

THE DYNAMICS OF CIVILIZATION

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Arnold Toynbee*, though in advanced years, is still publishing. In 1972 he published a new, brilliant synthesis of his A Study of History. This 500 page synthesis, with striking pictures, deals with more than 30 civilizations. He has included African civilizations; and, in general, he has sifted the latest evidence available in the field of archeology. He explains his use of the term "fossilized" civilization in his original work--with regards to the Jewish people in Palestine. He meant this term in a purely technical sense.

The Jews, not wishing to be a universal-state, delineated their conversion prospects--and, therefore became "fossilized" in terms of their prospect of becoming a "universal" entity, or civilization. Toynbee remains sensitive also, about criticisms having to do with the thinness of his earlier study.

Having integrated video-tapes of Kenneth Clark's "civilization" in my Western civilization courses, and having integrated tapes from Alistair Cooke's series into my American history courses, it seems to me, that it might be a good idea to acquaint the basic-student with some knowledge of the dynamics of civilization--using Arnold Toynbee's new, provocative, synthesis. Our students learn a good deal about the dynamics of the ghetto, the city, state and local government--and, indeed, national government, and international government. Why should they not learn something about the dynamics of that especially fragile entity they are partner to--civilization. A fascinating course could be developed just on the dynamics--and, Toynbee's new synthesis could act as a text. Or, Toynbee's book could be made available on twenty-four hour loan in the college library, and used co-laterally in the basic western (or world) civilization courses--which seem to be in decline.

* Toynbee is a proponent of the theory that civilizations develop to an apex then gradually decline.

Or, a three week mini-course could be given, for one credit perhaps, for a study of dynamics such as: challenge and response, penalization, race, environment, ethical and spiritual thrust. A follow-up three-week mini-course could deal with "lost" civilizations. Whatever path might be taken, some study would be given to the dynamics of civilization.

Civilizations, as Kenneth Clark points out in part 1 of his series "civilization is a most fragile thing. It is a difficult thing to define--perhaps only so through attribution, again, as suggested by Kenneth Clark. Why shouldn't our students know of the nebulous nature, and fragility of the larger entity they are a partner to?

There is now a barbarian ad on television-Ghengis Khan, I believe. Someone on Madison Avenue must have studied western civilization. The barbarian, the classic external proletariat, is a founding-father of civilization. And, while he may enter the scene initially, as a destroyer of culture, he very often gives the intruded, material civilization, a new energy and a new direction. Why shouldn't our students know about the crucial role of the barbarian? Every civilization faces the specter of a rising internal or external folk.

What about the role of race? Toynbee does not see it as a dynamic in civilization. There are no superior races in Toynbee's views; and he has had more than forty years to weigh the evidence. Should not our students be made aware of this point of race? Or, are Dr. Schockley's views to go unchallenged?

What about environment? Is this a dynamic of civilization? With all of the current interest in ecology, population control and so forth, should not this dynamic be given some thought--especially by the basic student? How do the various civilizations deal (or not deal) with their rising population?

And what about the dynamic of spiritual context and purpose. Toynbee sees this vital dynamic as lacking in the west today. Can a civilization survive without a sense of the "spiritual"? This should be discussed by all citizens of western civilization--especially our college constituency.

So I would suggest that some effort be made to deal with the dynamics of

civilization. Special attention should be made to America's predicament today. As a great extension of western civilization, we are subject to the cycles and pitfalls of civilization--past and present. Did we get into war in Viet Nam because of an inevitable imperialist-cycle in an advanced, materialist society? Toynbee, in a remarkable series of lectures in the Spring of 1961, saw America as running counter to its revolutionary tradition. He saw the PX on the American military base complex, as an example of a narrowminded, implosion complex--he would phase out the bases and their PX's. And, he saw the great need for America, having satiated itself in the material, to rejoin its former higher principles--expressed in Jefferson's great Declaration of 1776. No civilization in Toynbee's judgment, has lasted without this type of "higher" commitment. Our students should know this also.

I have actually made an effort, this particular semester, in Western Civilization 103 (from ancient times to Columbus), to stress the dynamics of civilization. In the first four weeks, we covered three civilizations: Sumer, Egypt, and ancient Greece. One of the questions I posed, in dealing with these three civilizations, invited the students to compose the most ideal civilization they could, borrowing from the three they had studied. They were also asked to list some aspects they would be careful not to use. Many rebuilt the civilization they are partner to presently---the American-model--providing a diverse, capital-economy, a Periclean-type of democracy (minus slavery). Most provided for womens' rights. However, one of my A students limited the role of women, rather like Periclean-times. Nearly all endorsed the art and architecture of Athens.

This sense of dynamics, alike the dynamics of mathematics, has given the historical data a new interest. They are now thinking in terms of a much larger landscape. And, it is easier for them to focus on the dynamics of their own civilization.

When we got to the middle-ages, I tried to get them to think in terms of a massive, agrarian "city of God" civilization. Many students had the idea that the middle-ages was a thing of the past. They now realize that, under certain conditions (an atomic-attack for example), they could be back in the countryside rather quickly.

I made it my business, in the first half of the middle-age study, to acquaint them with the richness of the Moslem and Byzantine cultures. A Kenneth Clark video-tape helped to reinforce this effort.

Some students are now reading, on their own, paperbacks on Sumer. Some are reading up on Saint Augustine and Saint Paul. They were stunned by the recent presentation of Godspell on ABC. We had spent four weeks on Roman Civilization; and I had played a bit of Godspell in class.

When we got to the high-middle-ages, I explained the spontaneous development of the universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. Being part of a spontaneous educational system themselves, they could appreciate the humble beginnings of these now prestigious institutions.

I was surprised to discover, upon apprising them of Marshall McLuhan's views of the media, and upon challenging them, once again, to construct an ideal educational-schematic, that they did not endorse an efficient, but dehumanized "electric-education." They wanted the by-play, potential friendships, dialectic, and potential warmth of the more traditional education.

So, as you can see, we had to do some thinking this semester. And, in addition to commanding considerable historical data, we had to make some difficult choices.