

All Civilizations are Mortal

(Paul Valéry)

What is to be Done?

(Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, alias Lenin)

Georges M. Halpern, MD, PhD

August 2016



All civilizations are **human**: conceived, designed, made by humans for humans and generations to come. And all humans have a cycle: conception, growth in the

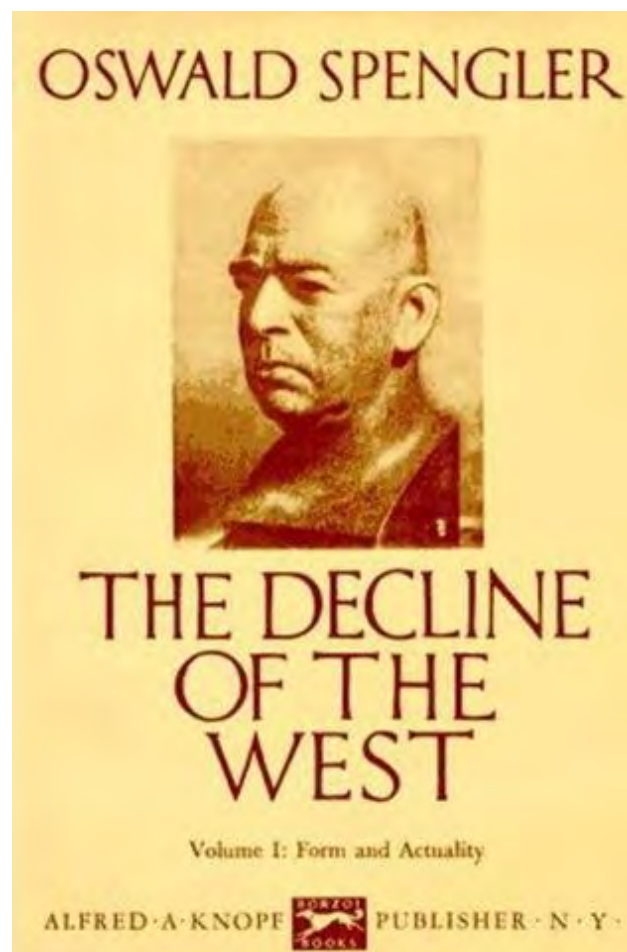
womb, birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence (coming of age!), adulthood, maturity, old age –and death. They do not resuscitate or reincarnate –or not been proven yet.

Giambattista Vico (Giovann Battista, 23 June 1668 – 23 January 1744) was an Italian political philosopher and rhetorician, historian and jurist, who was recognized much later as a great intellectual of the Age of Enlightenment. He criticized the expansion and development of modern rationalism and was an apologist for Classical Antiquity; Vico is best known for his *magnum opus*, the *Scienza Nuova* (1725, *New Science*). Vico is a precursor of systemic- and **complexity-thinking**, as opposed to Cartesian analysis and other kinds of reductionism. Furthermore, Vico can be credited with the first exposition of the fundamental aspects of social science and of semiotics, though his views did not necessarily influence the first social scientists. He is also well known for noting that *Verum esse ipsum factum* ("True itself is fact" and "The true itself is made"), a proposition perceived as an early instance of constructivist epistemology. More importantly, he was **very** influential, as his ideas run in parallel with...Karl Marx! For Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (2003), Vico as a humanist and early philologist represented "*a different alternative model that has been extremely important to me in my work,*" which differed from mainstream Western prejudice against the Orient and the dominating "standardization" that came with modernity and culminated in National Socialism. Vico saw the interdependence of human history and cultures as organically bound together. Said believes historians and scholars "*must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography. As geographical and cultural entities — to say nothing of historical entities — such locales, regions, and geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made.*"



The next visionary was **Konstantin Leontiev** (1831-1891), author of *The East, Russia and Slavdom* 1885-1886). His aesthetic and political theories had some similarities to those of Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler. Preceding the latter's theory of the cyclical nature of civilizations and *The Decline of the West* by several decades, Leontiev proposed that all societies undergo a state of flowering and increasing complexity followed by one of "secondary simplification", decay and ultimately death. Leontiev felt that the West had reached the beginning of secondary simplification. A pessimist, Leontiev made several predictions that turned out to come true. He prophesied that in the 20th century, there would be a bloody revolution in Russia led by an "anti-Christ" that would be socialist and tyrannical in nature and whose rulers would wield even more power than their tsarist predecessors. He said, "*Socialism is the feudalism of the future*". He felt that only the harshest reaction could prevent that scenario. He also predicted that Germany would grow strong enough to make one or two, but no more wars, and that China would, one day, threaten Russia's power. He also claimed that technology would, one day, lead to universal destruction.

But the real visionary was **Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler** (29 May 1880 – 8 May 1936) was a German historian and philosopher of history whose interests included mathematics, science, and art. He is best known for his book *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*), published in 1918 and 1922, covering all of world history. Spengler's civilization model postulates that ***any civilization is a superorganism with a limited and predictable lifespan.***



The book was a major success among intellectuals worldwide as it predicted the disintegration of European civilization after a violent "age of Caesarism", arguing by detailed analogies with other civilizations. It deepened the post-World War I pessimism in Europe. German Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer explained that at the end of World War I, Spengler's very title was enough to inflame imaginations: *"At this time many, if not most of us, had realized that something was rotten in the state of our highly prized Western civilization. Spengler's book expressed in a sharp and trenchant way this general uneasiness"*. Spengler's pessimistic predictions about the inevitable decline of the West inspired Third World intellectuals, ranging from China and Korea to Chile, eager to identify the fall of western imperialism.

Spengler's views contrast with the optimism of Arnold J. Toynbee (1940) and even more with the Panglossian Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) in which this author states that in the future the central axis of world politics will be a conflict between Western (United States and Canada, Western and Central Europe, Australia and Oceania – all Catholic-Protestant countries and cultures) and non-Western civilizations: *"the West and the Rest"*, or –as George W. Bush (in)famously said- *"if you are not with us, you are against us –and we will destroy you"*.

Fortunately, in recent years, the theory of Dialogue Among Civilizations, a response to Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, has become the center of some international attention. The concept was originally coined by Austrian philosopher Hans Köchler in an essay on cultural identity (1972). In a letter to UNESCO, Köchler had earlier proposed that the cultural organization of the United Nations should take up the issue of a "dialogue between different civilizations" (*dialogue entre les différentes civilisations*). In 2001, Iranian president Mohammad Khatami introduced the concept at the global level. At his initiative, the "dialogue among civilizations" was the basis for United Nations' resolution to name the year 2001 as the "United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations"-which happened. The Alliance of Civilizations (AOC) initiative was proposed at the 59th General Assembly of the United Nations in 2005 by the then Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and co-sponsored by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The initiative is intended to galvanize collective action across diverse societies to combat extremism, to overcome cultural and social barriers between mainly the Western and predominantly Muslim worlds, and to reduce the tensions and polarization between societies which differ in religious and cultural values.

A civilization is any complex society characterized by urban development, social stratification, symbolic communication forms (language then thought, writing systems), and a perceived separation from and domination over the natural environment by a cultural elite. Civilizations are intimately associated with and often further defined by other socio-politico-economic characteristics, including centralization, the domestication of both humans and other organisms, specialization of labor, culturally ingrained ideologies of progress

and supremacism, monumental architecture, taxation, societal dependence upon farming as an agricultural practice, and expansionism. Historically, a *civilization* was a so-called "advanced" culture in contrast to more primitive cultures. A civilization contrasts with non-centralized tribal societies, including the cultures of nomadic pastoralists (creators of Abrahamic religions, e.g. Judaism-Christianity and Islam), egalitarian horticultural subsistence neolithic societies or hunter-gatherers. Civilizations are organized in densely populated settlements divided into hierarchical social classes with a ruling elite and subordinate urban and rural populations, which engage in intensive agriculture, mining, small-scale manufacture and trade. Civilization concentrates power, extending human control over the rest of nature, including over other human beings.

The earlier neolithic technology and lifestyle was established first in the Middle East (from about 9,130 BCE), and later in the Yangtze and Yellow River basins in China (from 7,500 BCE), and later spread. The blending of the Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE) and Indo-Aryan culture into the Vedic Civilization (1500-500 BCE) is another major planetary event. Similar pre-civilized "neolithic revolutions" also began independently from 7,000 BCE in such places as northwestern South America (the Norte Chico civilization) and Mesoamerica. These were among the six civilizations worldwide that arose independently. The civilized urban revolution in turn was dependent upon the development of sedentarism, the domestication of grains and animals and the development lifestyles that allowed economies of scale and the accumulation of surplus production by certain social sectors. The transition from "complex cultures" to "civilizations" seems to be associated with the development of state structures, in which power was further monopolized by an elite ruling class. A number of traits distinguish a civilization from other kinds of society, and have been distinguished by their means of subsistence, settlement patterns, types of livelihood, forms of government, social stratification, economic systems, literacy, and other cultural traits. A. Nikiforuk (2012) argues that "*civilizations relied on shackled human muscle. It took the energy of slaves to plant crops, clothe emperors, and build cities*" and considers slavery to be a common feature of pre-modern civilizations. Civilization has been spread by colonization, invasion, religious conversion, the extension of bureaucratic control and trade, and by introducing agriculture and writing to non-literate peoples. But civilization is also spread by the technical, material and social dominance that civilization engenders. Traditionally, polities that managed to achieve notable military, ideological and economic power defined themselves as "civilized" as opposed to other societies or human grouping which lay outside their sphere of influence, calling the latter barbarians, savages, and primitives, while in a modern-day context, "civilized people" have been contrasted with indigenous people or tribal societies.

"Civilization" can also refer to the culture of a complex society, not just the society itself. Every society, civilization or not, has a specific set of ideas and customs, and a certain set of manufactures and arts that make it unique. Civilizations tend to develop intricate cultures, including a state-based decision making apparatus, a literature, professional art, architecture, organized religion, and complex

customs of education, coercion and control associated with maintaining the elite. The intricate culture associated with civilization has a tendency to spread to and influence other cultures, sometimes assimilating them into the civilization (a classic example being Chinese civilization and its influence on nearby civilizations such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam). Many civilizations are actually large cultural spheres containing many nations and regions. The civilization in which someone lives is that person's broadest cultural identity.

But the entire world has already become integrated into a single "world system", a process known as globalization. Different civilizations and societies all over the globe are economically, politically, and even culturally interdependent in many ways. There is debate over when this integration began, and what sort of integration – cultural, technological, economic, political, or military-diplomatic – is the key indicator in determining the extent of a civilization. Networks of societies have expanded and shrunk since ancient times, and that the current globalized economy and culture is a product of recent European colonialism.



Civilizations have generally ended in one of two ways; either through being incorporated into another expanding civilization (e.g. Ancient Egypt was incorporated into Hellenistic Greek, and subsequently Roman civilizations), or by collapse and reversion to a simpler form, as happens in what are called Dark Ages. Jared Diamond in his 2005 book *"Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed"* suggests five major reasons for the collapse of 41 studied cultures: environmental damage, such as deforestation and soil erosion; climate change; dependence upon long-distance trade for needed resources; increasing levels of

internal and external violence, such as war or invasion; and societal responses to internal and environmental problems -all these sound eerily familiar these days!

However the two major currents of civilizations, Western (circum-mediterranean first, then European, colonialist and US-driven) and Chinese were built on different cultures and beliefs. While the West embraced the Abrahamic religious mantra of the cult of the individual –emanation/spark of God- the Chinese (and Asia) remained part of a natural world (with its many deities and genies) and a necessary cohesion of society, with solidarity, intergenerational interdependence, tolerance, and openness. One striking example of this difference is the attitude during the Great Flood: according to Genesis (Books 6-9) Noah built the Ark to save his family –and many animals; while, conversely, based on recent findings (*Science*, 4 Aug 2016), the first Xia Emperor Yu is known as '**Great Yu controlled the Waters**' [大禹治水] due to his leadership and personal involvement in dredging and irrigation along the Yellow River, Wei River and other waterways, thus avoiding future catastrophes. These were two approaches to solve the same problem: one lesson led to the Torah (Old Testament); the other to Daoism and Confucianism^{2,3}. Maybe here lies the reason why China can turn into the economic power #1 in one generation! Since the 1960-1970s China and many East Asian countries have either embraced the Western current capitalistic system (with all its warts!) - or have had it imposed by the Western imperialist countries (e.g. the US) and their gargantuan corporations for one-way profits, without real redistribution (except corruption), or any long-lasting improvement of local conditions (infrastructure, soil and climate, water supply, health and education, etc.)- China is currently rethinking this embrace with constant references to Confucianism, and her priority in goals (e.g. development of infrastructures) is trying to avoid greedy profit first and above everything.

Morris Berman suggests in *Dark Ages America: the End of Empire* (2007) that in the corporate consumerist United States, the very factors that once propelled it to greatness—extreme individualism, territorial and economic expansion, and the pursuit of material wealth—have pushed the United States across a critical threshold where collapse is inevitable. Politically associated with over-reach, and as a result of the environmental exhaustion and polarization of wealth between rich and poor, he concludes the current system is fast arriving at a situation where continuation of the existing system saddled with huge deficits and a hollowed-out economy is physically, socially, economically and politically impossible. Five pillars of US culture that are in serious decay: community and family; higher education; the effective practice of science; taxation, and government; and the self-regulation of the learned professions. The corrosion of these pillars is linked to societal ills such as environmental crisis, racism, and the growing gulf between rich and poor (Jane Jacobs, 2005)

Some environmental scientists also see the world entering a Planetary Phase of Civilization, characterized by a shift away from independent, disconnected nation-states to a world of increased global connectivity with worldwide institutions, environmental challenges, economic systems, and consciousness. The Global scenario group used scenario analysis to arrive at

three archetypal futures: Barbarization, in which increasing conflicts result in either a fortress world or complete societal breakdown; Conventional Worlds, in which market forces or Policy reform slowly precipitate more sustainable practices; and a Great Transition, in which either the sum of fragmented Eco-Communalism movements add up to a sustainable world or globally coordinated efforts and initiatives result in a new sustainability paradigm.

Derrick Jensen (2006) argues that modern civilization is directed towards the domination of the environment and humanity itself in an intrinsically harmful, unsustainable, and self-destructive fashion. Defending his definition both linguistically and historically, he defines civilization as "a culture... that both leads to and emerges from the growth of cities," with "cities" defined as "people living more or less permanently in one place in densities high enough to require the routine importation of food and other necessities of life." This need for civilizations to import ever more resources, he argues, stems from their over-exploitation and diminution of their own local resources. Therefore, civilizations inherently adopt imperialist and expansionist policies and, in order to maintain these, highly militarized, hierarchically structured, and coercion-based cultures and lifestyles.

Both Western and Chinese-inspired current civilizations need to reassess urgently their goals, means, spirit, future -and more. Currently the "experts" who drive both use a tunnel-vision approach, claiming (even believing) that their choices are "the right and only" ones. They behave like the 5 blind men describing an elephant.



However, we should not sink the boat because we do not agree with the ship owner or the captain and his crew! Or throw the baby out with the bathwater. We do need most of our conquests and victories, and we need all (and more of) the technologies. We also need many (most?) structures that exist –and fight inequalities, lack or redistribution, blind faith in non-science based proposals, etc.

By itself capitalism – as an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and their operation for profit- is not evil. It has generated incredible progress, allowed for an unforeseen increase in healthier and longer

living population, driven our knowledge from the core of subatomic particles to the confines of the multiverse. These are some facts from an endless list, and we can, should and must continue. But not for the exclusive profit of the very few. All humans should benefit.

As alluded above, a model for solutions could be found in **Singapore**: Singapore is a global commerce, finance and transport hub. Its standings include: "easiest place to do business" (World Bank) for ten consecutive years, most "technology-ready" nation (WEF), top International-meetings city (UIA), city with "best investment potential" (BERI), 2nd-most competitive country (WEF), 3rd-largest foreign exchange center, 3rd-largest financial center, 3rd-largest oil refining and trading center and one of the top two busiest container ports since the 1990s. Singapore's best known global brands include Singapore Airlines (SIA) and Changi Airport, both amongst the most-awarded in their industry; SIA is also rated by *Fortune* magazine surveys as Asia's "most admired company". For the past decade, Singapore has been the only Asian country with the top AAA sovereign rating from all major credit rating agencies, including S&P, Moody's and Fitch. Singapore ranks high on its national social policies, leading Asia and 11th globally, on the Human Development Index (UN), notably on key measures of education, healthcare, life expectancy, quality of life, personal safety, housing. Although income inequality is high (GINI index = 46.4), 90% of citizens own their homes, and the country has one of the highest per capita incomes, with low taxes. Singapore is home to 4 million residents, 1/8th of whom are permanent residents and other foreign nationals. Singaporeans are mostly bilingual in a mother-tongue language and English as their common language. Racial and religious harmony is regarded by Singaporeans as a crucial part of Singapore's success, and was/is critical in building the Singaporean identity. Its cultural diversity is reflected in its extensive ethnic "hawker" cuisine and major festivals—Chinese, Malay, Indian, Western—which are all national holidays. This illustrates the success of multilingualism-multiculturalism, source of richer, more tolerant thinking and attitudes –and success.



Singapore, since its creation, has considered education and science-based knowledge at the center of its progress and future in all areas. The country's two main universities –NSU and NTU- are ranked among the top 13 in the world. Singapore has the lowest infant mortality in the world. The Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) is Singapore's lead public sector agency that spearheads economic oriented research to advance scientific discovery and develop innovative technology. Through open innovation, it collaborates with partners in both the public and private sectors to benefit society. Its BMRC research institutes focus on building up core biomedical capabilities in the areas of bioprocessing; chemical synthesis; genomics and proteomics; molecular and cell biology; bioengineering and nanotechnology; and computational biology.

The nation's core principles are meritocracy, multiculturalism and secularism. It is noted for its effective, pragmatic and incorrupt governance and civil service, which together with its rapid development policies, is widely cited as the "Singapore model". Gallup polls shows 84% of its residents expressed confidence in the national government, and 85% in its judicial systems—one of the highest ratings recorded. Singapore has significant influence on global affairs relative to its size, leading some analysts to classify it as a middle power. Singapore is ranked Asia's most influential city, and 4th in the world, by *Forbes*.

The only opening towards the future is a **complexity-oriented**, open-minded, curious and urgent series of consensus.

Acknowledgements

This essay is definitely NOT original. Whole libraries discuss these issues, and offer excellent solutions. But our Workshop discussions at/with *Para Limes* Institute on Complexity (www.paralimes.org) resulted in pressure to come up

with something we and Singapore could work on rapidly. Jan W. Vasbinder and Andrew LT. Sheng were the catalysts. My proposal is just that: a draft to develop and –maybe-solutions to offer. We’ll see what happens.

To the readers of my website, your comments and suggestions are urgently needed, and will be acknowledged.

The present display is the gift of Yves P. Huin, Webmaster *extraordinaire*. Albert B.W. Wong, PhD’s remarks were precious. And my gratitude goes to my students and Teaching Assistants at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the City University of Hong Kong for their remarks full of inspiration and juvenile energy.

References

1. Most of the text is copied –often *verbatim*- or inspired by Wikipedia and Google entries
2. <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/08/massive-flood-may-have-led-chinas-earliest-empire>
3. Albert BW Wong, HK. Personal communication 5 Aug 2016