

## Historical Parallels

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We traditionally understand the range of human activity over the millennia to have been 'linear,' meaning that events have proceeded causationally from ancient times to the present, and that we of the modern world are in some degree necessarily influenced by what has gone before us. Associated with this understanding is the notion that the modern age, since it is the inheritor from past ages, must be superior to past ages in knowledge, enlightenment from superstition, personal freedom and material affluence. Undoubtedly there is some justification for this view, but to one thoroughly indoctrinated in it out of ignorance of the past, there come gasps of wonderment when he/she learns of ancient achievements. A list of just Hellenic accomplishment would include the application of levers, cranks, screws and cogwheels in ancient Greek industries, popular entertainment by marionettes in automatic theatres, war machines operated by air pressure, even automatic door openers, and washing machines that delivered water and mineral soap. In the sciences, the original discoverer that the Earth traveled around the sun was Aristarchus, 1800 years before Copernicus. The Earth, known to be a sphere, had its diameter estimated by Eratosthenes, who erred only by eighty kilometres. Anaxomandes discussed the evolution of life from lower forms, long before Charles Darwin, and Democritus speculated upon the atomic nature of matter. Schools of the Hellenistic Age were supported by the state, and at the Alexandrian Museum were lectures on astronomy, geography, physics, mathematics, botany, zoology, anatomy and medicine, where research by vivisection was done on animals. In their laboratories the Alexandrians discovered the nerves and learned that the brain controlled the limbs, a fact already known to the ancient Egyptians. In the earlier Age of Pericles, freedom of the intellect was championed by the Sophists, who openly rebuked the old religion and sought natural causes for earthly and celestial happenings. For males who were not slaves, the development of the individual reached its pinnacle in the Greek city-states, where democratic government complete with paid citizen juries was practiced. When the Romans came on the scene, companies were organized to build roads, bridges and aqueducts, which had shares daily sold to the public as in a modern stock exchange. Apartment living became common. The more fortunate merchants and bankers decorated their houses with the finest furniture, carpets and hangings, and had ornate bronze utensils, baths and sanitary conveniences. A more elaborate house would have tile pipes for conducting hot air to living rooms.

Time and again, in various geographical areas, remarkable achievements were realized in separate and distinct societies, societies that are lumped by the linear historian as the "ancient world". Accordingly, the "modern world" is the direct inheritor of what anomalous progress was made in the past grand age of ignorance, regardless of significant distinctions between concepts of the West and those of by-gone ages. Such distinctions involve our Western thought on space, for example, that would have seemed odd to an ancient Greek. Where we think of a straight line as "the shortest distance between two points," to the Greek mind it was the edge of a block. He/she was concerned with the immediate, sensual "here and now". Consequently, the most favoured art form of ancient Greece was sculpture, whereas that of the West has been music. How different the basic outlook of these two societies, yet the Classical world is held to be the direct progenitor of the West. In like manner, the West differs significantly from India, which cared nothing about time and never produced an historian. By contrast, ancient Egypt was completely concerned with time, and the subtle influence of time's unidirection was the essential motif of giant hallways, and statues that are meant to be viewed only from the front. In their

psychological foundations ancient societies differed remarkably from each other, and from the West which in this respect must be considered an entity on its own.

Each civilization has had a unique life, and where there is life there is also death. To the superficially educated, the destruction of a great civilization comes with it being overrun by barbaric hordes, with, presumably, the example of Rome in mind, or through war that brought an end to the Aztec and Carthaginian empires, and which is especially easy to believe in today's age of atomic weapons. This popular view, of course, contains a grain of fact, but is not the kernel of truth, as any informed historian would readily agree with Toynbee's comment that of twenty-one occasions where civilization has been established, nineteen societies perished, not because of conquest but because of evaporation of substance from within. In other words, where a civilization has been erased from the world we should first look for evidence of decline inside its structure, for this is the enigma: the great societies of the past, like living organisms, have shown cultural deterioration on their own, when their institutions became spiritless, formalized, hierarchical, ruthless shells, which less sophisticated but more vigorous peoples did us the service of ending.

Thus we come to a new realization, that not only did each past civilization possess a character unique to itself alone, after a period of strength and growth each experienced, on its own, internal debilitation and death. Knowing this, the pattern of history loses its 'linearity' and takes the appearance of cycles; which automatically leads us to ask about the West. Is it, too, subject to the same prospect of internal decay? The 'linear' view is not paramount for no reason. In it we can take comfort, for regardless of what conditions may be like at present we can look forward to an ever improving future. There is nothing more certain than progress; history proves it. Our optimism and confidence are shaken the moment we perceive that modern civilization might contain the same mortality of ancient societies, whose skeletons today dot our global landscape.

What evidence, then, do we have that our Western world is no different from past worlds in the sense that it possesses a life destiny, that like them it is subject to birth and decay, and must obey biological laws? To answer, we must explore world history on a holistic basis and see if parallels do exist between the various civilizations, named by historian, Oswald Spengler, *high cultures*, i.e., Sumerian, Egyptian, Mycenaean, Chinese, Indian, Mexican, Andean, Classical, Levantine, Russian and Western. The exercise will have more than academic importance since our perceptions have an obvious influence on the decisions we make. Political policies, in particular, will be different if a problem at hand is viewed inevitable and of long term seriousness rather than a temporary aberration, and also modern social trends might be better evaluated in the knowledge that, "there is nothing new under the sun". In the words of George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The most remarkable parallel that can be drawn is between the Classical world and the Western,<sup>1</sup> for reasons that both developed around large bodies of water, the Mediterranean in the case of Greece and Rome, the Atlantic in the case of Europe and America, and both "high cultures" were originated by essentially the same race. Both began as the product of fusion, when barbaric invaders overran a more ancient and decadent society: the Dorian invasions in Greece over the remains of Mycenae, the Germanic invasions in Europe over the Roman Empire. Such invasions of vigorous barbarians over stagnated societies appear to be an

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<sup>1</sup> This historical vision follows the presentation of Amaury de Riencourt's "The Coming Caesars".

encouraging factor in the birth of new dynamism, as occurred also with the Chow invasions of China and the Aryan invasion of India.

After the barbaric invasion a feudal system developed in Greece, headed by Homeric lords, just as Europe was ruled by feudal barons. Egypt's Pharaonic Old Kingdom, the Chow era in China ruled by Chow princes, and Vedic India dominated by rajahs, represented the same feudal ages in those respective high cultures. Society has a hierarchical structure at this early stage, as well as always being intensely religious. So come eras when pyramids, temples and cathedrals are built, when religious thought is deep and religious "truth" is unquestioned.

Cities grew with the beginning of a commercial class and demise of the feudal order, while feudal territories merged into states. In China this maturation took place during the Spring and Autumn era, in India at the close of the Vedic era, in Egypt at the time of the fifth dynasty. The Mayan cities of Tikal, Copan, Naranjo and Piedras Negras flourished, as did Pachacamac, Chimú, Nazca and Tiahuanaco of the Andean Civilization. These are periods of unique perceptions and consequently of creativity in the arts and pure sciences, when people see the universe through new eyes and set out to explore for its own delight. New styles, concepts, innovations and techniques originated that formed the cultural basis of the different "high cultures," e.g., the Doric style of Greek architecture, the Gothic of the European. Such early stages are periods of original thought and creativity, of prototype as opposed to stereotype, and the essential soul of each "high culture" molds those creative expressions, even in the formation of the state. As the Greeks were concerned with the immediate, their concept of nationhood was limited to the city-state, that could be seen round about, whereas to the soaring Gothic spirit the nation could have a spacious extent. The Greeks spread commercial colonies throughout the Mediterranean just as European colonies later spread around the globe. Most notable of the Greek colonies was Syracuse, with opulence not unlike that of colonial Latin America.

The erosion of the feudal order is accompanied by reformation in religion and denouncement by religious leaders of the old social structure. Apollo was the god of Greece's Olympic faith, a god of poetry that symbolized harmony and beauty, whose prevalence became replaced in the seventh century BC by Dionysus, the god of the Orphic-Pythagorean social reformists. In like manner, Egypt's Heliopolitan clergy attempted to destroy the goddess Isis and replace her worship with that of the original sun-god, Ra, Buddha attacked Brahmanism with its caste privileges, and Islam was a religious revolution that became the religion of traders and merchants. Similarly, Protestantism attacked Europe's Catholic faith and became the pragmatic religion of dynamic capitalism.

With reformation, philosophical thought distanced itself from religion. Rationalism became a necessary adjunct to scientific inquiry, and 'free thinking' was the gentlemanly standard. The Goethes, Kants, utilitarians and empiricists of the West, the Sophists and Epicureans of ancient Greece, the Chinese schools of Mo Ti, Tzu Ssu, Mencius and Shang Yang, of the Indian Lokayata and Paribbajadas, and the rationalism of the Islamic Mu'tazila, were all expressions of an "Age of Reason" in their respective "high cultures".

Kings fell and new forms of more egalitarian government arose. The nation concept became more powerful and both Greece and Europe, bursting with internal energy, put their stamp on the known world with the conquests of older civilizations. Thus Alexander conquered Persia and Egypt just as later Europeans subjected India and China. The Greek cities even experienced an "industrial revolution," highlighted by enterprising Corinth. An age of unlimited optimism, peace and opulence ensued, known as the Hellenistic Era of the Classical world, the Victorian Era of the Western. By this time art had passed its last stage of genuine cultural

expression, with the change from Doric to Ionian, from Gothic to Baroque. Pure culture became solidified and secondary to practical undertakings, collecting and cataloguing; scientific inquiry became the servant of medicine and engineering, art in the employ of commerce and luxury. Confidence was supreme and culminated with such constructions as the Titanic, the “unsinkable” ship.

But political and social upheavals mark the end of this purely cultural stage of great societies. All “high cultures” have experienced a period of fratricidal *world wars*: the Peloponnesian Wars of Greece; the period of Warring States in China; in India when the states of Kosala, Avanti, Vidha and Licchavi clashed; the wars of Sumeria that ravaged Ur, Uruk, Nippur, Eridu and Lagash; the destruction of the Mayan world with the conflicts between Uxmal, Mayapan and Chacmultun; the rise of the revolutionary Khurramiyya and Muhammira of the Near East; and, of course, the First and Second world wars of the West. This period may have associated with it a people closer to their barbaric roots who feel biologically superior to the effete populations of the older states. Thus the militaristic Macedonians entered Greek history as did the Prussians in Europe, as well as the Toltecs of Mexico whose stark architecture and fierce art supplanted the more ornate of the Mayas.

These periods of convulsion indicate a metamorphosis in the life of high cultures when genuine creativity has passed and the pure thought of by-gone ages is utilized for pragmatic works. Diffusion of ideas, art forms and patterns of social behaviour from the centre of a civilized area is slower than the diffusion of material goods such as tools, weapons, vehicles, etc. The result is often stronger states at the edges of a civilized area than in the centre, because the centre is hampered by vested interests in the employment of its own innovations and because it devotes a larger part of its energy to nonmaterial culture. Inevitably, then, on the margins of a high culture are states predestined to swallow their worlds, which usually, in addition to their material advantages, have established beforehand the necessary psychological and social patterns. Thus it was with Rome, a state on the outskirts of Greek culture that eventually dominated Classical Civilization. It was little different with Chin, the state that conquered the whole of China, and of Persia that conquered the Sumerian world, or of the Turks in the Near East. The Aztec Empire, if not destroyed, would have embraced Mixtecs, Toltecs and Maya, just as the empire of the Incas conquered the Huari and Tiahuanaco peoples of the Andes.

Such world empires are efficient, pragmatic, legalistic and egalitarian. The achievements of Rome were not those of philosophy and art; rather they were of engineering, in the construction of aqueducts and highways, and of Roman law, which in that age of the ‘common man’ could postulate: “Better that a guilty man go free than an innocent man be convicted”. Then as now a person was innocent until proven guilty. Women gained near equality with men, and could be more influential in society than was ever possible in ancient Greece. The practice of freeing slaves grew and laws protected the enslaved. The Roman Empire offered security from pirates and war, and produced an age of unrivalled prosperity upon every land, where roads, bridges, aqueducts, public baths, amphitheatres, constructed sewers, porticos, triumphal arches and grain elevators could be found. Eighty thousand kilometres of road crossed the civilized world, and lighthouses circled the Mediterranean that was speckled with ships carrying huge quantities of goods in regular shipping lanes. The empire was a free trading zone that stretched across the known world. “Pax Romana” became a byword. Exploitive imperialism became a practice of the past. Political authority did not require that one be born a Roman, not even the position of emperor: Trajan was a Spaniard, Severus an African, Diocletian and Constantine were Illyrians. Cities grew cosmopolitan, every free man of the Mediterranean

world was granted Roman citizenship in 212 AD, and the government of Rome came to be a world government, ruling for the benefit of all peoples who were extended the same protection of justice, law and order.

*But the obedience of the Roman world was uniform, voluntary and permanent. The vanquished nations blended into one great people, resigned the hope, nay even the wish, of resuming their independence, and scarcely considered their own existence as distinct from Rome.<sup>2</sup>*

Psychologically and sociologically the Roman era was little different from the present American. At that time, sensing a loss from former Greek predominance, intellectuals condemned the levelling Romanization of the world just as Americanization is frowned upon by many today. And, to complete the picture, the East, represented by Parthians and Jews, was as hostile to Rome as communist Russia to the United States. The world then was also divided between East and West. The former empire of Alexander in Asia was forever lost to the Romans, and that area, later to hold the Levantine “high culture,” was a constant source of trouble. Alexander the Great imposed Greek culture upon unwilling peoples, which was as artificially rooted among them as the Europeanization of Peter the Great among resentful mujiks and clergy. The result was, when the opportunity was seized by the eastern nations to reclaim their own destinies, they became implacable enemies of those powers, Rome and America, that inherited the mantle from Greece and Europe.

The similarity between Roman and American characters was evident from their beginnings. Like the Puritans, the early Romans despised flippancy, instability and anything trifling. They had a sense of responsibility, earnestness and discipline. They revelled in hard work and had simple tastes. In contrast to the early Greek outlook such moral qualities do not suggest imagination or sense of beauty, but it is with such austere qualities that all world empires are begun, and with their loss is associated the downhill slide of the entire civilization. The pursuit of wealth, displayed in their dress, table, houses and furniture, and sensual gratification, became the standards by which Roman life was measured. Great villas arose, supported by slave worked plantations that could undercut the price of grain produced by independent farmers, resulting in the shrinkage of that sturdy class from which Rome, in earlier times, had drawn her armies. Since the country market for manufactured goods was drastically reduced, city industries could no longer dispose of their products and rapidly declined, their unemployed becoming a state burden. Cities enlarged, Rome itself containing one million inhabitants, and drained the countryside of wealth. Rome was filled with a shiftless mass that lived on state doles of meat and grain, that was content with the entertainment of bloody spectacles. Old Roman temples became disused, while imported gods and religions gained popularity. Lack of interest in public affairs increased, formerly responsible citizens turned indifferent. Celibacy and divorce became common, forcing Augustus to pass laws favouring marriage, yet sterility was sought and the Romans as a race disappeared from history.

Much the same picture is presented in every high culture after the establishment of its world empire. Conflicts and crises increase the need for a strong executive, resulting in the growth of the plebian power that eventually assumes total control. Julius Caesar merely fulfilled an inevitable trend, that was likewise fulfilled by Shih Hwangti of China, by Chandragupta of India, by Thutmose III of Egypt, and is today exemplified by growth of the American Presidency,

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<sup>2</sup> Gibbon: “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” vol. 1, p. 49

an office that originally was considered little more than that of a Senator. The ensuing periods of decline are ages of giant cities filled with effeminized masses and the “high culture” surrendering to a mediocre mass of fellahin. From then on there are no grand exploits, one decade is the same as any other, and history becomes the chronology of world dictators. The scene is then set for new waves of barbarians to conquer and create anew. The cycle is complete.