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2. Toynbee and the Cyclical Pattern of History

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2. Toynbee and the Cyclical Pattern of History

Abstract

There has been recently a return on the part of some writers to the Greek theory that the course of history follows a cyclical pattern. An important motivation for this return is the conviction that neither the theory of progress nor the classical Christian understanding of history can explain the setback which has befallen Western culture. One of the most famous explanations of the current dilemma to employ this pattern was that offered by the German writer, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), in the *Decline of the West* (1918-1922). Drawing his analogy from biology, Spengler argued that each civilization has a life cycle of its own, in the course of which it passes from youth to senility and final decay. He concluded that its life span approximated 1000 years, thus providing himself with a timetable by means of which he could predict the future of Western culture. Since he believed that Western Civilization has begun about the year 900, he felt certain that it had just about run its course. What he regarded as a great dearth of creative art and philosophy in recent times only confirmed his prediction. Appearing as it did as World War I was ending, a war which many had believed the progress of man had rendered highly unlikely, Spengler's book gained considerable notoriety. It influenced a young British historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, who was then thinking along some of the very same lines Spengler traced. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Repeating History, Historical Patterns

Disciplines

History | Intellectual History

Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIV: Historical Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. Toynbee and the Cyclical Pattern of History

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Born in 1889, Toynbee was educated at Oxford University. He worked for the British government in some capacity during both world wars, and served as a member of the British delegations to peace conferences in Paris in 1919 and again in 1946. For many years he has been Research Professor of International History in the University of London. Since 1925 he has been director of studies in the Royal

* Carl L. Becker, Progress and Power (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 91-116. Used with permission.

Institute of International Affairs, a private organization founded in 1920 to study international questions. The institute regularly publishes volumes in a series entitled A Survey of International Affairs. Professor Toynbee has lectured in the United States on a number of occasions. In addition, many of his articles have appeared in American newspapers and periodicals.

In 1934 Toynbee published the first volumes in a monumental study of history, which was completed in 1954 with the publication of the tenth volume. In this work he embraced a form of the cyclical theory of history. Maintaining that the "most intelligible field of historical study" was a civilization rather than a single nation-state, he isolated twenty-six such civilizations (plus several which proved abortive) which had existed. Then, using illustrations drawn from East and West, he proceeded to analyze the factors which in his opinion explain the "genesis" of civilizations and those which in turn bring about their "breakdown" and subsequent "disintegration."

Such a comprehensive explanation of history as this could be expected to receive widespread attention in the midtwentieth century, when many people were looking for some grand and convincing explanation of the growth and decay of human society. In the United States, where perhaps the awareness of crisis and hence the desire for an explanation had hitherto been less pronounced than in Europe, Toynbee became a best seller (if only in abridged form). Although there have been many defenders of his views, there have been many others who maintain stoutly that his generalizations are based on insufficient evidence or on evidence erroneously evaluated, and that they are far out of keeping with the humility which supposedly becomes a historian aware of the mass and complexity of his material. Toynbee's rejoinder has been that the work he did needs desperately to be done in our day. The historian has both the microscopic and the telescopic vision which best equips him to do it. He has also declared that he will be the first person to welcome correction of his errors.

The purpose of the selection which follows is to provide a glimpse of his understanding of meaning in history by examining some of his comments on the decline of civilizations, and particularly his estimate of the prospects of Western Civilization. In stubbornly refusing to admit that it is inexorably doomed, he departs from Spengler's analysis. The selection is taken from the one-volume abridgment of the first six volumes of A Study of History, which appeared in 1947.

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