

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
THE FUTURE OF THE WEST
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Note: This text distills and synthesizes some of the main lines of thought of the universal historians Nikolai Danilevsky, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee. Many commonly-found inflection points in the evolution of different civilizations on which those historians generally agree are noted. De Beus synthesizes the conclusions of these three writers to construct a concise template of the history of civilization. Although the historical benchmarks mentioned are not described in socioeconomic terms and are not all socioeconomic in nature, they can be correlated with, or even engrafted on, the model of Anacyclosis. In some cases, the correlation with elements of Anacyclosis is virtually explicit, such as references to the power of the middle classes, or the age of demagoguery. In any case, Anacyclosis, being chiefly focused on the socioeconomic causality of political revolution – on the diffusion and concentration of wealth and political power – lacks many of the cultural, ethical, and aesthetic correlations found in a comprehensive history of civilization like those made by these great writers. Yet these types of historical correlations do not contradict, but rather enrich, the study of Anacyclosis. The commentary at the end of the text suggests that the progress of civilization, like a ratchet, can generally only proceed forward. Footnotes and corresponding references are omitted.

VII. Synthesis: The Pattern of Civilizations. The Consensus of the Authors Discussed.

To begin with, all three authors [Nikolai Danilevsky, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee], as well as many others, recognize under some name or other the fact of the birth or dawn or emergence of a civilization after a “historyless” era which knows only a purely ethnographic form of existence and no *living* civilization. This dawn of a civilization is its first or archaic time; characteristic of it are mythology, epic poems and primitive art; it is the epoch of the great bards and primitive masters. One philosophy or religion undisputedly rules the material, social and spiritual aspects of society; worldly and spiritual authority are combined or closely connected, and exercised by a theocratic-aristocratic upper class by means of sacral laws and ethics. Rigid moral standards are generally recognized; community life is dominated by strong family ties. The economy of this period is rural and agricultural; hence those who own the land, i.e., nobility and church, dominate both socially and economically.

The period of spring, or bloom, or youth, or rise, which follows is inaugurated by the birth of the towns. This event renders the human mind more independent from clerical and feudal strains, stimulates it to activity and thus generates and intensive intellectual life. Yet religion continues to prevail over nationalism, intuition over reason, tradition over utilitarianism, spiritual over material values. This implies a unity of inspiration and a corresponding sense of style which sets its seal on all those products of art, philosophy, or politics for which each particular civilization is gifted. It is the “period of the great masters.”

However, the rise and growth of the towns gradually leads to a new phase, in which the city becomes entirely predominant over the countryside; its leading inhabitants, the commercial middle class, take over from the ruling group of ecclesiastical and rural nobility. The flourishing of spiritual activity in the towns, which brought about a renaissance of the human mind, gradually leads to its complete emancipation from religious discipline: spiritual life becomes secularized, the fine arts, law and ethics become independent from religion, their value becomes a subject of dispute and individual appreciation. Materialism starts to prevail over religion, utilitarian considerations over inner feeling, technique over

genius. Science comes to the fore and brings about an increasing control both over the physical surroundings and over the human environment, in other words: improved technique and geographical extension of the area of domination of the civilization. But these phenomena are neither causes nor proof of an increasing strength of the civilization; according to Danilevsky and Toynbee they often even tend to hide the internal decay which has already set in with this phase of “summer” or “maturity”.

The fundamental source of the decay does not, in the view of most authors, lie in external conditions, but in internal causes, notably in a loss of creative force, which is depicted by Spengler as a domination of intellect over instinct, and by Toynbee as a failure on the part of the leading creative minority in the society to devise adequate responses to particular challenges, causing a failure of the society to adapt itself to a changing situation. While there is a difference in accent and in explanation, there is on this point a common denominator between the two and many other philosophies.

The strongest similarity in views between most philosophers is noticeable with regard to the last phase, that in which disintegration finally occurs. (Danilevsky does not deal with the characteristics of this phase.)

Spengler mentions as typical phenomena of this period: prevalence of the world-city, the “megalopolis,” marked by the reign of its inhabitant, the intellectual nomad, and of its main power, money; physical sterility, and, accompanying it, spiritual sterility, i.e., disappearance of creativeness, loss of “style”; finally, world peace, resulting from the existence of a virtual monopoly of power, a “world empire” in which national and ideological wars are ended, but replaced by “private wars” of the Caesars; and a second religiousness as reaction against the preceding supremacy of intellect.

Typical characteristics of the last phase indicated by Toynbee are: a time of troubles, followed by a universal state; an internal proletariat which seeks refuge in a universal church; and an external proletariat; the combined forces of the latter two finally bring about the visible collapse of the universal state and of the civilization of which it is the last embodiment, if the civilization proves unable to devise an adequate response to the challenge of the time.

It will be clear that, although expressed in different terms and tinged by a different vision, these two pictures of the last stage of a society present some striking resemblances: the period of great troubles, of large-scale wars between ever larger units, in which finally one wins out and imposes a universal peace and a universal state; the advent of dictators and demagogues; the loss of creative force; the loss of style, evident in an artistic “sense of promiscuity”; the refuge which the suffering and weary masses seek in world peace and in religion; finally the return of society to a primitive state without living civilization—all these are common traits in the picture of both authors, and of a number of others as well.

For the conclusions common to the main authors discussed are supported by the fact that others, on an entirely different basis, have reached the same findings. ...

Still other authors who do not accept the cyclical view of history discern in the stages of our or other civilizations many characteristics similar to the ones borne out in the preceding pages. ...

If three or more historians with such a wide knowledge of facts, of different nationalities, writing at different times, basing themselves on different philosophies and using different methods have come to conclusions presenting so many similarities, there must be a strong assumption in favor of their correctness.

This assumption finds confirmation in certain clear and generally acknowledged facts against which they can be tested by everything thinking individual.

Id. The Facts of History.

We speak of civilizations in the plural. This implies that there have been more civilizations than one in the course of history. It furthermore implies that civilizations are born and die, or at least appear and disappear. Whether they are born from a period without civilization and wholly die, as Danilevsky and Spengler say, or whether they withdraw into a cocoon of religion in order to re-emerge in the form of a new civilization, as Toynbee says, or whether some of their perennial values survive and are absorbed by later civilizations, as other contend, is largely a matter of words and of metaphor.

It is furthermore equally certain that a civilization does not remain static from the moment of its appearance until that of its disappearance. Each civilization at one (or sometimes more) stages reaches a height of bloom, which implies that there are one or more processes of growth leading up to it, and of decline following it.

It also seems undeniable that in each civilization the weight of economic and civilized activity has shifted from a primitive rural, agricultural community to the cities, and through them finally to the metropolis. Concurrently the hub of power in each society has shifted from the priesthood and the landowners (the feudal aristocracy) to the money-making class (the bourgeoisie), hence to the masses, and hence to the demagogues or Caesars. Hand in hand with this movement there has been a development in many civilizations toward ever larger political and economic units, from the countries and boroughs to the city-states, hence toward countries, which gradually combine into two or three mammoth states, and finally all come under the dominance of one power.

It is also a fact that in former civilizations the phase of the metropolis, the universal state, and the Caesars, although in some cases of very long duration and experiencing ups and downs, never lasted indefinitely, and must therefore be considered as the last act of the life drama of a civilization.

All the established facts mentioned here, and recognized under differing names by many eminent writers, plead strongly against the view that no general trend can be discerned in the life of different cultures, and against the thesis that history can at any moment at any stage turn in any direction.

Some broad general trend of development common to all civilizations seems undeniable. To say, however, that they are consequently all bound to follow one inflexible pattern is too far-reaching and rigid a conclusion, drawn from too close a comparison with physical organisms. Even in the life of man, beast and pant there are thousands of different possibilities.

There is no reason why there should not be at least as great a latitude of variety for a society as there is for an individual; on the contrary, it should be greater, since a society is not bound by the laws of *physical* development.

Yet, even for a civilization we must on the basis of historical evidence assume that retrogression is possible to a limited degree only. There have been no examples of a civilization which had reached the phase of the world-cities moving back to that of an agricultural primitive society unless through such a process of disintegration and degeneration that the civilization would be lost or entirely change its character. The development of civilizations, as all life, can move upward or downward, never backward.

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