Lee Daniel Snyder. *Macro History: A Theoretical Approach to Comparative World History*

Laurence Grambow Wolf

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At first glance Snyder appears to be attempting to develop a synthesis of the work of Toynbee, Sorokin, and other historians. His theory has a set of cyclic patterns like Toynbee. Within each cycle, Snyder places periods or stages: reform, post revolutionary, consolidation, and disintegration. Each stage lasts for 75 – 100 years. A cycle totals roughly 300 – 400 years.

Thus a Snyder cycle is roughly the length of a Toynbee Time of Troubles or Universal State period. Snyder applies his concept to Western Europe and identifies five cycles from 250 to 2050: Transitional, Formative, Classical, Renewal, and Secularization. The demarcation of Snyder’s periods is radically different from Toynbee’s periods as the classic example of Hellenic civilization illustrates. Toynbee sees a “Breakdown” at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE, followed by a 400 year “Time of Troubles” period, which ended in a Universal State period created by Augustus in 31 BCE. In contrast, Snyder specifies a Classic Cycle from 770-350 BCE, a Renewal Cycle from 350-50 BCE, and a Secularization Cycle from 50 BCE – 250 CE. Snyder’s characterization embodies a significantly different view compared to Toynbee’s of the same civilization. (Similar comments could be made about his analysis of other civilizations.)

Snyder’s theory also has some resemblance to Sorokin’s cyclic model of civilizations, which has four primary phases: Ideational, Sensate, Idealistic, and Mixed. But here again Snyder differs significantly from Sorokin in the characterizations of the various periods of civilizations.

These differences with Toynbee and Sorokin are not explored in Snyder’s book, although he does refer to both authors in the text. It would have been helpful if he had provided a critical commentary, and shown why his theory is superior to these prior attempts.

As it is, he applies his theory single-mindedly to a variety of Eurasian civilizations. The length of his cycles when superimposed on various civilizations ranges from 300 – 400 years (in order to fit the historical record). He acknowledges anomalies between his theory and history.

After reading Snyder’s book, one is left with the feeling that the
proposed classification has no fundamental basis (a point he actually makes in his book), and could have been developed in other ways that would also "agree" with history. He is quite willing to stretch or contract a cycle to fit the historical data and views all his results as plus or minus 100 years – the length of a Snyder stage. (In contrast, for example, my mathematical theory of civilizations – described in the Life Cycle of Civilizations – is quantitative and tight in the sense that the cycles are always of the same length – four generations of mankind – being based on an inherent human four-generation social cycle suggested by Toynbee.)

The problem with Snyder’s theory, in my view, is its qualitative nature. Plausible qualitative arguments can be made for any number of variants of a cyclic theory of civilizations. He recognizes this problem implicitly when he argues for a scientific theory of history. His book begins with a chapter entitled, “History, Queen of the Sciences.” Most people would take this subject as an attempt at humor, but Snyder unequivocally states “it is no joke” (page 13), giving as the reason “history alone is capable of integrating all knowledge in terms of the role and destiny of humanity.” Snyder goes through a wide range of arguments on this subject. He then proceeds to develop his theory, which he views as scientific.

However, in developing his theory he ignores the nature of scientific theories. Firstly, scientific theories are of two types (with some overlap): descriptive scientific theories such as Botany or Anatomy, and analytic scientific theories such as Physics or Chemistry.

His theory is decidedly descriptive in nature rather than scientific, in my opinion. He uses Systems Theory as the organizing principle of his theory: systems contain sub-systems, which contain sub-sub-systems, and so on. Systems Theory is an organizing tool in Engineering, not Science.

In the development of his theory he often presents an aspect of civilization and then states 1) exceptions are possible and/or 2) it could be otherwise and/or 3) it requires verification with historical data. Items 1 and 2 signify the theory is, at the least, incomplete in the aspect considered, perhaps missing essential features. Item 3, which appears repeatedly, raises an important issue. (Some sample quotes from p. 531: “Presumably, the more successful the reforms, the less violent the revolution, a conclusion which, of course, must still be substantiated by detailed historical analysis.” and p. 533: “While our analysis remains
hypothetical and unrefined and insufficiently supported by specific historical research …") Issue: Should the presentation of a new theory include evidence for its features? Certainly Darwin presented evidence for his theory in The Origin of the Species, as did Sorokin, Toynbee and myself in our theories. Snyder often does not. So we are left with a theory largely without support – conceptually or with data.

Snyder’s theory is purely descriptive and stylistically of the same sort as most historical theories of civilization. Thus one must ask: “Where’s the Science?” Cyclicity has been discussed for millennia, and is not in itself a scientific concept. A qualitative scientific theory would be verbally phrased in terms of a set of axioms from which the features of civilizations are derived (as in Euclidean geometry.)

A quantitative mathematical theory of civilizations is precise, has a clear, unbiased theoretical basis, and supports extrapolations of the theory that have predictive value. Scientific theories make verifiable predictions. Scientific theories are necessarily falsifiable – if the predictions of a scientific theory are shown to be wrong, then the theory is discarded. Snyder’s theory appears to allow for numerous exceptions and is thus not generally falsifiable.

Snyder’s book develops his cyclic theory in the form of lists of historical periods, and their events, for Eurasian civilizations. The latter part of the book analyzes the various facets of civilizations: political, religious, and so on. The style of these sections will require endurance on the part of many readers. In the majority of discussion points, he states that the conclusions need to be verified by data that he does not have. His book is, at best, a call for the accumulation and further analysis of historical data on civilizations.

---------Stephen Blaha


A prolific writer of histories, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto has presented his readers with an iconoclastic work on a broad and important topic in which are scattered wondrous details.

The title attracts our attention, but Sr. Fernandez-Armesto has his own meaning for our favorite term. For him "civilization" is humankind’s efforts to redesign the natural environment to suit humankind’s needs and desires. His project is treated in seven parts, each an environmental type: desert, tundra and ice; grasslands; tropical and postglacial forests; alluvial soils in drying climates; highlands;
ocean margins, and, finally, the "domestication" of the oceans. As a geographer, this seems not at all illogical to me. Besides, it is refreshing to find so eminent a historian attending to the natural environment with which humans have variously contended down through the millennia. Also, for ISCSC members, there is merit in considering what preceded the conditions we recognize in a society and culture when we label it a civilization.

For this author, civilization is not a structural category that some academicians find useful and meaningful, but a set of processes present from the beginning. One is reminded of his idiosyncratic use of "civilization" when reading his frequent critical remarks about writers, academic or not, who exalted their own cultures as the civilized, while displaying contempt toward all others -- all those inferior barbarians!

Among his introductory remarks, he refers, in passing, to a long list of writers who have written about civilization and mentions Ellsworth Huntington. He is quite correctly critical of Huntington's views. Mention of this all-but-forgotten geographer reinforces my impression that Fernandez-Armesto is one who has indeed read widely before embarking on this "experiment" (his word!).

He ridicules proposals to define "civilization" with a checklist of attributes. I think he has gone overboard at this point, but I would not enthuse over attempts on our part to define "civilization" strictly. Humans are such wayward and unpredictable creatures, collectively as well as individually, that I would prefer using a checklist for guidance rather than for legalistic, dogmatic prescription. If a society has most, but not all, of the attributes on our checklist, it may well be worthwhile to consider it a civilization. Fernandez-Armesto does make a useful suggestion, however, in calling attention to the problem of definition: what does constitute a city, and just how is literacy to be correctly defined?

His discussion of people in New Guinea as early independent creators of agriculture struck me as a bit odd, but only a few days after reading his book, the New York Times reported (6.24.03) discovery of evidence that there may well have been agriculture there as early as 10,000 to 7,000 years ago. Aha! Felipe was not so far off the beaten track as I had thought!

In later portions of the book he treats of the rise of oceanic civilizations and pays good attention to the emergence of the Indian Ocean as an Arab lake, and the geographic conditions which aided or hindered
this development. This era was then followed by the emergence of the "Rimland" of western Europe and its gradual mastery of the Atlantic. He then raises the question as to whether Atlantic Civilization (Western Civilization) will be succeeded by a Pacific one, or by globalization's creation of a World Civilization. Or is globalization merely a rather superficial overlay on various civilizations which will adopt and adapt traits from The West? In discussing the Pacific, he calls attention to Fray Andres de Uedaneta, who, in 1545, led the first known crossing and return of this vast unspacific body of water.

His book has several such surprising details fleshing out his broad scheme. While telling us of cogent and sometimes obscure details, he also informs us of the foodstuffs which each culture relied upon, and whether or not its homeland was endowed with metals, workable soils, and the importance of its climate. The presence of numerous microclimates is a definite asset, as is the ability to succeed in more than one ecoregion. He is, however, no determinist, and casts aside all attempts to provide universal models, stages or patterns. For him, each civilization is a unique human effort to pursue its own values and goals in its own way, while interacting with other civilizations and with the environment.

I have not gone over this book looking for errors of fact. With so broad a topic, there may be some, but I leave that task to others. My concern has been with the Big Picture, the general approach, and the basic ideas. One may wish he had mentioned more of his "civilizations," but this is merely one book, and not a multivolumed encyclopaedia. Nevertheless, there is not space, in a mere review, to do justice to all the worthwhile (and controversial) topics Fernandez-Armesto discusses. If you have the patience to read a well-written work by a fearlessly iconoclastic historian who uses "civilization" in an entirely different way than we are accustomed to, you are in for a stimulating excursion.

---------- Laurence Grambow Wolf


When Barry V. Johnston and Lawrence Nichols place Sorokin within a grouping of other scholars, they perform much the same sort of service that Leonidas Donskis offers to Vytautas Kavolis. While there is masterful interpretation on both sides, there is one overriding differ-