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Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, OCTOBER 2014, Vol. 56, No. 4
(OCTOBER 2014), pp. 815-843

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908316>

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The Return of Civilization—and of Arnold Toynbee?

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Only rarely have historians risked looking globally. Arnold Toynbee and William McNeill are among the few whose reputations have survived attacks by scholars specializing in narrow limits of time and place.

———Janet Abu-Lughod (1989: ix).

TOYNBEE REDIVIVUS?

“Hardly anyone reads Spengler, Toynbee or Sorokin today,” says historian Niall Ferguson (2011: 298; see Burke 1993: xii). The anthropologist Jonathan Benthall similarly speaks of the “monumentally unfashionable” Arnold Toynbee (2010: 5). Occasional references to his works are found, for instance in the new environmental and global histories, but they tend to be fleeting and often dismissive (e.g., Hodgson 1993: 93; Fernandez-Armesto 2002: 20). Usually, if Toynbee is rejected today it is not so much because people do not agree with him as that they do not read him.

There are signs today that “civilization” is making something of a comeback both as a concept and mode of analysis. Might that offer the opportunity to revive and reconsider Toynbee? Of all twentieth-century scholars, Toynbee was the greatest historian and analyst of civilization. He was superior in style and erudition to Oswald Spengler, his closest rival. Toynbee’s biographer, the great world historian William McNeill, compares him to Herodotus, Dante, and Milton, remarking, “Toynbee should rank as a twentieth century epigon to his poetic predecessors, for he, like them, possessed a powerful and creative mind that sought, restlessly and unremittingly, to make the world make sense” (1989: 287).

Toynbee’s greatest popularity and influence occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, when he was courted by presidents, prime ministers, and princes. He lectured at universities all over the world, and at the height of his popularity, in the mid-1950s, could attract hundreds and even thousands of listeners. At the University of Minnesota in the winter of 1955 he addressed an overflow

audience of ten thousand people, many of whom had come hundreds of miles through the snow to hear him (*ibid.*: 243). Nor was he, at that time, disdained by his colleagues in the historical profession. Not only did he hold a professorship at the University of London, but Cambridge University in 1947 offered him the Regius Professorship of History, one of the two premier chairs of history in the United Kingdom (*ibid.*: 208). Numerous universities in the United States also offered him distinguished positions, and he twice gave the Lowell Lectures at Harvard.

Nevertheless, at some point in the 1950s some very prominent and influential figures in the discipline of history began the attacks on Toynbee that in the ensuing decades led to the eclipse of his reputation among historians and, increasingly, among other scholars as well.¹ Right up to his death in 1975 Toynbee continued to enjoy great popularity in several quarters of the globe, notably in Japan (*ibid.*: 268–73), but his scholarly reputation waned. Students of history were discouraged from reading him, and references to him, in all the scholarly disciplines, were likely to be treated with contempt. These days, so it seems, few people read Toynbee, and if they do, it is most likely to be in the form of D. C. Somervell's skilful and highly successful two-volume abridgement of *A Study of History* (1947), rather than the full twelve volumes.

Does the return—if such it is—of an interest in civilization suggest that people are more likely now to be sympathetic to Toynbee's work, which was basically a comparative study of civilizations? "Return" is of course always a treacherous word in the world of scholarship. There will be those who will argue that "civilization" never really went away, or that it continued under different forms and terms, sometimes with different meanings.² No doubt one could point to many works of history over the past fifty years, especially popular ones, which feature civilizations in their titles and their substance, not to mention the great success of the clever video game *Civilization*.³ Or

¹ The two most influential criticisms appear to have been those of the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl (1955), and, especially in the United Kingdom, the witty and merciless attack of the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (1957), who portrayed Toynbee as a would-be Messiah and his *Study* as the Bible. See McNeill 1989: 239. There is a good selection of contemporary views of Toynbee—by no means all critical—in Montagu 1956. For the fullest listing of works about Toynbee, see Morton 1980.

² An example is the series *The History of Human Society*, edited by J. H. Plumb (1961–1981), though Plumb's introduction to such examples as J. H. Parry's *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (1990 [1966]: 13–25) shows clearly that the only civilization that the series was designed to illuminate was the Western one.

³ For some of the leading works on civilization, including those published in the latter part of the twentieth century, see Melko 1969, and the references in Huntington 1997: n. 1, 324–25. For the later period, the contributions of Needham (1954–2003), McNeill (1965), and Hodgson (1974; 1993) stand out, and show that important works using the civilizational concept persisted into the second half of the twentieth century. The clustering around the period from the 1930s to the early 1960s, with not much coming later, is however significant. It is important to remember that Fernand Braudel's great work on the civilizations of the Mediterranean, for instance, was first published in 1949, though he continued to publish on civilizations till the end of his life

one might dismiss any recent signs of a return to civilization as marginal and ephemeral, unlikely to change the climate of distrust and disparagement that has surrounded it for five decades and more.

Yet one can make a reasonably strong case that civilization is once more receiving sustained attention from scholars, and that it is attracting a wider public as well. Furthermore, one can point to at least some of the reasons as to why that has been happening in recent decades.

This article has a threefold focus: it suggests a renewal of the concept of civilization; it traces the history of the concept as a means of finding where Toynbee can be placed in that tradition; and it attempts to make the case—tentatively and with due caution—for directing our attention once more to Toynbee as an acute and imaginative analyst of civilization whose work continues to be highly instructive.

THE RETURN OF CIVILIZATION

By general consent, Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1997) marks the inauguration of a renewed interest in civilization. "Human history," announced Huntington firmly, "is the history of civilizations" (ibid.: 40). Civilizations, for Huntington (as for Toynbee), derive from the major world religions.⁴ Renouncing the idea of a "universal civilization" toward which the whole world was converging, Huntington wished to stress the separate "fault lines" that divided, and continue to divide, the major civilizations. He was particularly concerned, in the contemporary period, with those separating Western civilization from those of Asia—especially the Sinic and Japanese varieties—and from Islamic civilization. The West sees Asian and Islamic civilizations as "challenger civilizations" to its historic dominance. But it is evident that, for Huntington, Islam is regarded as the greatest threat at the present time (ibid.: 217–18).

The 9/11 attacks, and the subsequent conflicts with Al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups, were bound to add to this feeling of a cosmic clash between Islam and the West. In the years since, the sense of Islam as the West's principal antagonist has for most Westerners abated somewhat, but not the feeling that the West is embattled, surrounded by threats and challenges on all sides. That has if anything increased. The rise of China to economic predominance is the obvious challenge (e.g., Jacques 2012), but India, too, finally but unmistakably demonstrating its potential, represents another important contender.

(1975; 1995). Similarly, McNeill notes of his *Rise of the West* that it was "conceived in 1936" (1965: vii). An important work of synthesis of the 1960s, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), contains no entry on "civilization" or "civilizations."

⁴ For Huntington's appreciation of Toynbee, while nevertheless disagreeing with him on a number of points, see Huntington 1997: 40–78.

And Japan, while still apparently unable to pull itself out of the doldrums brought about by the massive economic downturn of the 1990s, remains a formidable competitor; it could always return to the position it had reached in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was widely forecast that it would become “number one,” at least economically.

Asia, in its many varieties, seems poised to present the greatest civilizational challenge to the West. Hence the popularity of terms such as “re-orient”—the return of or to the East—(e.g., Frank 1998; see Hobson 2004), and the revival of a thriving literature concerned with what we might call the “Weber problem”: how and why, and when, did the West rise to dominate the world, and how secure is that dominance today? The return of civilization as a form of analysis is at least partly bound up with the return of the old questions: “What is the West?” and “What is the relation of the West to ‘the rest’?”⁵

That is the evident concern of what we might take as the most recent expression of the trend that Huntington started, Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011). Ferguson’s book, based on a series made for British television, clearly continues the Huntingtonian theme, and its very subtitle is taken from the title of one of Huntington’s chapters (ch. 8: “The West and the Rest: Intercivilizational Issues”). The very lively, sometimes vitriolic controversy Ferguson’s book has engendered itself shows that he has touched a very living nerve. In a similar vein, and also controversial, is historian Anthony Pagden’s combative *Worlds at War: The 2,500-Year Struggle between East and West* (2008). Pagden makes no bones about “the clash of civilizations,” which he clearly regards as the master theme of the past two millennia, nor does he attempt to conceal his partiality for the civilization of the West. Equally warm, in all senses, was the reception for Ian Morris’s *Why the West Rules—For Now* (2011). Morris is a classicist and a historian and much praised by Ferguson, though he writes in a less combative style. He, too, tries to explain how it was that the West rose to prominence, and what the prospects might be for the future.⁶

The question of the present condition and future of the West is not the only thing driving the revival of civilizational analysis. There is what many regard as a much more deep-seated challenge, to not just Western civilization but also to what we might think of as civilization itself, civilization as the accomplishment

⁵ For the most recent literature and discussion of the “rise of the West” question, see the excellent synthesis in Goldstone 2009. An important contributor, and critic of Weber, has been the historical anthropologist Jack Goody (1996; 2004; 2006). Like Goody, many of these commentators refrain from a self-conscious use of the civilizational concept, but what they deal in—comparisons between large-scale regional and historical complexes—evidently relate to what are commonly thought of as civilizations.

⁶ Morris here self-confessedly follows in the footsteps of Jared Diamond’s extremely popular and highly influential *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1999). See further Morris 2013.

of the whole of humanity. Here what is at issue is not so much the rivalry and competition between civilizations, but between civilization and nature, or perhaps more accurately the way in which human action impacts on the relation between human civilization and the natural world. The reference here is to the heightened consciousness of “the environment” in recent times, and the popularity of ecological history and the ecological approach in a number of social science disciplines, economics, sociology, and anthropology.⁷

With Felipe Fernandez-Armesto’s *Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature* (2002), the ecological mode is welded to the civilizational. For Fernandez-Armesto, a civilization is “a type of relationship to the natural environment, recrafted, by the civilizing impulse, to meet human demands” (2002: 14). So civilizations can be treated as multiple attempts, some more successful than others, to reshape the natural environment in accordance with varying ideas of needs. We are not too far here from early Darwinian approaches to civilization, as in Walter Bagehot’s *Physics and Politics* (1956 [1872]), with its stress on environmental challenges as a factor in social evolution. Bagehot, with his concept of “the cake of custom,” was an admitted influence on Toynbee. Here, however, it is worth noting that despite some disparaging remarks on Toynbee, Fernandez-Armesto’s framework—essentially one of challenge and response—evidently owes much to him, as Fernandez-Armesto reluctantly concedes (2002: 20). Equally important is that, like other recent scholars, Fernandez-Armesto finds the civilizational approach a congenial one. The enthusiastic reception given to his book—and several others by him in the same conceptual mode, such as *Millennium* (1995)—testifies once more to the growing popularity of the concept of civilization.⁸

There is one further area that we might consider in accounting for what seems a distinct revival of civilizational analysis. That is the current interest in “world history,” or “global history,” and indeed more generally in the whole process of “globalization” as that has preoccupied scholars for some decades now (Mazlish and Buultjens 2004). Again, that can lead to several approaches and point in many different directions. But what seems common, what seems almost forced on all practitioners, is a consideration of units that go well beyond the nation-states that were the focus of so much research and writing over the past hundred years. Indeed, in the case

⁷ The work of Alfred Crosby (1973; 1986) has been particularly influential here. See also McNeill 2000.

⁸ This example of course indicates that Huntington’s 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations* cannot be taken as the literal start of the revival of civilizational analysis, but the impact of that book was such as to popularize it and make it widely available again. One would also need to mention the debate on “Eurocentrism,” and the rise of post-colonial studies—for example, in the work of Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and Dipesh Chakrabarty—as relevant background to the renewed concern with civilization.

of world history, that can almost be said to be the driving force behind the move, one that has expressed itself in the history curriculum as much as in the forms of scholarly inquiry conducted by historians. As a pedagogic device, as well as a research strategy, the aim is to show the world as in some sense a single unit with parts that constantly crisscross and interact. While “culture” and “cultures” are sometimes the terms within which this global story is told, it is as common to encounter “civilization” and “civilizations.”

A work such as *World Civilizations*, written for undergraduate courses by Peter Stearns and others (2011), can stand as a representative example of the numerous texts with similar titles. Works in “Big History,” such as David Christian’s *Maps of Time* (2004), nearly always treat civilizations as the basic units of analysis, when, that is, they reach them at all, which is usually long after they have considered the origins of the universe, the formation of stars, and other such lofty matters. As for globalization studies as a whole, contributions are roughly evenly divided between those that consider abstract global processes—information and financial flows, cultural homogenization, and the like—within a single global system, and those that, in effect if not always by name, refer to civilizational units as the most important components of a world that has increasing elements of convergence but also a persisting plurality based on civilizational legacies.⁹ What both schools share is a dismissal of nation-state approaches in favor of larger complexes that are economic, cultural, or political. At the very least, then, one can say that “globalization” creates the conceptual space, and opportunity, for a reconsideration and reinsertion of civilizational analysis.

It is clear that “civilization” now, as in the past, is being called upon to do a great deal of work. Some of the uses are vague, some idiosyncratic, and some arbitrary. If there has been a revival of the concept then we need a map of it to sort out its various meanings and applications. The best way to do this is to look, however briefly, at the history of the concept, to see the uses to which it has been put. That will help us to situate current uses of the concept within the various traditions of use. It will also enable us to see where Arnold Toynbee stands within those traditions and what the value of his contribution might be.

CIVILIZATION: A WORD AND ITS USES

It was the French who, by general agreement, invented the word, as they often claim to have invented the thing itself. It was in mid-eighteenth-century France that the word “*civilisation*” seems to have been coined, the substantive evolving out of the earlier verb *civiliser* and the earlier participle *civilisé* (the latter, in

⁹ For examples of the first approach, see Castells 2000–2004; for the second, Berger and Huntington 2002.

their turn, replacing the even earlier *policie/police* and *policé*.¹⁰ Since French was the international language of culture, it was not long before *civilisation* became naturalized in the various European languages, though with interestingly different shades of meaning. James Boswell seems to have been one of the first to naturalize the term in English, in his account of a conversation in March 1772 with Samuel Johnson while the latter was working on the fourth edition of his great dictionary. “He [Johnson] would not admit *civilization*, but only *civility*. With great deference to him I thought *civilization*, from *to civilize*, better in the sense opposed to *barbarity*, than *civility*; as it is better to have a distinct word for each sense, than one word with two senses, which *civility* is, in his way of using it” (1967 [1791]: I, 414).

Boswell’s use of the new term was wholly consistent with its dominant meaning at the time of its origin. For most agree that in its earliest uses, “civilization” was almost wholly moral and prescriptive. It was tied to ideas of “progress” and betterment, and its referent was humanity as a whole, seen as a single developing entity. Its standard antonym was “barbarity” or “barbarism.” Progress was the movement from *barbarism*, the rude, uncultivated, uncivilized state of mankind, to the higher condition of refinement in thought and manners—in a word, to *civilization*. Here civilization showed clearly its derivation from the verb “to civilize” and the participle “civilized,” themselves cognate with such terms as *police*, *politesse*, and polished or “polite” society.

While civilization was soon to acquire the predominant meaning of a developed state or condition, in its earliest uses—following the verbal origin—it often carried the sense not of a condition or a finished state but of a process of becoming, a “civilizing process” (Febvre 1973: 232; Starobinski 1993: 4). While the processual meaning of civilization gradually gave way to its meaning as a particular condition or state of being, the earlier meaning never entirely disappeared. It is this tradition of use and this pattern of achievement that is explored at length in Norbert Elias’s great work, *The Civilizing Process* (1994 [1939]).

It is important to note that this understanding of civilization as a characteristic of humanity as a whole—even though some parts were seen as more advanced than others—was perfectly compatible with a dislike, distrust, or even outright rejection of it.¹¹ For some, such as Rousseau, the cultivation of manners and the increase of material well being associated with civilization

¹⁰ For the history and meaning of the word *civilisation/civilization* I have relied mainly on Febvre 1973, Williams 1976: 48–50, Braudel 1995: 3–8, Elias 1994: 3–41, Starobinski 1993; and Mazlish 2004a: 1–20; 2004b.

¹¹ A variant of this was to distinguish between “true” and “false” civilization, and even to see false civilization as a modern kind of “barbarism,” as in a treatise of 1768 of the marquis de Mirabeau (Starobinski 1993: 7; see Mazlish 2004a: 5–7). As Starobinski notes, there is a tradition of thought that believes “something in civilization works against civilization” (1993: 23).

were purchased at great moral cost. Civilization corrupted the simplicity and spoiled the spontaneity of the simple life of those reviled as “primitive” and “savage.” While there was, at least for Rousseau, no going back to the woods, there was every reason to be unsparingly critical of the moral condition into which so-called civilization had brought modern society.

This critical tradition, deriving from Rousseau, was to have a long life, and indeed it is by no means over today. It was continued by the Romantics of the early nineteenth century, who were inspired by works such as Rousseau’s *Emile*. For the French poet Baudelaire, civilization was “a great barbarity illuminated by gas” (in Starobinski 1993: 26). Nor were the Romantic poets and artists the only ones to draw on Rousseau. Here is the early socialist Charles Fourier, on the evils bred by “civilization”: “All you learned men behold your towns peopled by beggars, your citizens struggling against hunger, your battlefields and all your social infamies. Do you think, when you have seen that, that civilization is the destiny of the human race, or that J.-J. Rousseau was right when he said of civilized men, ‘They are not men’?” (in Febvre 1973: 239). Civilization might for some be a heroic achievement of humanity; for others it was at the least a double-edged process, where the gains might easily be outweighed by the losses.

The idea of civilization as a moral condition towards which humanity was progressing underlay much of the social philosophy and social science of the nineteenth century. Whatever their differences, it was shared by such thinkers as Hegel, Comte, J. S. Mill, H. T. Buckle, and Herbert Spencer. But relatively early in its development the concept acquired a second meaning that was to accompany it for the rest of its history, even to some extent threatening to displace the earlier meaning. This was civilization in its ethnographic or purely historical guise, as a form that could and did take many shapes and styles. Hence one could speak not simply of civilization, in the singular, but of civilizations, in the plural. This shift to a more neutral, value-free, “scientific” concept of civilization seems to have taken place somewhere between 1780 and 1830, again first in France (Febvre 1973: 234; Starobinski 1993: 6). A particular impetus was given by the reports of travelers and explorers such as Bougainville, Cook, and Alexander von Humboldt, which described with scientific accuracy and vivid detail societies which seemed to be flourishing on the basis of quite different principles from those of Europe (Mazlish 2004a: 27–38). The effect was to relativize European or Western civilization, in both place and time. European civilization was not necessarily the apex or the end point of mankind’s evolution; it was just one of many civilizations.

An important bridging role, to some extent linking the older moral to the newer sociological or anthropological usage, was performed by François Guizot’s highly influential *The History of Civilization in Europe* (1997 [1828]), based on lectures delivered at the Sorbonne in that year. There was, Guizot affirmed, a distinctively European civilization, which despite the

variety of its parts and incompleteness in any particular country, exhibits “a certain unity,” deriving from common origins and based on common principles, which “tend to produce well nigh everywhere analogous results” (ibid.: 10). While sure that Europe, with France at its heart, was in the van of progress, called upon to give the lead to the world, Guizot was at pains to paint civilization not simply as a moral achievement but as “a fact, like any other—a fact susceptible of being studied, described, narrated.” He declares, “for my own part, I am convinced that there is, in reality, a general destiny of humanity, a transmission of the aggregate of civilization; and consequently a universal history of civilization to be written” (ibid.: 11–12).

Civilization is here used mainly in its unitary sense, and the notion of progress is reaffirmed. But Guizot is aware that another history and study of civilization is possible, one that considers civilizations in the plural, one that sees them as distinct and competing entities. “Civilization,” he says a little later, “is a sort of ocean, constituting the wealth of a people, and on whose bosom all the elements of the life of that people, all the powers supporting its existence, assemble and unite” (ibid.: 13). This is a remarkably good description of what later came to constitute the idea of civilization in its ethnographic and historical sense, abstracted from any idea of progress or philosophy of history. It does indeed describe what Guizot goes on to do, here in the *History of Civilization in Europe*, and in its immediate successor, the *History of Civilization in France* (1829), also based on lectures at the Sorbonne.

Europe for Guizot is an identifiable and distinct civilization, and he describes its course and vicissitudes from the time of the fall of the Roman Empire to his own day. He distinguishes between civilization in its external aspect—the “development of the social state”—and in its internal one—“the development of the individual man.” Progress in both is necessary for the development of civilization. He shows European civilization’s progress in both these spheres, with varying degrees of emphasis and creativity, here in Italy, there in England, yet again in France. He is happy to be able to show that civilization by his day has progressed considerably in Europe, but warns against complacency: “Civilization is as yet very young ... the world has by no means as yet measured the whole of its career” (1997: 24).

At the same time as charting the course of European civilization, however, Guizot refers to other civilizations—Egyptian, Indian, Syrian, Phoenician, Etruscan, even Greek and Roman as separate civilizations (ibid.: 27–32). These are seen as usually characterized by the overwhelming predominance of one principle and one power, compared to the diversity and competition of principles and powers that characterize European civilization. Hence the facts of tyranny and eventual stagnation in the former, and liberty and progress in the latter. But the important thing, from the viewpoint of the concept of civilization, is the acknowledgment of the plurality of civilizations, that Europe, for all its achievements, is just one among the civilizations

of the world. As Febvre suggests, we see in Guizot, “a delicate question solved by means of a skilful synthesis. There are such things as civilizations. And they need to be studied, analyzed, and dissected, in themselves and on their own. But above these there is indeed such a thing as civilization with its continuous movement onwards, though perhaps not in a straight line” (1973: 241).

Guizot therefore represents a halfway house in the development of the concept of civilization. The eighteenth-century meaning, predominantly moral, struggles with the increasingly historical, sociological, and anthropological nineteenth-century views of civilization. Something similar is found in H. T. Buckle’s unfinished *History of Civilization in England* (1903 [1857–1861]), a work which enjoyed huge popularity on the European continent, more even than in Britain itself (Heyck 2004). Far more comprehensive than its title suggests, Buckle’s work is a genuine comparative history, with comparisons not simply between the different nations of Europe but also between European and Asian civilizations. (In 1862, at the age of only forty-one, he died while on an expedition to the Middle East to obtain first-hand knowledge of its civilizations.) While Buckle argued, like Guizot, that there was indeed progress in civilization, seen in Comtean perspective as the movement from the reign of superstition to that of science and reason, he was much more open to the varying factors that hindered or retarded this development, and more cautious in his estimation of progress. In his use of the statistical method (Quetelet as well as Comte were among the thinkers he most admired), in his stress on environmental and geographical factors in the shaping of civilization, and on the fluidity of the interchange between different civilizations, Buckle offered a much more exact and scientific method for the comparative study of civilization.

With Buckle and others, the way was opened to treating civilizations as distinct historical entities with their own principles and varying courses of development. While the evolutionary framework of much nineteenth-century thought still kept alive the idea of progress, with the West leading the way, it became increasingly possible to dispute that approach by asserting the variety of civilizations, each with its different contributions—if one chose to see it this way—to world civilization.

A key moment in this development came with the equation between “culture” and “civilization” in the anthropologist E. B. Tylor’s seminal *Primitive Culture* (1891 [1871]). “Culture or Civilization,” declared Tylor on the first page of his work, “taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (ibid.: I, 1; see Hann 2011: 1). There it was: all civilizations were “cultures,” whole complexes which indeed were rarely completely autonomous or separated from each other, but which could and should be studied for their own sake’s, and not simply as

part of a broader story of the progress of humanity.¹² Even as “civilization” fell into disfavor with many in the newly professionalized historical and anthropological disciplines, it was in essence kept alive by being transmuted into “culture.” When late in life the American anthropologist Alfred Kroeber began to compile a “Roster of Civilizations and Cultures,” he for all intents and purposes reverted directly to Tylor’s conception, though Tylor’s evolutionism was rigorously excluded:

The terms civilization and culture are used here not contrastively or exclusively, but inclusively as essential synonyms of sometimes varying accent. There is no difference of principle between the two words: they denote somewhat distinguishable grades of degree of the same thing. Civilization currently carries an overtone of high development of a society; culture has become the customary term of universal denotation in this range, applicable alike to high or low products and heritages of societies. Every human society has its culture, complex or simple. The word culture could therefore properly be used to include all the particular exemplars that will be listed; but for the larger and richer cultures the term civilization has current usage, and need not be quarreled with, on the understanding that no distinctions of kind between civilization and culture are implied (Kroeber 1962: 9; and see 1963 [1923]: 1–13, 69–73; 1975 [1957]).¹³

Kroeber did not live to complete his work, though he did leave some tantalizing fragments, together with a sideswipe at Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, two practitioners of civilizational analysis from whom he had learned much but of whose “moralizing” approach he was highly suspicious (1962: 16). But while anthropologists were digesting civilization and regurgitating it as culture (Hann 2011), some sociologists were calling for a serious reengagement with it. Sociology’s forerunners, including Montesquieu and the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, had had much to contribute to the early development of the concept of civilization. Later Comte, Spencer, and Buckle added their considerable weight, though not all of them were concerned to theorize the concept itself, or its applications. Nor were the immediate founders of the discipline, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, especially interested in taking civilization as their unit of analysis—“society” became the almost universally preferred term in sociology, its implicit referent being nearly always the nation-state (“methodological nationalism”). But Weber’s comparative studies of the world religions—Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, together with his work on “the Protestant Ethic”—have been rightly seen as a form of civilizational analysis, with the “axial age” religions as “surrogates for

¹² Tylor himself does not go all the way with this conclusion, holding to a view of civilization, and its progress, not dissimilar to Guizot’s (Tylor 1891: I, 27). On Tylor generally, see Burrow (1966: 228–59), who, however, overstates his evolutionism.

¹³ It is possible to argue that a stronger contrast can be made between civilization and culture, especially if the former is defined primarily by the existence of cities, together with an urban way of life characterized by such things as the division of labor, social stratification, and literacy (e.g., Childe 1964 [1942]: 30–31). On this basis, China had civilization but the Australian aborigines did not—though they both had culture in Kroeber’s sense.

civilization.” What Weber was attempting in these studies, says Edward Tiryakian, was a delineation of the main features of a distinctive “civilization of modernity” as it evolved in the West (2004: 35).

Durkheim may have preferred “society”—national society—to “civilization.” But in a number of places he, together with his nephew and collaborator Marcel Mauss, made the case for the study of civilization as an entity encompassing more than the “national life” found in the supposedly bounded society of the nation-state. “Social phenomena that are not strictly attached to a determinate social organism do exist: they extend into areas that reach beyond the national territory or they develop over periods of time that exceed the history of a single society. They have a life which is in some ways supranational” (Durkheim and Mauss 1971 [1913]: 810). These supranational elements form “systems of facts that have their own unity and form of existence,” and which require “a special name ... Civilization seems to be the most appropriate name” (ibid.: 810–11.) The unitary, universal, concept of civilization is decisively rejected. But “if there does not exist one human civilization, there have been and there still are diverse civilizations which dominate and develop the collective life of each people” (ibid.: 812). Durkheim and Mauss instance “Christian,” “Mediterranean,” and “Northwest American” civilizations, all of whose constituent parts—nations—share common features and none of which can be reduced to any one part. “Without doubt,” they say, “every civilization is susceptible to nationalization; it may assume particular characteristics with each people of each state; but its most essential elements are not the product of the state or of the people alone.... A civilization constitutes a kind of moral milieu encompassing a certain number of nations, each national culture being only a particular form of the whole” (ibid.: 811; see Mauss 2004 [1930]: 28).

Neither Durkheim nor Mauss went much further than these brief indications, and sociology has for the most part been loath to take up the civilizational concept, seeing it as too vague, loose, and imprecise (e.g., Mills 1967 [1959]: 135). “Society” remained the master term, and society the basis of analysis. There were sociologists who valiantly fought to keep civilizational analysis at the forefront. Chief among these was Pitirim Sorokin, whose *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937–1941), in four volumes, was a heroic exercise in civilizational analysis. Another was Benjamin Nelson, who from the 1940s through the 1970s produced a stream of studies in the spirit of Weber, with an explicit plea for the study of “civilizational complexes” (1981). More recently, Shmuel Eisenstadt (2003), Edward Tiryakian (2004), and Johann Arnason (2003) have been energetic and tireless advocates of civilizational analysis.¹⁴

¹⁴ These are just examples of their work. Further examples can be found in Arjomand and Tiryakian 2004; Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock 2004; Roberts and Hogan 2000; Arnason 2000; and Adams, Smith, and Vlahov 2011. The journals *Thesis Eleven*—with which Arnason

Perhaps most influential, at least most recently, was Norbert Elias, whose *The Civilizing Process*, first published in German in 1939, was rediscovered with the English translation of the 1970s and went on to have a spectacular career.¹⁵ Nonetheless, despite the reputation and accomplishments of these sociologists, it seems fair to say that for most sociologists, as for most anthropologists and historians, the case for civilization as a unit of analysis remains to be made. Skepticism abounds in the profession, abetted by a professionalism that looks askance at such an ambitious venture, involving as it does vast tracts of history and an extraordinarily wide range of societies in time and space.

Before we consider a justification for this undertaking through an examination of the work of Arnold Toynbee, it is important to mention two further, highly influential contributions to the civilizational idea.¹⁶ In 1930, Sigmund Freud published his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1963 [1930]). With Freud, we have a concept of civilization that maintains the eighteenth-century idea of it as unitary and universal, but without the hope and optimism once attached to it (Rousseau et al. excepted). He pitilessly strips the concept of all glamour, of the *hubris* that has traditionally accompanied it. What he sees instead is a precariously achieved level of order and civility that has constantly to be on its guard against the instinctual forces of the *Id* that threaten to overwhelm it. That is civilization, according to Freud: a policeman watching over and repressing our unlawful and barbarous impulses. “Civilization ... obtains mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city” (ibid.: 60–61). Eros, the “life instinct,” the civilizational principle, is engaged in a titanic struggle with Thanatos, the “death instinct,” which has as its unceasing aim the dissolution of all human community and civilization. “It is this battle of the giants that our nurse-maids try to appease with their lullaby about Heaven” (ibid.: 59). For Freud,

has long been associated—and the *European Journal of Social Theory* have been among the principal English-language carriers of civilizational analysis in sociology. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* has also carried many articles on civilizations, most of them however not by sociologists. One searches most of the mainstream American and British sociology journals in vain.

¹⁵ I should probably note that Elias’s concern is with “civilizing” and “civilization” as unitary concepts, similar to eighteenth-century usage, rather than with the multiple (and relativized) civilizations of contemporary anthropology and sociology.

¹⁶ This discussion of concepts of civilization has focused thus far on French and British thinkers, partly because of the importance of their contributions, partly because of a limitation of space (and knowledge!). Freud and Gandhi are introduced simply as examples of other possible uses and traditions, though not wholly, as the example of Gandhi makes clear. See, for example, Gandhi’s list of European influences on his thought—Ruskin, Tolstoy, and so forth—in *Hind Swaraj* (2009 [1909]: 118). The most famous remark Gandhi made about Western civilization was that “it would be a good idea” (Mazlish 2004a: 156).

civilization was and is always a hard won and painfully maintained cultural achievement, always threatened with being undermined by elemental biological forces.

Mohandas K. Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi, writing about the same time as Freud, has an even more jaundiced view of civilization, which he roughly equates with “modern civilization,” Western-style. While he maintains a concept of “true civilization,” which he identifies principally with traditional Indian culture and society, in his seminal work *Hind Swaraj* (2009 [1909]) he is mainly concerned to castigate what he sees as an almost universal acceptance—notably among educated Indians—of Western modernity as the only viable civilization for our times. The danger is that Indian nationalists, enamored of Western-style civilization, will in throwing off British rule simply continue and replicate the civilization through which the British have already ensnared and corrupted traditional India. In his “Introduction” to his translation of Tolstoy’s *Letter to a Hindu*, Gandhi wrote: “It is for us to pause and consider whether, in our impatience of English rule, we do not want to replace one evil by another and a worse. India, which is the nursery of the great faiths of the world, will cease to be nationalist India, whatever else she may become, when she goes through the process of civilization in the shape of reproduction on that sacred soil of gun factories and the hateful industrialism which has reduced the people of Europe to a state of slavery, and all but stifled among them the best instincts which are the heritage of the human family” (Tolstoy 2009 [1909]: 3). This was also the message spelt out, bitingly and with much colorful detail, in *Hind Swaraj* (see especially Gandhi 2009: 33–37, 64–69, 105–9).

Freud and Gandhi both continue to some extent in the eighteenth-century tradition of treating civilization as a single thing. But the nature of their treatment reveals how difficult this exercise became, how hedged round with warnings and qualifications, once the concept was divorced from the idea of progress. Such a sobriety grew still more pronounced as Western society descended into the horror of the First World War, a triumph of barbarism over civilization if ever there was one. It was far safer to keep to the increasingly respectable plural use of civilization as propounded by the anthropologists and archaeologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

TOYNBEE AND CIVILIZATION

It was in this climate that Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1991 [1918–1922]) appeared, which goes a long way toward explaining its enormous impact and popularity in the immediate postwar period (Hughes 1952: 89–97). Spengler accepted the multiplicity of civilizations, and also that Western civilization had been among the most creative. But now he saw Western civilization in its death-throes, following the cycle of birth, rise, and decline that he discerned in all civilizations. Using the German terms that

had been established by Kant, Herder, and others in the late eighteenth century (Elias 1994: 3–28), Spengler distinguished between the creative *Kultur* of a society, and its hardening and descent into mere *Zivilisation*. But he gave the distinction his own special twist by employing them to indicate successive phases of social evolution. “The Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture, and in this principle we obtain the viewpoint from which the deepest and gravest problems of historical morphology become capable of solution. Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable.... They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again” (1991: 24). We have it in Arnold Toynbee’s own words that the appearance of Spengler’s book almost stopped him in his tracks, as apparently answering a question that he had been pondering for many years. What had led a few societies in humanity’s whole history to transcend the level of “primitive human life” to embark upon “the enterprise called civilization? What had roused them from a torpor that the great majority of human societies had never shaken off? This question was simmering in my mind when, in the summer of 1920, Professor [Lewis] Namier ... placed in my hands Oswald Spengler’s *Untergang des Abendlandes*. As I read those pages teeming with firefly flashes of historical insight, I wondered at first whether my whole inquiry had been disposed of by Spengler before even the questions, not to speak of the answers, had fully taken shape in my own mind” (Toynbee 1948: 9).

Toynbee was perhaps relieved—as any scholar might be—to discover on closer examination of Spengler’s book that it did not really answer the question of the geneses of civilizations at all, adopting instead “a most unilluminatingly dogmatic and deterministic” approach, according to which “civilizations arose, developed, declined, and foundered in unvarying conformity with a fixed timetable, and no explanation was offered for any of this” (ibid.: 10). Moreover, though there are interesting correspondences between Spengler’s and Toynbee’s works, and though Toynbee quotes Spengler many times, it is clear that Toynbee had arrived at his basic conception of civilizations, and of their dynamics, before he read *The Decline of the West*.¹⁷ This had a lot to do with Toynbee’s training as a classicist, because it was fundamentally from classical literature and classical history, the literature and history of what he called

¹⁷ On the similarities and differences between Spengler and Toynbee, see Hughes 1952: 138–41; Michell 1956; Geyl 1955: 95–96, 131–36, 144–56; and McNeill 1989: 98–102. Most commentators agree that the greatest similarity between the two lies in the way they picture civilizations as “independent and mutually impenetrable entities” (Geyl 1955: 131; see McNeill 1989: 102); the greatest difference lies in Toynbee’s ultimate acceptance, in the later volumes of the *Study*, of a basically Christian interpretation of history, in which spiritual progress compensates for the cyclical pattern of the rise and fall of civilizations (Hughes 1952: 140–41; McNeill 1989: 186–89). For Toynbee’s own references to Spengler, see, for example, 1962–1964: I, 135 n. 2; VII, 56; IX, 629–30; and especially volume XII, “Reconsiderations,” *passim*.

Hellenism, that Toynbee drew his inspiration for his understanding of the pattern of *all* civilizations.

Already in May 1920, before he knew of Spengler's work, Toynbee in a lecture to Oxford students, entitled "The Tragedy of Greece," had sketched out some of the main ideas that were to govern his great *Study* in subsequent decades. He declared, "civilization is a work of art," and that an understanding of it can be derived as much from literary and artistic sources as from more conventional historical ones. Toynbee then proceeded to argue that the study of the history of Greek civilization has particular advantages over that of others, especially the modern West, because "in Greek history the plot of civilization has been worked out to its conclusion" (1921: 5, 10). The history of Hellenism—the history of Graeco-Roman civilization—had to be seen, he said, as a unified one: "The first emergence of the Greek city-state in the Aegean and the last traces of municipal self-government in the Roman empire are phases in the history of a single civilization.... You cannot really draw a distinction between Greek history and Roman history.... The Roman Empire was essentially a Greek institution ... the pulse of the Empire was driven by a Greek heart" (ibid.: 17–18, 20).

Thus seen, Greek history had to be considered a "tragedy" in three acts, each producing its characteristic mood and expression, and each contributing to the tragic denouement, the decline and fall of Greek civilization. Toynbee was particularly concerned with the third and final act because it was in considering its course that he hit upon the idea that civilizations do not merely die, but rather in the process of their dying they throw up their successors. The Roman Empire, which was "the decline and fall of Greek civilization," the third act in the Greek tragedy, was highly oppressive of the Roman proletariat, but in such a way as to give rise to "a rival civilization of the proletariat—the Christian Church" (ibid.: 35, 37). "Thus the empire of which Marcus [Aurelius] and Paul [of Tarsus] were citizens was more than the third act in the tragedy of Ancient Greece. While it retarded the inevitable dissolution of one civilization it conceived its successor.... By the seventh century after Christ, when Ancient Greek civilization may be said finally to have dissolved, our own civilization was ready to 'shoot up and thrive' and repeat the tragedy of mankind" (ibid.: 41).

Certainly at least up to the appearance of volume six of the *Study*, in 1939, this classical conception seems to have undergirded the structure of the whole massive enterprise. While all the relevant terms are not in the 1920 lecture, it is clear that Toynbee had by then convinced himself that in the vicissitudes of Graeco-Roman civilization he could discern the "tragic" course of all civilizations. "Hellenic Society" (or Civilization¹⁸) had the further advantage of

¹⁸ It is only comparatively late in the preliminary inquiry of volume I that Toynbee begins to use the word "Civilization" instead of "Society," his preferred term in the earlier part. Thereafter, and

showing unambiguously something else that came to loom large in the *Study*: the way civilizations are often “apparented” and “affiliated” to each other—how one civilization might derive from an earlier one while in turn giving rise to a later one. Thus Hellenic Society is seen as affiliated to an earlier Minoan-Mycenean Society, while subsequently being “apparented” to later Western Society. Hellenism demonstrated for Toynbee, in a highly satisfactory way, both the distinctiveness and the connections between civilizations. It was this that enabled him to distance himself further from Spengler, with the latter’s much stronger insistence on the separation of civilizations.

It is easy to see, when observed on the larger canvas of the *Study*, the way in which Toynbee converted the local and particular phases of Hellenic civilization into the key terms for his analysis of civilization *tout court*. Civilizations, he argues, begin with a heroic and hard-won response to a challenge from the environment, at first the physical environment but then increasingly a social and political one. This response, carried out by “creative minorities,” hardens over time to rule by less adaptable and less creative “dominant minorities” (see Spengler on the move from *Kultur* to *Zivilisation*). This in turn generally leads to a “Time of Troubles,” in which the different states composing the civilization war with each other, leading to a peace of exhaustion in the creation of a “Universal State.” Meanwhile, large sections of the population withdraw into the status of an “internal proletariat,” while outside the frontiers of the civilization an “external proletariat” of “barbarians” threatens. The internal proletariat throws up a “Universal Church” that offers hope and the promise of salvation. The Universal Church then becomes the chrysalis of a new civilization that is thereby “affiliated” to the old.¹⁹

Hellenic civilization, in Toynbee’s understanding of it, had gone through precisely this course. Thus an original, creative response in the Greek city-states is consolidated by Alexander in his empire (at the cost of the

throughout the *Study*, he uses both terms interchangeably. This is not because of a confusion between civilization and society, as Mazlish (1966: 364) alleges—which is why Toynbee uses the capital S in distinguishing his use of “Society” from the commoner sociological entity “society”—but rather because Toynbee came to see that he needed a more definite term to distinguish his kind of Societies from “primitive societies,” which, like Societies or Civilizations, can also be considered “intelligible fields of historical study” (their main problem being that they lacked historical records). “Civilizations” are distinguished from “primitive societies” by being infinitely fewer in number (twenty-one or twenty-three at the most, compared to hundreds of primitive societies), lasting much longer, being spread over relatively large areas, and embracing a much larger number of human beings (1962–1964: I, 147–49; XII, 271–92). Toynbee adds: “Civilizations are not static conditions of societies but dynamic movements of an evolutionary kind” (*ibid.*: I, 176).

¹⁹ For the discussion of the main terms of this schema, see *ibid.*: I, 56–57, 187–88, 271–99, 335–36; III, 128–17, 231–48; IV, 7–114; V: 35–337; VII, “Universal States and Universal Churches.” There are helpful summaries in Somervell’s abridgement of the first six volumes (Toynbee 1947: 567–89).

independence of the city-states). The break-up of Alexander's empire leads in turn to a "Time of Troubles" in which warfare convulses the Hellenic world. Eventually Rome emerges as the dominant force, with a "dominant minority" that creates a "Universal State" in the Roman Empire. At the same time an "internal proletariat," made up of peoples from all parts of the empire, emerges, to develop the "Universal Church" of Christianity. On the borders of the empire are the barbarian tribes, the "external proletariat," which eventually break through only to be absorbed by the emerging new civilization of Western Christendom. The Roman Empire is also "apparented" to a second new civilization, that of Orthodox Christianity, which rises with the Byzantine Empire and is continued within the body of the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere, such as Russia (1962–1964: I, 52–63).²⁰

Such was the conception that underlay Toynbee's vast undertaking, the labor of a lifetime. Over a period of forty years—the work as a whole was first conceived, he tells us, in 1921—he produced a succession of volumes amounting in the end to the twelve volumes of *A Study of History*. Volumes I–III appeared in 1934, IV–VI in 1939, and VII–X—interrupted by war work—in 1954. *A Historical Atlas and Gazetteer*, published as XI, appeared in 1959, followed finally by a volume of *Reconsiderations*, published as XII in 1961. Oxford University Press from 1962 into 1964 published a paperback edition of all twelve volumes (conveniently, pagination was the same as for the hardback edition).

A Study of History is, by any measure, a stupendous achievement. There is really nothing comparable to it in any other language or society. Even its severest critics, such as Pieter Geyl, remark on its "miraculous learning," the "wealth of its examples," "its splendid, full and supple style." They commend it for the range of disciplines it draws upon—anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, biology, and literature. For all his criticisms, says Geyl, "I shall ever remain grateful to the author for profound remarks, striking parallels, wide prospects, and other concomitant beauties" (1955: 91, 97). William McNeill, Toynbee's more sympathetic biographer, writes, "After more than half a century reading Toynbee's pages still remains an adventure. The dazzling range of his information, the boldness of his comparisons, the perspicacity of his reflections ... all combine to make his volumes worth anyone's attention" (1989: 165).

These observations are important, since they point toward the possibility that, even if readers were to be unconvinced by the overall framework of

²⁰ Hellenic Civilization was for Toynbee "the finest flower of the species that has ever yet come to bloom" (1962–1964: II, 315), and throughout the *Study* it furnishes him with some of the most instructive and illuminating examples of the general features of civilization as they follow their "tragic" course (see, for example, *ibid.*: I, 53–54; III, 310–18, 336–46; IV, 20–25, 58–63; V, 19–20, 210–13; 287–91; VI, 287–91). In 1959, Toynbee published a concise, integrated account, *Hellenism: The History of a Civilization*, fulfilling, as he says, a commission of 1914! (1959: vii).

Toynbee's *Study*, they might still find much to admire and learn from it. It is all the more regrettable then, that, discouraged by the dismissal of Toynbee by most professional historians, few people read him today. They therefore do not discover for themselves the "firefly flashes of historical insight"—what Toynbee found of value in Spengler—that are to be found scattered throughout the twelve volumes, and which make them worth the attention of anyone, however unfashionable Toynbee's general approach has become. Toynbee can be read for the parts as well as the whole; it is possible that the parts are indeed better—more instructive, more interesting—than the whole.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt an assessment of the general features of Toynbee's analysis of civilizations. It is probably here that Toynbee has come in for the most severe criticism.²¹ Critics have not been persuaded by the model of "challenge and response" as the source of civilizational genesis and growth. They have accepted that Toynbee differs from Spengler in not working with the analogy between the individual and the social organism, each with their cycles of birth, youth, maturity, and decline into old age. But they see similar weaknesses in the common pattern that Toynbee discerns of growth and decline through the sequence of a creative minority becoming a dominant minority, a Time of Troubles leading to a Universal State and a Universal Church, and the emergence of a new civilization on the basis of the Universal Church created by the internal proletariat. For many critics, while some of the concepts work for the particular pattern of Hellenic Society, they are highly unconvincing when transposed across all twenty-one civilizations.

I share some of these concerns. Toynbee's overall framework can often seem Procrustean; the intricate relationships of "apparentation-and-affiliation" between civilizations often seem too ingenious to be convincing; the fondness for analogies and metaphors drawn from the mechanical, physical, and life sciences often seems to lead to fanciful comparisons. Moreover, civilizational analysis, especially of the comparative kind, is always going to be problematic, given enduring disagreements about definitions and units of analysis. Thus Toynbee's listing of twenty-one civilizations might seem highly questionable; many of his critics have come up with very different lists, equally convincing (or not).

But to say this is not to dismiss Toynbee—far from it. *A Study of History* is far more than a schematic account of civilizational rise and fall in the manner of earlier "conjectural histories" or evolutionary "philosophies of history." It is far more, in other words, than the sum of its parts. Its strength lies precisely in "the parts"—in the examination of particular civilizations, in tracing the links

²¹ See especially Geyl 1955; Trevor-Roper 1957; Manuel 1965: 153–60; and Mazlish 1966. A good selection from the earlier period is Montagu 1956. For reasons given in the text, there is a dearth of extended commentary for more recent decades, but there are some useful items in Morton 1980 and McNeill 1989.

between them, in providing illuminating insights into all manner of historical questions that have preoccupied historians and others for a long time. None of this, probably, would have been possible, for Toynbee at least, if he had not approached his study from a lofty and philosophical height. But whatever our feelings about the project as a whole, it is open to us to find in this vast study many particular gems, discussions of particular issues that throw light on subjects of major importance. Toynbee had an encyclopedic knowledge and a penetrating mind. His way of thinking about history provides him with a vantage point from which to look at some familiar questions in a quite unfamiliar way.

I take just a few examples, based on my own interests, from the earlier volumes. One concerns the peculiarity of Scottish development, and its relation to England and the United Kingdom, of which it became an integral part. How was it that Scotland became so “English,” despite its origins in settlements from Celtic Ireland and the early predominance (later celebrated by nationalists in search of “difference”) of the Scottish Highlands with their Celtic culture and language? Toynbee traces this to the successful response to the challenge of “Far Western Christian Civilization,” whereby Scottish kings merged with the Northumbrian Anglo-Saxon kingdom to the south, making Edinburgh the capital and the English language (Inglis in its Scottish form) and English administration the key features of royal rule (1962–1964: II, 190–202). Thus it was that, after many centuries, the union of England and Scotland could be accomplished with relatively little disruption, given the commonalities of language and much of the apparatus of law and administration. This remarkable outcome, and the continuing ties between Scotland and England, is something often commented on, but little explained. It is the civilizational perspective—the pressure put upon the Scots by the Scandinavians—that allows Toynbee to trace the source of the strength of this connection, one that later historians of the United Kingdom had to recover, rather painfully and usually with little reference to Toynbee’s pioneering analysis (Kumar 2003: 77–81).

A further enlightening example comes in the discussion of the impact of the sixteenth-century Shiite Revolution in Iran on the course of the Ottoman Empire. Most scholars have seen in the rivalry between Shiite Iran and the Sunni Ottomans a major source of conflict for both societies. But Toynbee shows how, in addition, the Shiite revolution led by Ismail Shah Safavi (r. 1500–1524) redirected Ottoman policy in a fundamental way. Instead of pressing westwards towards Europe, as had been their wont hitherto (and which continued, in the conquest of Hungary for example), the Ottomans were forced to turn their attention to the Arab lands to forestall the export and extension of the new Shiite power to that region. The conquest of Syria, Egypt, and the Hijaz by Selim I, his assumption of the title and claims of the caliphate, and the further extension of control over Muslim North Africa, followed naturally from this understanding, giving the Ottoman Empire an altogether new character, with new interests (Toynbee 1962–1964: I, 70, 347–402).

Once again, it is through an understanding of civilizational successions and encounters that Toynbee is able to appreciate this fundamental reorientation of Ottoman policy, one that ultimately fatally undermined it in its competition with the Christian West.²² As the main carrier and guardian of Islamic civilization, the Ottomans had nevertheless also seen themselves as the successors of Rome and Byzantium. Hence their protection of Greek Orthodoxy, and their generally westward movement and aspirations in the first century of Ottoman rule. The Shiite revolution in Iran blew them off course, forcing them to accentuate their Islamic character and adopt an increasingly rigid attitude towards Christians. The attempt to Westernize in the nineteenth century came too late to save the empire (*ibid.*: I, 25–59; II: 222–28).

The history of Islamic civilization also furnishes the occasion of one of Toynbee's most flamboyant exercises in historical explanation. Why, asks Toynbee, in the early history of Islamic Society, was the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad not merely able to take power from the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus, but also to unite in a far more successful way the two halves of the empire that had co-existed uneasily under the Umayyads? For his answer we find Toynbee delving deeper and deeper back into the past of the region. First is the recognition that the parts the Umayyads had tried to weld together belonged to two earlier and quite distinct civilizations—one Roman, the other Sassanian (Iranian). For nearly seven hundred years the line between these two halves had been maintained. But, it turns out, before the separation both once belonged to the empire of the Achaemenidae, the Persian Empire that flourished from c. 550–c. 330 BC, the empire extinguished by Alexander the Great (Kuhrt 2001). The two parts, in other words, separated in the Hellenic period, were once united in the Achaemenian Empire. The union of the two parts accomplished by the Abbasids thus “prove to have been a reunion.” Toynbee's description of this long-drawn-out process provides an instructive example of his whole manner of inquiry.

This observation gives a hint of what the social current may have been which was making for this union so strongly at the time when the Umayyads gave way to the Abbasids. It may have been an impulse—mainly, no doubt, unconscious, yet certainly not less potent and probably more persistent than if it had been clearly envisaged—to join together again the parts of a whole which had been put asunder by force, and thereby to undo completely a deed which had been left in suspension—half undone and half still to undo—during those centuries in which an arbitrary line of division had cleft the former domain of the Achaemenian Empire in twain. In this light, the cataclysmic conquests of the primitive Muslim Arabs seem to respond antistrophically, in the rhythm of history, to the cataclysmic conquests of Alexander. Like these, they

²² Toynbee's account of this reorientation, and of its importance in later Ottoman history, is confirmed by several later authorities, for example, Braudel 1975: II, 667–68, 798–802, 1166–74; and Finkel 2007: 108–14, 492–93. Not all, though, accept that it necessarily weakened the Ottomans in their rivalry with the West.

changed the face of the world in half a dozen years; but instead of changing it out of recognition, *more Macedonico*, they changed it back to a recognizable likeness of what had been once before. As the Macedonian conquest, by breaking up the Achaemenian Empire, prepared the soil for the seed of Hellenism, so the Arab conquest opened the way for the later Umayyads, and after them the Abbasids, to reconstruct a universal state which was the equivalent of the Achaemenian Empire. If we superpose the map of either empire upon the map of the other, we shall be struck by the closeness with which the outlines correspond, and we shall find that the correspondence is not simply geographical but extends to methods of administration and even to the more intimate phenomena of social and spiritual life. We may express the historical function of the Abbasid Caliphate by describing it as a 'reintegration' or 'resumption' of the Achaemenian Empire—the reintegration of a political structure which had been broken up by the impact of an external force, and the resumption of a phase of social life which had been interrupted by an alien invasion (1962–1964: I, 76–77).

"Is it fantastic," asks Toynbee rhetorically, "to conceive the possibility of such a relation between two institutions which were separated in time by an interval of more than a millennium"? Toynbee, here at least, evidently thinks not. Even over such long stretches of time, the violent conquest of a civilization by "an alien force" can be expected to resonate in a society until such time as an opportunity arises for "the victim to reassume the posture out of which he had been shaken by the original impact and to resume the career which the intrusion had arrested" (*ibid.*: I, 77).

Specialists have been scathing about this account, seeing it as an example of Toynbee at his worst. Even as sympathetic a figure as McNeill demurs (1989: 254); and Toynbee himself was later to accept that, although the Muslim caliphate should still be considered a "Syriac universal state," "we must conclude that the conscious continuity of the Syriac Civilization did not survive the fall of the Achaemenian Empire" (1962–1964: XII, 443). In this instance perhaps the specialists are right. But did Toynbee, under the onslaught of the criticisms, lose his nerve too readily (or is that word "conscious" still a subtle indication of the old conviction)? Is it really so fantastic to think that we can trace collective memories and practices, often long buried but maintaining some sort of subterranean existence in civilizational complexes occupying the same region, back to very distant pasts? We have the robust declaration of the great historian Fernand Braudel that "civilizations, like sand dunes, are firmly anchored to the hidden contours of the earth," and that "what we call civilization is the distant and far distant past clinging to life, determined to impose itself." Referring to the loss of Algeria by France in 1962, Braudel says: "If North Africa 'betrayed' the West, it was not in March, 1962, but long ago, in the eighth century if not even before the birth of Christ, with the building of Carthage, city of the East" (1975 [1949, 1966]: II, 757, 775). Here is the *longue durée*, indeed: the establishment of the Phoenician city of Carthage in the ninth century BC is seen as creating an "Oriental," anti-Western, ethos in North Africa that is still operative nearly three thousand years later.

Another example of the long reach of civilizations—as it happens from much the same Middle Eastern area as discussed by Toynbee—has recently been supplied by Patricia Crone. In her absorbing account of the Khurramis, the Iranian communities that long resisted Islam after the Muslim conquest of Persia, Crone traces the source of that resistance back to the Zoroastrianism of the third century AD, and even further back, to a long-lasting set of radical beliefs and practices in the mountain villages of Khurasan and Transoxania, the heartland of Khurramism (Crone 2012: vii, 22–27). What is more, Khurramism long outlasted the Muslim conquest, to persist in diluted form, as varieties of Zoroastrianism, right up to our own times, and thus lasting some two thousand years (ibid.: 472–93). Hence in both Braudel and Crone we are confronted with civilizational impulses of between two and three thousand years old, considerably more than the thousand-year link between the Achaemenids and the Abbasids that Toynbee wishes to show. At the very least we should be prepared to accept that civilizations experience “renaissances” that recapitulate key aspects of their past, often their very distant past.²³

There are many other aspects of Toynbee’s work that would repay renewed attention, for instance, the sections on “The Stimulus of Pressures” and “The Stimulus of Penalizations,” with their many insights into the role of “marches” and “interiors” in the development of civilizations, and why certain minorities were able to flourish in the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires (1962–1964: II, 112–259). All these derive from the “challenge-and-response” framework which is one of the much criticized master themes of the *Study*, but which in Toynbee’s hands enable him to describe and account for some of the most instructive episodes in world history.

To the particular insights gained through taking the comparative civilizational approach, we should finally add the great mental liberation that Toynbee brings by proclaiming the “philosophical equivalence” and the “philosophical contemporaneity” of all civilizations. By the first, Toynbee means that civilizations—he identifies twenty-one over the course of recorded history—“must be regarded as all approximately equal to one another in value” (ibid.: I, 177). Nothing is more emphatic, and nothing more attractive, than Toynbee’s rejection of the view that “the Western Society of our day is the consummation of human history and is synonymous with ‘Civilization’ itself” (ibid.: I, 151). Toynbee will have no truck with “the Unity of Civilization” thesis, whether in its eighteenth-century Eurocentric form or the wider Western-centric version that became popular in the twentieth century with its view of the gradual but steady Westernization of the world. For Toynbee the human

²³ The phenomenon of “renaissances,” as “the evocation of a dead culture by the living representatives of a civilization that is still a going concern,” is treated fully in volume 9 of the *Study* (1962–1964: XI: 1–166). In his recent study, *Renaissances*, Jack Goody praises Toynbee for the breadth of his approach, specifically his rejection of Eurocentrism (2010: 8–9).

story has been multiple and diverse. All twenty-one civilizations must be regarded as attempts, more or less successful, and more or less instructive, at solving the problems facing all human societies, of getting a living from the environment and giving shape and meaning to human lives. Such a perspective should induce a proper humility, particularly necessary in the face of Western triumphalism. "We know of twenty-one cases in which the enterprise of civilization has been attempted hitherto. We know of no case in which the goal of human endeavour has been attained yet, while on the other hand we know of fourteen cases in which attempts to attain the goal are proved to have failed irretrievably by the fact that the societies which made them have become extinct. The possibility of attaining the goal is still an open question in the seven cases of the civilizations that are still alive" (*ibid.*: I, 159).²⁴

To the second principle, "the philosophical contemporaneity" of all civilizations, it might be objected that not all of the twenty-one civilizations identified are in fact contemporary; fourteen are, after all, extinct. In response, Toynbee points out that civilization as a species occupies only a small fraction of the total time that humanity has existed and that, within this perspective, all civilizations, dead or alive, can still be considered as relevant and representative expressions of human striving and achievement.²⁵

If we take the antiquity of Man to be something like 300,000 years, then the antiquity of civilizations, so far from being coeval with human history, will be found to cover less than 2 per cent of its present span; less than 6,000 years out of 300,000+. On this time-scale, the lives of our twenty-one civilizations—distributed over not more than three generations of societies and concentrated within less than one-fiftieth part of the lifetime of Mankind—must be regarded, on a philosophic view, as contemporary with one another (*ibid.*: I, 174).

When asked by a journalist in 1965 how he would like to be remembered, Toynbee replied: "As someone who has tried to see it whole, and ... not just in Western terms." McNeill comments on this: "Toynbee, more than any other single person, was able to introduce to a large portion of the world's reading public the simple truth that Asians, Africans, Amerindians, and even specialized peoples like the Eskimo had a history that was independent of and analogous to the history of Europeans. The vision of a human past, cast, as he said, 'not just in western terms' was, therefore, his great and central

²⁴ For the enumeration and classification of civilizations, and the distinction between "extinct," "arrested," and "living" civilizations, see Toynbee 1962–1964: I, 34–36, 129–46. For later thoughts, see *ibid.*: XII, 282–300.

²⁵ Toynbee does not deny that the "primitive societies" studied by anthropologists also offer valuable lessons to us today; and he decries those who see them as simply "static" and uncreative, noting, "The mutation of Sub-Man into Man, which was accomplished, in circumstances of which we have no record, under the aegis of primitive societies, was a more profound change, a greater step in growth, than any progress which Man has yet achieved under the aegis of civilizations" (1962–1964: I, 192). But civilizations are a different, and far rarer, variety of the human experience than the thousands of primitive societies, and it is they who carry the seeds of the future.

contribution to our tradition of learning, and ought to become his enduring claim to fame” (1989: 284–85). This indeed, certainly in the context of the time, is surely enough to warrant a return to Toynbee, as one of the great pioneers of global, comparative, history. But perhaps even more it is as a comparative student of civilizations that Toynbee has claims on us today. It is not just Eurocentrism, or a narrow focus on the West, that stands in need of correction. It is also “methodological nationalism,” the privileging of the nation-state as the object of historical or sociological study. If “civilization” can help us to get beyond that, then its return is welcome indeed, and Toynbee’s time, too, may have come around again.

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Abstract: After a period of neglect, civilization as a concept seems once more to have regained popularity among a number of historians and social scientists. Why? What is the appeal of civilization today? And might the return of civilization also herald a return to the work of Arnold Toynbee, once regarded as the towering figure of civilizational analysis? This paper considers the history of the concept of civilization, and argues for the continuing importance and relevance of Toynbee's multi-volume *A Study of History* within that tradition. The claim is that, whatever the weaknesses of Toynbee's general approach, the civilizational perspective he adopts allows him to cast an illuminating light on many important historical questions. Moreover his belief in the "philosophical contemporaneity" and equal value of all civilizations should make him peculiarly attractive to those many today who reject Eurocentrism and who are increasingly persuaded of the need to consider the total human experience from earliest times up to the present.