

ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE
AND THE CYCLE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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The Cyclical Unit of History

Historians have long sought to learn the cyclical unit of history. That is the recurring history that perfectly repeats itself, all steps being the same from one cycle to the next. Oswald Spengler argued the sovereign nation-state was the cyclical unit of history, with nation-states being born, emerging from a vivacious youth to a position of world power, and then fading away. These nation-states did not disappear following their moment on the world stage but simply became “just another country.”

This concept of nation-states growing up and coming to power is related to Hegel and his ideas about a “World Spirit.” At any given moment in history, Hegel argued, a particular nation-state becomes the “World Spirit,” and its ideas and actions dominate the world at that time. That nation continues to dominate until a rival nation-state rises to power and takes over as the World Spirit, and so on forever.

British historian Arnold J. Toynbee argued that the cyclical unit of history was the “Civilization,” a group of nation-states whose ideas and ways of doing things come to dominate “the known world.” Often one nation-state is the most powerful leader in the Civilization and comes to dominate it and symbolize it. After a lengthy period of domination, the Civilization falls, the world goes into a state of low-level organization, and

humanity waits for the next Civilization to emerge and the cycle to begin anew.

Toynbee wrote: “The intelligible unit of historical study is neither a nation-state nor (at the other end of the scale) mankind as a whole but a certain grouping of humanity that we have called a [Civilization].”¹

“The known world” in Toynbee’s theory is those nations which the Civilization has the technological power to know about and dominate. Thus the Mayan Civilization in Mexico did not dominate the planet earth but was able to dominate all the other nation-states in its vicinity that it knew about.

Toynbee studied many years of human history and finally concluded there had been 21 major civilizations.² The three most important were the Egyptian Civilization in the ancient world, the Hellenic Civilization (Greece and the Roman Empire) in the classical period around the birth of Christ, and the present Western Civilization.

The Cycle of Civilizations

Toynbee described a new Civilization as emerging out of the turmoil and lack of order created by the fall of the previous Civilization. The Middle Ages in Europe are a good example of this sort of disorderly and under-organized period in the history of human affairs. Toynbee described these periods of near anarchy as an “interregnum.”

At the beginning of the Civilization, a “creative minority” in a nation-state develops new ways of doing things – ways that enable them to get ahead of their neighbors.³ At the beginning there are many nation-states

¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Abridgement of Volumes I-VI, by D. C. Somervell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 11.

² Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 35.

³ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 214.

ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

competing for domination, but technological advances enable a limited number of nation-states to take over their neighbors and become more powerful. Warfare and other forms of competition are continuous. Eventually just two powerful nation-states are vying to control the Civilization and create a single government for “the known World.”

Toynbee labeled this giant fight between the last two nation-states vying for control of the Civilization as “a time of troubles.”⁴ That was because technological advancements were making warfare so much more deadly and destructive. In the end, because of the horror of war, one nation-state or the other gains complete control and leadership over the entire Civilization.

Toynbee refers to this period in a Civilization’s history as the “Universal State.”⁵

The lifespan of a Civilization led by one nation-state can be a long one, lasting for hundreds of years. Thus the Hellenic Civilization (Greece and Rome) was finally dominated and led by the Roman Empire for more than 400 years.

But the very success of the Civilization brings its downfall. With no competitors forcing it to innovate and move forward, the Civilization begins to decay. “Challenge and Response,” Toynbee points out, ceases to exist.⁶ The Civilization becomes set in its ways and eventually is unable to defend itself from the forces of break-up and disintegration. Toynbee noted:

⁴ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 12. For discussion of the 20th Century as Toynbee’s “time of troubles,” see Ian Hall, “‘Time of Troubles’: Arnold J. Toynbee’s twentieth century,” *International Affairs*, January 2014, V. 90, No. 1, pp. 23-36.

⁵ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, pp. 12, 368.

⁶ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, pp. 78, 140.

ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

“Loss of creative power is a sign of breakdown [of a Civilization]. A creative minority degenerates into a dominant minority which attempts to retain by force a position which it has ceased to merit.”⁷

During this disintegration of a once thriving Civilization, Toynbee discovered, two opposing groups emerged. One was an “internal proletariat” of people who lived within the geographical boundaries of the Civilization but did not believe they were served well by it. These people were, in Toynbee’s words, “in” but not “of” the particular Civilization.⁸

The second group opposing the Civilization as it was breaking up was labeled by Toynbee as the “external proletariat.” These were uncivilized barbarians and “war-bands” at the far distant edges of the Civilization which made guerilla-style raids upon it.⁹

Because of successful resistance from either the internal proletariat or the external proletariat, or both, the Civilization eventually falls. Its final adherents struggle hard but fail to save it. An interregnum of many competing small nation-states reappears.”¹⁰

It is during this interregnum that the Cycle of Civilizations gets ready to begin anew.¹¹

⁷ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 246, 317.

⁸ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 377.

⁹ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 403.

¹⁰ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 12.

¹¹ For a one paragraph summary of Toynbee’s Cycle of Civilizations, see Ian Hall, “Challenge and Response: The Lasting Engagement of Arnold J. Toynbee and Martin Wight,” *International Relations*, V. 17(3) (2003), p. 394. For a second one paragraph summary, see Krishan Kumar, “The Return of Civilization – and of Arnold Toynbee?”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2014, 56(4): p. 831.

One thing is clear. Planet earth is filled with the ruins of past Civilizations. The pyramids in Egypt, the Parthenon in Athens, the Roman Forum in Rome, the Mayan ruins in Mexico, and the Inca ruins in Peru are but a few of many examples. A number have become world-famous tourist attractions.

The Greeks and the Romans

Arnold J. Toynbee wrote that one could learn all there was to know about the Cycle of Civilizations by studying the Greeks and the Romans. The Civilization those two nation-states created dominated the Mediterranean Basin and Europe. Comparatively speaking, this “Hellenic Civilization,” as Toynbee labeled it, was advanced in the development of thought, art, drama, and primitive engineering. It was capable of building substantial roads, functioning water systems, and large stone buildings and public plazas.

Rome eventually defeated Greece, creating the unified Civilization known as the Roman Empire. The world became generally peaceful, but Rome did have to contend with various rebellious groups, both within and at the fringes of the Empire, that did not want to conform to the Greco-Roman way of doing things. Those rebellious groups eventually overthrew Rome and the interregnum known as the European Middle Ages resulted.¹²

Western Civilization

Unfortunately Toynbee chose “Western” for the name of the Civilization that rose out of the European Middle Ages. That choice was unfortunate because the word “western” became associated with European imperialism during the 1800s and early 1900s. By the 21st century the word

¹² Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, pp. 12, 261.

has become negative in connotation to certain groups and quite widely attacked intellectually in various circles.

According to Toynbee, Italy provided the creative minority that sparked the birth of Western Civilization. It was the “Italistic” Age. It occurred at the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation.¹³ The creative minority began using scientific thinking and technological advances to break away from religious and tradition-dominated ways of doing things. It was the dawning of an age of geographical exploration as well as all kinds of experimentation. A capitalistic economy developed which, as time went by, became regulated in many instances by democratic governments. There thus was the rise of the great democracies alongside the monarchies and despotisms of old.

Toynbee saw Industrialism and Democracy as the two greatest developments of Western Civilization.¹⁴ He wrote that Western manufacturers and technicians spread Western values more than Western nations and armies.¹⁵ He traced the birth of Democracy in Western Civilization to the development of Parliament in England.¹⁶ He believed “democracy is the political expression of humanitarianism.”¹⁷ He characterized Western Civilization as a global phenomenon.

At the beginning there were many nation-states, but a prolonged series of wars – including two great World Wars – resulted in the concentration, in 1945, of power in two large and populous nation-states, the United States

¹³ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 312.

¹⁴ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 206.

¹⁵ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 36.

¹⁶ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 237.

¹⁷ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 282.

and the Soviet Union. The competition between these two great “world powers” extended to economic expansion as well as military armaments. Because of the development of nuclear and hydrogen weapons during World War II, the expected final confrontation between the two nation-states (to establish single nation-state control of the Civilization) was horrifying to contemplate in terms of destroyed cities and human casualties.

From 1945 to 1991, a period of 46 years, these two great powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, contested for control of the “known world” (now the entire planet Earth). Both of these nation-states had atomic and hydrogen weapons available and ready to use. The situation perfectly met Toynbee’s definition of “a time of troubles” too great to bear.

The United States after World War II

Prior to World War II, the United States mainly declined the role of being a major world power. The United States was late coming into World War I, and it absented itself from efforts at world peace such as the post-World War I League of Nations. At this time Toynbee was an outspoken supporter of the League of Nations and a critic of German Nazism and Italian fascism.

Following the victory of the United States and its allies (including the Soviet Union) in World War II, there was a “revolution in United States foreign policy.”¹⁸ The nation that had toyed with “isolation” prior to World War II suddenly became a champion of international engagement.

¹⁸ William G. Carleton, *Revolution in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1957). The “revolution” was the United States ending its pre-World War II isolationism and, after World War II, taking a super active role in world affairs.

The United States played a leading role in the formation of the United Nations, a confederation of sovereign nation-states devoted to charting and following paths to universal peace and international accommodation. Faced with a military challenge from the Soviet Union, the United States began negotiating bilateral and multilateral military treaties with other nations to counterbalance the military power of the Soviets. These military treaties were soon followed by well-financed economic aid programs to other nation-states (the Marshall Plan, etc.) and major trade agreements (the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, etc.).

Organizing international military affairs and international trade treaties to oppose the Soviet Union established the United States as one of the primary nation-states in the Western Civilization. The United State was doing business all over the planet and simultaneously allowing other nation-states to do business in the United States. Advances in communications technology, centered in the United States but soon practiced everywhere, allowed further unification of the planet through television, cell phones, and the computer-based internet.

Toynbee argued that Western techniques and values “radiate outward into the world that surrounds them.” He said Industrialism and Democracy radiated out from Great Britain to planet earth at the end of the 18th Century (1800).¹⁹ After World War II, the United States took over from England the major role in “radiating” Western values and lifestyles to the world.

The “Universal State” that the United States has been building since the end of World War II is unique in this regard. It has not been adding other nation-states to an empire and sending its own people to govern them, as did

¹⁹ Toynbee, *Abridgement by Somervell*, pp. 281-282.

the Roman Empire and many other Universal States. The United States has been using voluntary treaties and confederations, such as the U.N., NATO, and NAFTA, to build an orderly world.

Toynbee visualized that such a voluntary path to a Universal State might be possible. “What we are looking for is a free consent of free peoples to dwell together in unity, and to make, un-coerced, the far-reaching adjustments and concessions without which this ideal [the Universal State] cannot be reached in practice.”²⁰

Toynbee thus was in favor of the “Universal State,” but only if it could be achieved through peaceful negotiation rather than military conquest.

The Irresistible Character of Western Civilization

Toynbee saw the ideas and rewards of the Western Civilization as irresistible to those living outside its ever-expanding boundaries. The political freedoms and social freedoms it embodied were further enhanced by automobiles, television sets, clean drinking water, tremendous progress in health care techniques, cell phones, Social Security programs, and other material benefits. In Toynbee’s view, the rewards of the Western Civilization, as promoted by the United States, were too attractive to be successfully resisted by non-Western nation-states and societies.

The Break-Up of the Soviet Union

Toynbee was troubled by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the eventual emergence of the Soviet Union as a totalitarian Communist state.

²⁰ Toynbee, Abridgement by Somervell, p. 552.

He saw the Soviet Union as a Western society and described Communism as mainly a front for Russian territorial expansion.²¹

Toynbee passed away in 1975, just at the time when there had been a major cooling off in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Before he died, Toynbee speculated that an all-out war between the United States and the Soviet Union, to see which nation-state would be the sole controlling force in the Western Civilization, was not inevitable. He conceded there might be a peaceful path to the “Universal State” – the final stage – of Western Civilization.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the break-up of the Soviet Union into its constituent states two years later in 1991, were events of great significance for Toynbee followers. The main competitor of the United States for control of the Western Civilization had been eliminated. The final horrific military battle for mastery of the Civilization, fought with nuclear and hydrogen weapons, had been avoided. Commentators began referring to the United States as “the world’s only great superpower.”

The First Years of the “Single Power”

Stage of Western Civilization

The United States, since 1991, has been leading the entire planet Earth into the first years of a Toynbee-style “Universal State.” As Toynbee predicted, the United States has been troubled by small wars on the fringes of the Civilization, in places such as Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The United States has had to deal with troublesome and rebellious small powers in North Korea and Iran. But that is the typical role of the great nation-state that succeeds in ruling the final “Universal State” phase of a civilization.

²¹ Toynbee, *Abridgement by Somervell*, pp. 205, 400.

The threat of major warfare, such as World Wars I and II, has been eliminated. There will be no more world-wide conflicts with death tolls possibly as high as the 87 million or so killed in World War II. The creation of a worldwide economic system continues apace. In the early 2000s, “globalism” became the watchword for the economic future of the United States as it prepared its sons and daughters to go to do business all over the planet. International tourism was growing steadily. Spending at least part, if not all, of one’s college career in a foreign country was an upper-class fashion.

Since the end of World War II, the United States has set about building a planet-wide security system rather than a centrally controlled empire such as Rome. Instead of seeking military control or economic domination over other national states, the United States has woven together a system of voluntary military alliances and mutually agreed upon trade pacts that provide much the same military security and wealth that a traditional sort of empire could provide.

In 2019 the Pentagon, the five-sided building in northern Virginia housing the headquarters of the U.S. military establishment, acknowledged ownership and operation of 514 overseas bases. These bases were capable of launching a wide variety of military strikes against other countries, ranging from dispatching a nuclear strike to putting “boots on the ground” during political unrest in a far-off city. Legitimizing these military bases were extensive treaties with other nations providing for mutual defense in case either nation is attacked by an aggressor. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), undertaken with most of the nations of Western Europe, was the first of these many regional military alliances.

The military agreements are important, and so are as the world trade pacts that the U.S. has negotiated and worked to continually expand since the end of World War II. These trade pacts have created a global business community in which it is comparatively easy to trade products between one nation and another. Giant cargo ships, filled to the brim with “intermodal” metal containers that hustle goods from one nation to another, are the major symbol of this United States orchestrated worldwide economic revolution.

“Collaboration” and “confederation” are the watchwords of this orderly new world. Instead of conquering other nations and forcing them into an empire, the U.S. negotiates its way to military and economic security. The military alliances and trade pacts are mainly held together through voluntary participation. International treaties create confederations which nations can join or stay out of – or even leave – as they wish.²²

The forward march of technology has assisted the United States in creating this new form of, in Toynbee’s words, a “world civilization.” Jet airplanes have made almost every point on the earth’s surface accessible. The comparatively low cost of jet-powered air travel has encouraged middle-class travel around the globe. Credit cards that can be used to finance travel in a variety of nations further complement this emerging “international community of travelers.” Nations that readily exchange tourists in this manner are not likely to go to war with one another. They will refrain from dealing harshly with each other in terms of economics.

²² For a review of United States foreign policy in the early stages of the Universal State, see Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America,” *International Security*, V. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012-2013), pp. 7-51. See also G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?,” *International Affairs*, 94: I (2018), pp. 7-23.

ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

The rise of digital technology further facilitates the shrinking of the globe. Cell phones now connect people together from throughout the world. Images can be transmitted internationally with ease.

According to Toynbee and his followers, this situation could last for 400 years or more. As early as 1946, Toynbee had written the following: “Our society has embraced the whole world in its tentacles, and there are no longer external proletariats of any considerable dimension left to barbarize us.”²³

Why is Toynbee out of Favor?

Arnold Joseph Toynbee was born on April 14, 1889. From 1918 to 1950, he was a British historian and a leading authority on international affairs. Although his ideas about the cyclical unit of history were very popular for a while, by 1970 these ideas were beginning to fade away and not be mentioned very much.

Toynbee was famous for his 12-volume *A Study of History*, which he slowly published volume-by-volume from 1934 to 1961. The majority of the volumes had the word “Civilizations” in their specific titles. The existence of a recurring Cycle of Civilizations was a unifying theme throughout the entire project.

Toynbee’s works were progressively available throughout a period that included the end of World War I, the rise of Hitler in Germany, World War II, the emergence of the Soviet Union as a world power, the beginning of the Cold War, and the “revolution in American foreign policy.” His theory of Civilizations explained many of these events, particularly the shift

²³ Toynbee, *Abridgement by Somervell*, p. 464.

from many powerful nations to only two nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, competing to dominate the Civilization.

Following Toynbee's death in 1975, the breakup and downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the United States in a singular position of world power, much resembling Toynbee's Universal State.

Why has a historical theory that makes sense of so many major world events over such a lengthy period of time fallen so far from favor?²⁴

Toynbee was one of a group of scholars famous for taking a "world view," which meant trying to explain history in terms of what is happening on the entire planet earth over long periods of time. One explanation for Toynbee's fall from historical grace might be from the "world view" approach falling out of favor. Historians in the 1970s began concentrating on writing about more limited topics, such as women's rights history, or race-relations history, or the history of one people dominating another. Toynbee wrote "macro-history," but by the late 1970s "micro-history" had come into fashion.²⁵

There also is the problem that Toynbee's theory carves out a major role for the United States to play in shaping and controlling the Western

²⁴ For a description of the decline of Toynbee and his ideas, see Ian Hall, "Challenge and Response: The Lasting Engagement of Arnold J. Toynbee and Martin Wight," *International Relations*, V. 17(3) (2003), pp. 389-390. See also Michael Lang, "Globalization and Global History in Toynbee," *Journal of World History*, V. 22. No. 4 (December 2011), p. 747. Lang described Toynbee as "like an embarrassing uncle at a house party." See also Krishan Kumar, "The Return of Civilization – and of Arnold Toynbee?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2014, 56(4): pp. 815-816.

²⁵ Ian Hall, "Challenge and Response: The Lasting Engagement of Arnold J. Toynbee and Martin Wight," *International Relations*, V. 17(3) (2003), p. 399.

Civilization. Many scholars have difficulty seeing the United States in such a favorable light and prefer to concentrate on U.S. shortcomings in the contemporary world. Also at play may be Toynbee's favorable attitudes toward the role of Industrialism and Democracy in world affairs. Many also would disagree with his contention that perpetual competition – Challenge and Response – is the main driving force of history.

And then there is this unpleasant thought in adhering to Toynbee's theory. Four to five-hundred years from now or so, the Western Civilization will fall or be overthrown. The world will be in a disorganized state, an interregnum, reminiscent of the Middle Ages. To Toynbee's credit, however, he allowed that, although the previous 20 Civilizations had fallen, Western Civilization, the 21st, was not necessarily doomed to disintegrating. "The divine spark of creative power is still alive in us," he proclaimed.²⁶

There also is that, from an enlarged view, things have been going well in the world since Toynbee began to fall out of favor in the 1970s. The Cold War reduced in intensity, and there has been good economic growth throughout the world. Best of all for the United States, the break-up of the Soviet Union has smoothed the path of the world to the final stage of the Western Civilization – the stage of the "Universal State." This has created a more sensible ordering of human affairs on the planet. With things going so well overall, it is understandable that historians might prefer to focus their vision on lesser incidents that show more conflict and confusion.

Whether the world pays attention or not, Toynbee's theory of the Cycle of Civilizations remains the best single historical theory for explaining

²⁶ Toynbee, *Abridgement by Somervell*, pp.251-254, 553.

world events in the 20th and early 21st centuries – and perhaps for hundreds of years to come.