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**Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat**  
**Growth and Decay**

**WILL DURANT**

We have defined civilization as “social order promoting cultural creation.”<sup>67</sup> It is political order secured through custom, morals, and law, and economic order secured through a continuity of production and exchange; it is cultural creation through freedom and facilities for the origination, expression, testing, and fruition of ideas, letters, manners, and arts. It is an intricate and precarious web of human relationships, laboriously built and readily destroyed.

Why is it that history is littered with the ruins of civilizations, and seems to tell us, like Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” that death is the destiny of all? Are there any regularities, in this process of growth and decay, which may enable us to predict, from the course of past civilizations, the future of our own?

Certain imaginative spirits have thought so, even to predicting the future in detail. In his Fourth Eclogue Virgil announced that some day, the ingenuity of change having been exhausted, the whole universe, by design or accident, will fall into a condition precisely the same as in some forgotten antiquity, and will then repeat, by deterministic fatality and in every particular, all those events that had followed that condition before.

Alter erit tum Tiphys, et altera quae vehat Argo  
Delectos heroas; erunt etiam altera bella  
, atque iterum ad Troiam magnus mittetur Achilles

“There will then be another [prophet] Tiphys, and another Argo will carry [Jason and other] beloved heroes; there will also be other wars, and great Achilles will again be sent to Troy.”

<sup>68</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche went insane with this vision of “eternal recurrence.” There is nothing so foolish but it can be found in the philosophers.

History repeats itself, but only in outline and in the large. We may reasonably expect that in the future, as in the past, some new states will rise, some old states will subside; that new civilizations will begin with pasture and agriculture, expand into commerce and industry, and luxuriate with finance; that thought (as Vico and Comte argued) will pass, by and large, from supernatural to legendary to naturalistic explanations; that new theories, inventions, discoveries, and errors will agitate the intellectual currents; that new generations will rebel against the old and pass from rebellion to conformity and reaction; that experiments in morals will loosen tradition and frighten its beneficiaries; and that the excitement of innovation will be forgotten in the unconcern of time. History repeats itself in the large because human nature changes with geological leisureliness, and man is equipped to respond in stereotyped ways to frequently occurring situations and stimuli like hunger, danger, and sex. But in a developed and complex civilization individuals are more differentiated and unique than in a primitive society, and many situations contain novel circumstances requiring modifications of instinctive response; custom recedes, reasoning spreads; the results are less predictable. There is no certainty that the future will repeat the past. Every year is an adventure.

Some masterminds have sought to constrain the loose regularities of history into majestic paradigms. The founder of French socialism, Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), divided the past and the future into an alternation of “organic” and “critical” periods:

The law of human development . . . reveals two distinct and alternative states of society: one, the organic, in which all human actions are classed, foreseen, and regulated by a general theory, and the purpose of social activity is clearly defined; the other, the critical,

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in which all community of thought, all communal action, all coordination have ceased, and the society is only an agglomeration of separate individuals in conflict with one another.

Each of these states or conditions has occupied two periods of history. One organic period preceded that Greek era which we call the age of philosophy, but which we shall more justly call the age of criticism. Later a new doctrine arose, ran through different phases of elaboration and completion, and finally established its political power over Western civilization. The constitution of the Church began a new organic epoch, which ended in the fifteenth century, when the Reformers sounded the arrival of that age of criticism which has continued to our time. . . .

In the organic ages all basic problems [theological, political, economic, moral] have received at least provisional solutions. But soon the progress achieved by the help of these solutions, and under the protection of the institutions realized through them, rendered them inadequate, and evoked novelties. Critical epochs-periods of debate, protest . . . and transition, replaced the old mood with doubt, individualism, and indifference to the great problems. . . . In organic periods men are busy building; in critical periods they are busy destroying.<sup>69</sup>

Saint-Simon believed that the establishment of socialism would begin a new organic age of unified belief, organization, co-operation, and stability. If Communism should prove to be the triumphant new order of life Saint-Simon's analysis and prediction would be justified.

Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) varied Saint-Simon's scheme by dividing history into separate civilizations, each with an independent life span and trajectory composed of four seasons but essentially two periods: one of centripetal organization unifying a culture in all its phases into a unique, coherent, and artistic form; the other a period of centrifugal disorganization in which creed and culture decompose in division and criticism, and end in a chaos of individualism, skepticism, and artistic aberrations. Whereas Saint-Simon looked forward to socialism as the new synthesis, Spengler (like Talleyrand) looked backward to aristocracy as the age in which life and thought were consistent and orderly and constituted a work of living art.

For Western existence the distinction lies about the year 1800 -on one side of that frontier, life in fullness and sureness of itself, formed by growth from within, in one great, uninterrupted evolution from Gothic childhood to Goethe and Napoleon; and on the other the autumnal, artificial, rootless life of our great cities, under forms fashioned by the intellect. . . . He who does not understand that this outcome is obligatory and insusceptible of modification must forgo all desire to comprehend history.<sup>70</sup>

On one point all are agreed: civilizations begin, flourish, decline, and disappear-or linger on as stagnant pools left by once life-giving streams. What are the causes of development, and what are the causes of decay?

No student takes seriously the seventeenth-century notion that states arose out of a "social contract" among individuals or between the people and a ruler. Probably most states (i.e., societies politically organized) took form through the conquest of one group by another, and the establishment of a continuing force over the conquered by the conqueror; his decrees were their first laws; and these, added to the customs of the people, created a new social order. Some states of Latin America obviously began in this way. When the masters organized the work of their subjects to take advantage of some physical boon (like the rivers of Egypt or Asia),



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economic provision and provision constituted another basis for civilization. A dangerous tension between rulers and ruled might raise intellectual and emotional activity above the daily drift of primitive tribes. Further stimulation to growth could come from any challenging change in the surroundings,<sup>71</sup> such as external invasion or a continuing shortage of rain-challenges that might be met by military improvements or the construction of irrigation canals.

If we put the problem further back, and ask what determines whether a challenge will or will not be met, the answer is that this depends upon the presence or absence of initiative and of creative individuals with clarity of mind and energy of will (which is almost a definition of genius), capable of effective responses to new situations (which is almost a definition of intelligence). If we ask what makes a creative individual, we are thrown back from history to psychology and biology-to the influence of environment and the gamble and secret of the chromosomes. In any case a challenge successfully met (as by the United States in 1917, 1933, and 1941), if it does not exhaust the victor (like England in 1945), raises the temper and level of a nation, and makes it abler to meet further challenges.

If these are the sources of growth, what are the causes of decay? Shall we suppose, with Spengler and many others, that each civilization is an organism, naturally and yet mysteriously endowed with the power of development and the fatality of death? It is tempting to explain the behavior of groups through analogy with physiology or physics, and to ascribe the deterioration of a society to some inherent limit in its loan and tenure of life, or some irreparable running down of internal force. Such analogies may offer provisional illumination, as when we compare the association of individuals with an aggregation of cells, or the circulation of money from banker back to banker with the systole and diastole of the heart. But a group is no organism physically added to its constituent individuals; it has no brain or stomach of its own; it must think or feel with the brains or nerves of its members. When the group or a civilization declines, it is through no mystic limitation of a corporate life, but through the failure of its political or intellectual leaders to meet the challenges of change.

The challenges may come from a doze” sources, and may by repetition or combination rise to a destructive intensity. Rainfall or oases may fail and leave the earth parched to sterility. The soil may be exhausted by incompetent husbandry or improvident usage. The replacement of free with slave labor may reduce the incentives to production, leaving lands untilled and cities unfed. A change in the instruments or routes of trade-as by the conquest of the ocean or the air-may leave old centers of civilization becalmed and decadent, like Pisa or Venice after 1492. Taxes may mount to the point of discouraging capital investment and productive stimulus. Foreign markets and materials may be lost to more enterprising competition; excess of imports over exports may drain precious metal from domestic reserves. The concentration of wealth may disrupt the nation in class or race war. The concentration of population and poverty in great cities may compel a government to choose between enfeebling the economy with a dole and running the risk of riot and revolution.

Since inequality grows in an expanding economy, a society may find itself divided between a cultured minority and a majority of men and women too unfortunate by nature or circumstance to inherit or develop standards of excellence and taste. As this majority grows it acts as a cultural drag upon the minority; its ways of speech, dress, recreation, feeling, judgment, and thought spread upward, and internal barbarization by the majority is part of the price that the



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minority pays for its control of educational and economic opportunity.

As education spreads, theologies lose credence, and receive an external conformity without influence upon conduct or hope. Life and ideas become increasingly secular, ignoring supernatural explanation and fears. The moral code loses aura and force as its human origin is revealed and as divine surveillance and sanctions are removed. In ancient Greece the philosophers destroyed the old faith among the educated classes; in many nations of modern Europe the philosophers achieved similar results. Protagoras became Voltaire, Diogenes Rousseau, Democritus Hobbes, Plato Kant, Thrasymachus Nietzsche, Aristotle Spencer, Epicurus Diderot. In antiquity and modernity alike, analytical thought dissolved the religion that had buttressed the moral code. New religions came, but they were divorced from the ruling classes, and gave no service to the state. An age of weary skepticism and epicureanism followed the triumph of rationalism over mythology in the last century before Christianity, and follows a similar victory today in the first century after Christianity.

Caught in the relaxing interval between one moral code and the next, an unmoored generation surrenders itself to luxury, corruption, and a restless disorder of family and morals, in all but a remnant clinging desperately to old restraints and ways. Few souls feel any longer that "it is beautiful and honorable to die for one's country." A failure of leadership may allow a state to weaken itself with internal strife. At the end of the process a decisive defeat in war may bring a final blow, or barbarian invasion from without may combine with barbarism welling up from within to bring the civilization to a close.

Is this a depressing picture? Not quite. Life has no inherent claim to eternity, whether in individuals or in states. Death is natural, and if it comes in due time it is forgivable and useful, and the mature mind will take no offense from its coming. But do civilizations die? Again, not quite. Greek civilization is not really dead; only its frame is gone and its habitat has changed and spread; it survives in the memory of the race, and in such abundance that no one life, however full and long, could absorb it all. Homer has more readers now than in his own day and land. The Greek poets and philosophers are in every library and college; at this moment Plato is being studied by a hundred thousand discoverers of the "dear delight" of philosophy overspreading life with understanding thought. This selective survival of creative minds is the most real and beneficent of immortalities.

Nations die. Old regions grow arid, or suffer other change. Resilient man picks up his tools and his arts, and moves on, taking his memories with him. If education has deepened and broadened those memories, civilization migrates with him, and builds somewhere another home. In the new land he need not begin entirely anew, nor make his way without friendly aid; communication and transport bind him, as in a nourishing placenta, with his mother country. Rome imported Greek civilization and transmitted it to Western Europe; America profited from European civilization and prepares to pass it on, with a technique of transmission never equaled before.

Civilizations are the generations of the racial soul. As life overrides death with reproduction, so an aging culture hands its patrimony down to its heirs across the years and the seas. Even as these lines are being written, commerce and print, wires and waves and invisible Mercuries of the air are binding nations and civilizations together, preserving for all what each has given to the heritage of mankind.



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