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The Return of Arnold Toynbee?

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In 1929 the historian Arnold Toynbee made an extensive visit to China and Japan. Steaming into Hong Kong, he fancied himself in his beloved Mediterranean, the site of most of his studies hitherto as a classicist. “From the sun to the horizon, on every side, there was a cloudless blue sky. A fresh, dry, north-easterly breeze was blowing in my face; and on either hand were jagged islands rising from the sea with the lineaments of the Isles of Greece . . . I felt I was in the Classical World”. The exhilaration continued as he visited Shanghai, Peking, Nanking, and Manchuria, despite the changes of scenery, climate, and comfort (Shanghai was a “Nordic city”, Manchuria “has the climate of Canada”, Nanking was “the most uncomfortable capital in the world”). The Great Wall evoked “awe and admiration”. He praised “the marvellous symmetry” of the architecture of the Forbidden City. He was impressed by the “cool-headedness and restrained vitality” of Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang, and though disgusted by the cynicism and opportunism of many of Chiang’s leading associates, saw much in the work of ordinary officials to encourage him. The Chinese, he decided, are “a wonderful nation. They have been expanding – North and South and East and West – for three thousand years. How far will they go?”

When the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931, Toynbee was appalled by the failure of the League of Nations to act, and by British connivance at this irresponsibility. This, he thought, would ultimately lead to “finis Britanniae”. In his first book, *Nationality and the War* (1915), he had predicted that “the fundamental factor of world politics during the next century will be the competition between China and the new [British] Commonwealth”. Now he saw Britain throwing away the chance to take a leading role in the international crisis, and condemning itself to becoming a junior partner to the other “British Empire”, the United States. But what is more remarkable in this prediction was the recognition, confirmed by his first-hand observations in 1929, that China would overcome the turmoil created by the Nationalist Revolution of 1911 and go on to become a great world power again.

In his monumental, twelve-volume, *Study of History* (1934–61), Toynbee returned repeatedly to China and its civilization. Like many scholars since, he thought that in the long perspective of Chinese history, the “century of humiliation” suffered by the Chinese since the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century represented no more than the blink of an eye. China would find its rightful place again among the world powers, and its culture – especially as represented by religious thinkers such as Confucius and Lao-Tse, but also by secular figures such as Sun Yat-Sen – would contribute powerfully to the syncretic world civilization that Toynbee thought was emerging in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Chinese returned the compliment in

being, in the 1930s and 1940s, among the first non-Western countries to pay attention to Toynbee’s work. After the Communist Revolution of 1949 this was not surprisingly officially discouraged. But, as I learned on a recent trip to China, there has been a rediscovery and a renewed interest in him over the past decade or so. This matches, and has partly been fuelled by, the long-standing commitment to Toynbee in Japan that dates back to the huge success of the Japanese translation of his works in the 1960s and 1970s, and the setting up of a well-financed Toynbee Society – still very active – to carry on his endeavours. No less helpful to

several decades, had been widely reviewed and discussed – the *TLS* devoted its whole front page and two inside columns to a review of the first three volumes in 1934, finding in them a “nobly conceived and assiduously executed work”, with a possible “mark of greatness”. Even those professional scholars who disagreed with him on this or that topic praised him for the breadth of his enterprise and the extraordinary achievement it represented. The great German literary scholar E. R. Curtius compared Oswald Spengler unfavourably with Toynbee, arguing that “a new methodology for the humanistic disciplines is announced in [Toynbee’s] work”. He thought that “Toynbee’s view of history could become,

him. Not to be outdone, the Japanese in 1967 had him lecturing in the Imperial Palace in the presence of the Emperor, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education (such august attention was not entirely new – in 1936, Hitler, seeking to influence British public opinion over his Rhineland policy, sought out Toynbee during the historian’s visit to Berlin and granted him a two-hour interview).

Curtius had remarked, in his essay of 1948, that “it may be foreseen that the response of official historical scholarship to the ‘challenge’ of Toynbee’s *Study of History* will be one of protest.” The scholars had indeed been sharpening their pens, and in the 1950s came out in full-blown attack. Probably most influential, from a purely scholarly point of view, were the courteous but emphatically expressed criticisms of the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl, in his book *Debates with Historians* (1955). But it was the witty and merciless attack of the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, in the pages of *Encounter* (June 1957), that probably did the most damage to Toynbee’s reputation, especially in Britain. Trevor-Roper portrayed Toynbee as a would-be Messiah and ridiculed his *Study* as a kind of Bible, prophesying a millennium to be inaugurated *Anno Toynbaei* (“on this article as a whole, no comment”, was Toynbee’s laconic observation in his *Reconsiderations* of 1961, Volume 12 of the *Study*). The historical profession, swayed by this judgement from the newly appointed Regius Professor of History at Oxford, duly turned its back on Toynbee. Undergraduates were sternly warned off him. I should have sensed what was in store when, anxiously noting my interest in Toynbee (to whom I had been introduced by the classics master), my history teacher at my north London grammar school arranged that the sixth-form history prize I was awarded should be Geyl’s *Debates with Historians*. That should put a stop to that. Later, as a history undergraduate at Cambridge, I quickly learned from the amused and condescending smiles on the face of my teachers to avoid all references to Toynbee.

I have recently, after a long period in which his volumes languished on an upper shelf, returned to Toynbee. I have done so partly under the stimulus of a renewed interest not so much in him as in the concept of “civilization” – a concept, like Toynbee himself, long scorned by professional scholars. This revival is conventionally, and conveniently, dated from the appearance of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1997). It has continued in such works as Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: The West and the rest* (2011), as well as in a number of recent works by Anthony Pagden, Ian Morris and others which are basically a defence of Western civilization against what are seen as threats to its worldwide cultural, economic and political dominance. That is one thing driving the renewed interest in civilizational analysis. Another is the more generalized fear, revealed in such works as Felipe



Toynbee’s reputation in Japan has been the backing of the powerful religious group, Soka Gakkai, whose leader Daisaku Ikeda idolized Toynbee and made his thinking central to Soka Gakkai’s blend of East–West philosophy.

Is it time also for Western scholars and thinkers to reconsider the “monumentally unfashionable” Toynbee, as Jonathan Benthall not so long ago described him (*TLS* May 14, 2010)? Might his moment have come again? In the 1950s and 60s Toynbee was one of the most famous people in the world, his reputation akin, perhaps, to that of H. G. Wells – another great synoptic thinker – in the 1920s and 30s. His *Study of History*, written over

in the next decades, a common possession of all thinking people – by way of ‘inspiration’ and social mimesis”. In America, Henry Luce in 1947 put Toynbee on the front cover of *Time* magazine, and Whittaker Chambers in the same issue proclaimed him one of the most important thinkers of his time. Toynbee’s American reputation was well and truly launched, and Toynbee spent much of the 1950s on lecturing tours there, when he could attract hundreds and even thousands of listeners. At the University of Minnesota in the winter of 1955 he addressed an overflow audience of 10,000 people, many of whom had come hundreds of miles through the snow to hear

Fernández-Armesto's *Civilizations: Culture, ambition and the transformation of nature* (2002), that the whole enterprise of human civilization might be undermined by our unconscionable treatment of nature. Not the fate of this or that civilization, but of civilization *tout court*, might hang in the balance. But whether civilization or civilizations, for all these thinkers there is an urgent need to return to concepts that take us well beyond the confines and the contemplation of the nation-state.

Whatever the cause, is not the return of civilization as an object of analysis also a reason for a return to Toynbee? Toynbee was the greatest student of civilizations, certainly in the twentieth century, perhaps ever. Curtius, comparing him with previous thinkers such as Hegel, Comte, Bergson, Spengler and others, certainly thought so. One might not agree with Toynbee's enumeration of twenty-one civilizations. One might find, as a strategy for analysis, the formula of "challenge and response" facile and unconvincing. One might take issue with the conviction, beguiling as it is, that the course of all civilizations can be found in that which can be traced in Hellenic or Graeco-Roman civilization. There is a whole language associated with Toynbee – "the stimulus of pressures", "dominant and creative minorities", "times of troubles", "external proletariats", "universal states and universal churches" – that make many uneasy. Some too are put off by the sometimes laboured and fanciful analogies and metaphors drawn from the mechanical, physical, and life sciences.

But, whatever one thinks of the general framework and concepts, no one who has read even a little of it can doubt the wealth of material and the fund of ideas to be found in the *Study*. Toynbee is in many ways better in the parts than in the whole. In his case the sum may be less than the parts, the bricks more solid and satisfying than the building. The great world historian William McNeill, who wrote a splendid biography of Toynbee, once said that "the heart of Toynbee's intellectual procedure has always been the sudden flash of insight" (Toynbee quotes this in "Reconsiderations" with evident approval). That seems just right. One can see this in such examples as Toynbee's argument – against almost all nationalist historiography, Turkish as well as Greek – that the Ottoman Empire was the salvation of Greek Orthodoxy, riven as it was with internal conflicts and almost fatally weakened by the assaults of Latin Christianity. Or there is the virtuoso account of how medieval Scotland came to be "Anglicized", in the warding off of the Scandinavian threat by the merging of the Scottish kingdom with the Northumbrian Anglo-Saxon kingdom to the south – thus making Edinburgh the capital and the English language ("Inglis" in its Scottish form) and English administration key features of royal rule (an analysis that would repay study today in the context of the Scottish referendum).

There are many such examples throughout the *Study*. For Toynbee no doubt the insights came from the elaborate comparisons of civilization that were always going on his mind, no matter how concrete and detailed the example. It was, for instance, his understanding of the Ottoman Empire as both the inheritor of the Islamic legacy of the Arabs and the successor to Rome and Byzantium that allowed him to perceive the protective attitude towards the Greeks (as well as, eventually in the nineteenth century, the parting of the ways as the Otto-

mans were forced by Turkish nationalists to emphasize the Muslim character of the empire). Toynbee could think of whole civilizations, and of their interactions and successions over the whole 6,000 years of recorded history, as we might think, say, of the nations of Europe over the past few centuries. This perspective, together with his belief in what he called the "philosophical contemporaneity" of all civilizations – the sense that all civilizations could be considered "contemporary" and their contributions still relevant, given that the 6,000-year history of civilization represented only a small fraction of the whole of human history – is what enabled him to look at familiar episodes and questions from an unusual angle. We may not share that perspective, certainly most of us would lack the knowledge to be able to do so in any systematic way. But that does not stop us from benefiting from its fruits, the many particular insights that are

strewn throughout the *Study* (that is why D. C. Somervell's well-known *Abridgement*, skilful as it is, is no substitute for consulting the whole *Study*, helped by the magnificent index compiled by Toynbee's second wife, Veronica Boulter).

For those daunted by the length and density of the *Study*, there are some marvellous lectures and essays to fall back on. In such volumes as *Civilization on Trial*, *The World and the West*, and *America and the World Revolution*, Toynbee laid out, clearly and powerfully, some of the main ideas of the *Study*, not neglecting to include some of the examples that give the *Study* its appeal. Toynbee wrote and published tirelessly, beyond the labour of producing not just the successive volumes of his great work but, as Director of Studies for nearly thirty years at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, the annual *Survey of International Affairs*. He

wrote fast, often on the hoof during his many travels. It is from one such volume of travels, *A Journey to China or Things Which Are Seen* (1931), that one might take a final example of the Toynbean way of looking at things, a way in which a particular problem or puzzle is understood by looking at it from the heights of a civilizational perspective.

Arriving in Peking in 1929, Toynbee is reminded, "with a certain shock", that Peking is not at all old. There are almost no material signs, for instance, of the thirteenth-century Mongol Yuan dynasty, which under Khubilai Khan was actually responsible for the founding of Peking (then called Dadu, "Great Capital") and laying it out on classical Chinese lines. The Imperial Palace or Forbidden City is a fifteenth-century Ming creation, following Khubilai's rectilinear plan, and it has been destroyed and restored many times, especially since the fall of the empire in 1911. How then, asks Toynbee, can a city "of this modest physical age" yet make "an impression of immemorial antiquity"? It is because Peking reflects an "ideal type" of the ancient Asian city, of the kind that was built in the now vanished "Ma'muns Baghdad" and "Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon". "What impresses one in Peking is not the actual material city that one beholds with the eye of the flesh. It is the eidos, the archetype laid up in Heaven, of which the city of the Mongols and the Ming is the latest incarnation." Standing on the site of Babylon a month or so earlier, Toynbee had found himself unable to re-imagine the city, so little of which remained. "I came away from Babylon baffled and disappointed, little guessing that after a while I was destined in a few weeks to see Babylon still in the flesh at – Peking."

Later on Toynbee is shocked at the dilapidated state of the Forbidden City, and the other famous buildings such as the Temple of Heaven. If they were being cared for at all, "their upkeep was being paid for by some vicariously public-spirited American benefactor". It looks, he remarks, "as though vandalism were part of the Chinese tradition". But further reflection convinces him once more that it is not the physical, material, reality that matters to the Chinese. They do not care about conservation or the loving preservation of old artefacts. Once again a civilizational parallel occurs to him: in this case the India of the Mughals, for whom it was common "for each new dynasty to build a new Delhi and let the last Delhi go to pieces". Unlike, say, the Japanese who, like many Europeans, are obsessive about preservation, for the Chinese as for the Indians – Hindus as well as Muslim – "the indifference or hostility towards the transitory incarnation may be the negative aspect of a positive reverence and affection for the eternal idea".

It is not a matter of agreeing with Toynbee, though on this question his views chime remarkably well with those of some leading Sinologists, such as the late Simon Leys. It is more a question of recognizing the fascination and fertility of Toynbee's method, the kind of insights that the civilizational perspective can lead to. It is time to return to civilization, and that also means time to return to Arnold Toynbee.

This is an edited version of a lecture given at the Institute of World Literature at the City University of Hong Kong on June 23, 2014.

Median

A boy dashes across the road
from darkness into streetlights, flit
of limbs through lanes, like bar-code,
his body lit

for these few seconds. Then he's gone,
deletes himself with one last stride
into the darkness on
the other side.

The sodium lamps, like canopies
along the median of the boulevard,
are yellow and weak, but these
alone stand guard.

Outside them, shadows thickly mass.
Only small bits of buildings – a sill,
an eave, a sheen of glass –
are visible;

a footpath fading into black,
a rubbish bin's half cylinder,
a swarthy pool of shellac
around a fender.

Beyond the lightly captured islands,
there's nothing, not a glint, and save
the roaring highway, silence
like a vast stalled wave.

This is what the boy departs,
and joins again, unknown events
that his decision starts,
or those it ends.

I saw him maybe six months past.
I am thousands of miles along
the road, and moving fast
to the latest song,

awake, in the middle of it,
but stressed and trying not to sleep
on stretches poorly lit,
trying to keep

a closer eye on where the street-light
gives way to dark and all is lost
or found, since that one night
my path was crossed.

JUSTIN QUINN