



Arnold Joseph Toynbee: The Role of Life History in Civilization Cycling

I A LIFE IN COMPARATIVE HISTORY

“His name was a burden in itself...” It is thus, that William McNeill, the world historian featured in the subsequent chapter, opens his biography of Arnold Joseph Toynbee, so named for a *famed* uncle and *spectacularly successful* grandfather. Only *heroic* achievement wrought of native ability, cultivated through stalwart industry, enabled Toynbee to shoulder, and then supersede his burden. Toynbee’s industriousness was legion. Forsooth, with respect to any notion of balance, or of happiness, his industriousness was ruinous. Like a sprinter exploding forth at the sound of the starting shot, Toynbee began each day the same as the last; with a “fanatical, and on occasion, frenetic dedication to work,” against which his mother warned and his wife remonstrated. One son recollected his father, his face a “mask of nervous irritation,” rebuking him as a *nuisance* for intruding upon the silence so necessary for sustained work. Through the early derangement¹ of his father and later estrangement from his mother, through the First and Second World Wars, through the caprice and subsequent separation from his first wife,² through crises of faith and fits of ennui, through the political apostasy of one son and the suicide of another...through all, Toynbee labored.

Expansive though it is, *A Study of History*, most especially its first six volumes, was written in the spaces and summers afforded by the completion of innumerable commissioned works. But there it was always in his thoughts; this grand comparative study of civilizations generated

of “prolonged, private, privileged study” (McNeill 1989; p. 133).³ As a student *greedy* for accolades, Toynbee wished to become a *gigantic historian*; proportions that did indeed accrue to him, not simply from breadth of focus and voluminous output, but also from the philosophical largess pervading his writings. Even as sweeping histories fell from favor, Toynbee always insisted that particular events derive meaning from their place within the whole. To an extent this is true, but, belying this rationalized apology, was a native aspect of temperament bent to the rise and fall of civilizations that played out amidst his nursery toys and marked his earliest composition.⁴ In actualizing his ambition, Toynbee increasingly aroused the professional scruples of contemporary academics, one of which regarded Toynbee as more prophet than historian.⁵ In his later years, Toynbee conducted an intensive study of Hannibal, which had the intended effect of rehabilitating his credentials among the mass of specialist historians then extant, and rapidly proliferating. Barring this attempt at ingratiation, Toynbee characteristically set his chin at defiance, as can be seen in his defense of H. G. Wells’, *The Outline of History*.⁶ In a thinly veiled self-defense nested within the introduction to the first of twelve volumes, Toynbee swipes at the carping specialists, happy to *traverse their tiny allotments*, while failing to appreciate what they could neither conceptualize nor attempt: A “long journey through Time and Space...re-living the entire life of Mankind as a single imaginative experience” (Toynbee 1951; volume I; pp. 4–5).

2 FIREFLY FLASHES OF HISTORICAL INSIGHT

Nearly thirty years after reading Oswald Spengler, *teeming with firefly flashes of historical insight*, Toynbee registered his reaction, replete with the consternation that his great project had been anticipated: “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”⁷ (McNeill 1989). Yet, as Toynbee ultimately recognized, Spengler explicated the laws of civilizational cycling without satisfactorily explaining the nature of their processes. If Spengler told *what*, Toynbee could explain *why*. Like Spengler, Toynbee saw patterns amidst historical noise. These cyclical patterns, recurring across millennia, presented themselves to his attention the more he read and wrote. Though he had not yet composed *A Study of History*, or so

many other volumes on which his reputation would rest, Toynbee's philosophy of history matured in the 1920s. What he then sorely lacked was a cache of data accruing to decades of reading, so indispensable to the comparative historian. Much reading, and also traveling, working, writing, teaching, and lecturing, eventually yielded the empirical store of knowledge that came to fill twelve volumes of his magnum opus, which might otherwise have been communicated in two volumes if restricted to presenting his patterned philosophy of history.⁸ From his hard-won perch, Toynbee could, for instance, recognize cultural continuities extending between distant civilizations through the medium of universal religions: Modern Western civilizations were affiliated through the Christian Church to Hellenic Civilization; Asian civilizations were affiliated through the Mahayana to the Sinic Civilization; Hindu Civilization was affiliated through Hinduism to the Indic; Iranic and Arabic civilization through Islam to the Syriac (Toynbee 1951; volume VII; p. 393). Repetition of this empirical process of comparison would follow for scores of pages, rendering Toynbee's conjectures compelling.

For Toynbee, decline and fall inevitability arose from inextricable *flaws in human nature*. Following the dissolution of one civilization, either through catastrophic war, overextension, or the disaffection and disenfranchisement of the populace, a "dominant minority" regroupes, stabilizes and brings peace to the region, and anon, forms a new state. Initially, this dominant minority wins the allegiance of the masses. By and by, the leadership falters and degrades, and tries to compel with force what it had earned with ability.⁹ From such decline comes the fall:

We have seen that, if and when a civilization begins to lose its creative power, the people below its surface and beyond its borders, whom it is all the time irradiating with its influence and attracting into its orbit, begin to resist assimilation, with the result that the society which, in its age of growth, was a social unity with an ever expanding and always indefinite fringe, becomes divided against itself by the sharp lines of division between a dominant minority and an internal and an external proletariat. The minority, having lost the power to influence and attract, seeks instead to impose itself by force. The proletariat, inwardly alienated, remains in, but not of, the disintegrating society until the disintegration has gone so far that the dominant minority can no longer repress the efforts of the proletariat to secede. In the act of secession, at length accomplished, a new society is conceived. (Toynbee 1951; volume I; pp. 187–188)

By virtue of its brevity, the foregoing passage is but an imperfect ambassador, but nonetheless tolerably represents the Toynbean process of internal decadence, decline, decay, and dissolution. Be that as it may, there is another aspect to the final process of dissolution: Loosed from within, bonds are sundered from without. This more complex interaction between internal weakness and external pressure is captured metaphorically by Toynbee (1951; volume I; p. 135) as he likens a defunct civilization to an “old tree whose roots decayed until the wind tore them up and overthrew the solid trunk.” When despotic compulsion replaces voluntary allegiance, citizens of the state and subjects of the empire, in spite of some semblance of outward conformity, withdraw their allegiance, and though they may not transfer it to a rival state, leave their own state open to capture and conquest (Toynbee 1951; McNeill 1989).

Failure of the dominant minority, whether through ineptitude or treachery, is compounded by the proletariat’s own declension; a disease which taints the “soul and life-blood and marrow and pith and essence and epitome” of the civilization (Toynbee 1951; volume V; p. 200). Victory brings with it complacency; sustained security elicits relaxation and invites decadence. By way of example, in Rome, after Hannibal was vanquished and Macedon could no longer mount a challenge, hegemonic security ushered in an advanced state of decay, such that a handsome boy and a container of caviar were more valued than land. Once this malady is advanced, not even a philosopher king, acting competently as well as benevolently, can revive the state whether or will he tries to revert to what was (*archaism*) or summon what could be (*futurism*). Indeed, the very attempt to escape the present is symptomatic of decline. However, centuries may separate the onset of declension and the culminating fall. The process of declension is so protracted because Toynbee locates its beginning phases at the point where most see only the peak of mature strength. A stellar analogy suggests itself in reviewing Toynbee’s writings; truly, a civilization is like a star in all its phases. There is a time in which a star’s gasses are just coalescing, just as a civilization’s peoples first cohere into a body politic; this is followed by a steady, mature phase for both star and civilization; thereafter, expanding enormously, a star becomes a red giant, just as the civilization becomes a universal state or vast empire; this is followed by the star either collapsing into a black hole or white dwarf, like the universal empire that creates a power vacuum as

it recedes to a small dense nucleus or scatters its remnant peoples to the winds. So, like the star that has expanded into a red giant, the civilization that has expanded into a universal state is in its early phases of decline, unsustainably irradiating power and prestige throughout the world to the detriment of its internal cohesion.

3 THE HALLUCINATION OF A WANDERER LOST IN THE FOREST

Though he rested his hopes of surpassing Spengler via superior causal explanation, it was precisely in the arena of explanation that Toynbee first faltered; for, at the outset, he seemed to reject the lens of Western science, with its fixed laws and reductive methods, in favor of mythical and religious allegory, pivotal leadership, and particular descriptions. Being thus broadly skeptical of reductive arguments, it follows that he specifically rejected nascent biological and environmental explanations of civilization, likening their logic to the “hallucination of a wanderer lost in the forest, who has turned and turned again in an ever narrowing circle till he cannot see the wood for the trees” (1951; volume I; p. 270).¹⁰ Even while valuing an inch of progress gained toward understanding human nature above all rival forms of knowledge,¹¹ Toynbee foreclosed on the promise of what we would now call evolutionary ecology; at least he did so initially for reasons evident in his philosophical introduction to *A Study of History*. He cannot justly be blamed for so doing. After all, nascent biological and ecological theories of civilization were then suffering from a want of data in the fields of evolution, genetics, ecology, and paleoclimate. Additionally, as a matter of course even now, biological explanations are treated separately from ecological explanations, rather than viewing ecology as constraining biological evolution. Compounding these impediments, Toynbee demanded that any correlations generated by reductive theories “must be demonstrated to be fixed and permanent.” A scientific *law*, he insisted, “must maintain itself in every instance under all conditions” (Toynbee 1951; volume I; p. 253). Such a demand could neither be met by evolution, which is after all a historical process (Eldredge 1991; Avise 2007) subject to randomness (Bonner 2013), founder effects (Bhattacharya et al. 2007; Slatkin and Excoffier 2012), accidents of migration (Cavalli-Sforza 1966; Harpending et al. 1993), and bottlenecks (Ambrose 1998; Hawks et al.

2000), or by climate, which varies across locales of the same biome, and has been subject to significant change even within recorded history (Hetherington and Reid 2010; Trauth et al. 2007; deMenocal 2011; Donges et al. 2011; Stewart and Stringer 2012).

Notwithstanding these exacting expectations, we do well to recall that *A Study of History* was written over decades by an author learning, maturing, and changing. While he continued to reject population dysgenics as a reason for civilizational decline,¹² subsequent volumes belie Toynbee's initial repudiation of reductive accounts; volumes which manufacture multitudes of generalizable laws lending themselves to biological interpretation. Take the slate of *challenges and responses* appearing in the second volume, delineated into *The Stimulus of Blows*, *The Stimulus of Pressures*, and *The Stimulus of Penalization*. Civilizations are born of blows, which must neither be *insufficient* nor *excessive*. Moorish incursions, first on the Aragonese and then on the Castilian border, stimulated Spanish Christian populations to ever higher heights of civilization; then, there is the stimulation of the temperate zone, lying between the climatic harshness of Maine and Canada and the permissiveness prevailing below the *Mason Dixon Line*¹³; or consider the penalization and persecution differentially expressed in the Jewish diaspora. Toynbee is in effect cataloguing selective pressures as they are discussed within the evolutionary literature. As our premise runs, *Toynbee was ever and anon describing human evolution, as traduced through civilizational history*. As such, the evolutionary explanation might be harnessed to produce several volumes of reinterpretation on the rise, decline and fall of civilizations as they are treated in *A Study of History*. An applied review of group selection, for instance, might illuminate state formation and dissolution. Likewise, Toynbee's climatic interpretations are prime for evolutionary ecological explanation. Notwithstanding, we must be satisfied with using life history theory to skeletally reinterpret the patterned rise and subsequent internal decadence that seems to recur as inevitably as organismic senescence.

"Abel has been slain by Cain." At least so it was in the long view of history. Towers, walls, moats, and defensive structures of all varieties demonstrate that early outposts of civilization were mercilessly raided by unsettled nomads, with many an Abel killing many a Cain. However, in the fullness of time, "Western Civilization has swept Nomadism off the face of the Earth, almost without noticing what it has been doing, as one incident in the titanic social revolution...". This is evolution! The

settled agriculturists represented by Abel were relatively more *sLH*-selected, conceivably being non-randomly higher in conscientiousness, altruism, future-oriented anxiety, planning ability, intelligence, and other traits associated with slow life histories. Thereafter, as settlements grew to towns, cities, and nation states, they neutralized the threat of nomadic raids from without by degrees, only to replace it with the threat of decay from within. Extending the cooperative venture of small settlements to the national level, however difficult to initiate, proved more difficult to maintain. Virile, new societies ran the gauntlet, effectively defending themselves from nomadic raiding, not to mention rival states. At birth then, they are systematically *sLH*-selected, relative to their nomadic rivals. The selective pressures associated with state formation, however, slowly relax as the state matures. Entropy ensues. It does so especially when civilizations become hegemonic universal states free from the fitness-enhancing group selective pressures that come in the guise of war and competition. Within walls erected against external conquest, no matter if they are the stone ramparts of Constantinople, riverine, or montane barriers, or a phalanx of mercenary arms, there arises a changed selective regime, increasingly opening niches to the *fLH*-selected who become Machiavellian leaders, free riders, psychopathic manipulators, thieves, mendicants, adulterers, and dissidents. The *fLH*-selected thrive in the randomness outside of the walls, and now come to thrive on the increasing anonymity, trust, and abundance, within the walls.¹⁴ Like a parasitized host, *sLH*-selected founders slow the process of decline that comes before the fall by imposing rules, regulations, and penalties not limited to corporal punishment, shaming, banishment, branding, disfiguring, disenfranchising, and executing. Notwithstanding, the self-interested, again stemming disproportionately from *fLH*-selected populations, need not themselves bring the state to its knees; no, they only need to undermine the social contract, betray the trust of the populace, and attenuate returns to disinterested patriotism, all of which prostrates the state internally, leaving it ripe for external conquest.

Biology is at the center of this reinterpetive thesis. Civilizations rise in part from the biological capital in their possession; biological capital that is maintained via Toynbee's concept of *civilizational challenge* with its stimuli of *blows*, *pressures*, and *penalizations*, which are nothing but unidentified instantiations of group selection. After sweeping away all rivals, the hegemonic state removes the *challenges and responses*, or in other words, the group selective pressures characteristic of the growth phase.

Decline follows. Recall, we are never told what it means for the “soul and life-blood and marrow and pith and essence and epitome” of peoples to degrade. Substitute soul and its related derivatives for *fLH*-selected biological capital, and we may have our answer. It would then follow that even a reactionary philosopher king cannot revitalize the civilization, as civilizational strength is lost with biological capital.

4 THE TIPPING POINT

If this simply reads like a reiteration of Toynbee and like-minded declinists, one should not fail to appreciate the species of decline we are advancing. Once more, the internal decay is, in part, a biological decay.¹⁵ Decadence is regression; a slide back toward a more *fLH*-selected point on the life history continuum. As Toynbee did himself, the reader may fail to appreciate the evolutionary processes evident in the pages of *A Study of History*. It is customary to mentally segregate biological evolution from historical events. Yet, an eruption of recent literature speaks to the contrary, and in various ways, blurs such boundaries, suggesting humans, complete with the cultures they create, are both products and drivers of evolution (Henrich 2015; Laland et al. 2010; Richerson et al. 2010; Gintis 2016; Boyden 2013).

Moreover, before dismissing the possibility, call to mind arguments from Chapter 2, wherein the speed and nature of evolution were addressed. Exemplified by Jewish, Tibetan, and Inuit populations (Winogard et al. 2017), evolution effects detectible, directional population-level change in the course of three or more generations, which corresponds to the time frame of decline documented by Toynbee and other declinists. In addition, recollect that the present species of evolution does not proceed piecemeal, but rather changes the constituent traits comprising the life history complex *en masse* (Werner 1988; Stearns 1989; Wolf et al. 2007). Going further, evolution does not require death, but only differential reproduction (Betzig 1986; Birkhead and Møller 1996). In other words, a Ciceronian patriot need not die, but only has to be outnumbered by the progeny of self-serving masses. Well before eradication, there comes a *tipping point*, for life history speed and other factors, biological and bio-cultural, that hollows out the population, leaving it vulnerable to internal capture by self-serving leaders, and to external conquest by more *sLH*-selected rivals.

NOTES

1. Toynbee's father, Harry Toynbee, had become depressed and thereafter institutionalized while Arnold Toynbee was yet young. In addition to depriving him of the support of his father, this event instilled in the younger Toynbee a fear that he would follow in his father's footsteps, and in kind, lose his rational faculties (McNeill 1989).
2. In his preface to the seventh volume of *A Study of History*, Toynbee remarks on an excessive interregnum between this volume and the last. In between came the Second World War, and what he alludes to as turmoil within his life comparable to that outside his life:

The world around me and within me had, indeed, met with a number of challenging and transforming experiences in the course of the nineteen years and more that, by the summer of a.d. 1946, had already passed since the first of the original notes for the book had been written. The focus and perspective in which the earlier millennia of the Age of the Civilizations presented themselves to the eyes of our generation had been appreciably modified in the meantime by further discoveries in the field of Archaeology. The prospects of a contemporary Western Civilization, ... had become clearer and graver since the National Socialist movement in Germany had given to Western Man—and to his non-Western contemporaries likewise—a horrifying practical demonstration of the moral depths to which the heirs of a Christian civilization were capable of dragging themselves down. A new dimension of the Spiritual Universe had been brought to light by the psychologists, and a new dimension of the Material Universe by the atomic physicists. An Einstein and a Rutherford, a Freud and a Jung, and a Marshall and a Woolley, as well as a Gandhi, a Stalin, a Hitler, a Churchill, and a Roosevelt, had been changing the face of the Macrocosm; and at the same time my inner world had been undergoing changes which, on the miniature scale of an individual life, were, for me, of proportionate magnitude. (Toynbee 1951; volume VII; p. vii)

3. Jealous of the time invested in his writing of *A Study of History*, Toynbee's wife dubbed it the *nonsense book*, a name which Toynbee became accustomed to and began to use himself.
4. His earliest surviving composition features rivals *Peppo* and *Pug* vying for supremacy: "Your generation will grow slovenly and cowardly and shall be beaten down by the nation called men. ... But soon men will begin to

fight each other and get disorderly, and then will Peppo's children rule all men" (McNeill 1989; p. 8).

5. This was Pieter Geyl quoted by McNeill (1989; p. 256).
6. Illustrative of his defensiveness in this regard, this is the referenced passage wherein Toynbee seemingly uses H. G. Wells as a stand-in for himself, as he defends the grand project of historical synthesis:

At the furthest, the term is extended to cover the interim reports upon such work which are contributed to learned journals or to synthetic histories. There is a strong tendency to depreciate works of historical literature which are created by single minds, and the depreciation becomes the more emphatic the nearer such works approximate to being 'Universal Histories'. For example, Mr. H. G. Wells's *The Outline of History* was received with unmistakable hostility by a number of historical specialists. They criticized severely the errors which they discovered at the points where the writer, in his long journey through Time and Space, happened to traverse their tiny allotments. They seemed not to realize that, in re-living the entire life of Mankind as a single imaginative experience, Mr. Wells was achieving something which they themselves would hardly have dared to attempt—something, perhaps, of which they had never conceived the possibility. In fact, the purpose and value of Mr. Wells's book seem to have been better appreciated by the general public than by the professional historians of the day. (Toynbee 1951; volume I; pp. 4–5)

7. As per McNeill, this is taken from Arnold J. Toynbee's, *Civilization on Trial*, pp. 9–10.
8. First, it should be said that there are many editions of Toynbee's *A Study of Civilization*, only some of which are unabridged within twelve volumes. The reference to his philosophy of history being presented in two volumes refers to the abridgement undertaken by D. C. Somervell, partially with Toynbee's cooperation, which achieved its length by excising, not only digressions and asides, but the historical examples that supported Toynbee's cyclical view of civilizations.
9. Toynbee compares the flute of the snake charmer with the whip of the overseer, noting that when the charm ceases to work, the whip is resorted to, but this only hastens dissolution and revolt.
10. In spite of this philosophical position as set forth formally in the introduction to *A Study of History*, there and elsewhere, Toynbee goes on to treat the ideas of Huntington with due consideration, while also invoking environmental explanations in subsequent volumes. For instance, in

volume II, in an annex or appendix beginning on page 413, Toynbee is most clearly favorable to Huntington, and heaps great honors upon his head, including that of broadly agreeing with his thesis of climatic effects and climatic variation through time. Toynbee begs only to differ with Huntington on the application of his theory in two particular instances; these are times where Toynbee perceives inconsistent application, and takes Huntington gently to task. Toynbee follows his own theory that climatic stress is stimulating; those environments most stimulating do not permit ease, because ease promotes indolence; but neither are they too harsh, because this becomes crushing.

11. This valuation is taken from the following excerpt:

Yet, if it were true, as has already been suggested in this chapter, that a mile gained in the progress of Man's control over Non-Human Nature is of less importance to him than an inch gained in the enhancement of his capacity to deal with himself and with his fellow men and with God, then it was conceivable that, of all Western Man's achievements in the twentieth century of the Christian Era, the feat that would loom largest in retrospect in the epimethean view of Posterity might be the breaking of new ground in the field of insight into Human Nature. (Toynbee 1951; volume VII; p. 496)

12. In volume four, beginning on page 14, Toynbee overtly rejects eugenic arguments; insisting that the decline of the civilization does not derive from the decline in its biological capital.
13. The great problem with Toynbee's survey is this overgeneralized dichotomy between permissive and harsh ecologies. There is little attention to what the individual stressors are; specifically whether they can be met or managed, even as he is elsewhere and otherwise sensitive to such distinctions. We see this in one critique of Huntington, in which Toynbee charges inconsistency. Partial desert climates, he thinks, should be ranked as more stimulating in Huntington's scheme. To his utmost credit, Toynbee recognizes a golden mean in climate, such that he realizes, for instance, extremely high latitudes can be excessively cold. However, while he recognized that a climatic stressor can pass beyond the point of diminishing returns, Toynbee did not consider whether that stressor could be managed with ingenuity or had to be passively suffered, as Huntington seemed to do.
14. In addition to regression along the life history continuum, social amplification epistasis models can potentially explain some of the variances. Social epistasis is the accumulation of spiteful and deleterious mutations

accruing to a population that has stayed itself from the sharpest cutting edge of evolutionary selective pressures by virtue of anthropogenically engineered environments. Woodley of Menie, Sarraf, Pestow, & Fernandes (2017).

15. We use the word decay here for the sake of continuity, and because the *sLH*-selected society is really in the process of decay. Notwithstanding, the reader should note that *fLH*- versus *sLH*-selection should *not* be read as inferior or superior; one is not inherently better than the other. From a Darwinian perspective, this process is just a response to selective pressures.

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