

## THE "GRAND HISTORIANS'" USE OF THE CONCEPT OF DISORGANIZATION

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### I Introduction: Determinism and Social Change

The purpose of this paper is to determine what contributions to the theory of personal and social disorganization have been made by some of those writers who have conceived a master pattern in the organization of historical materials. A classification of these authors merely by academic disciplines is both inadequate and misleading. Such a classification usually gives little hint of the several approaches used in their works. Some other basis must be sought for a more analytical classification. I therefore propose to classify these authors in accordance with what they consider to be primary factors bringing about the rise and fall of various societies, that is, in accordance with their particular theories of social change.

Any consideration of social change almost inevitably leads into a concomitant consideration of determinism versus free will. Each of the authors to be examined espouses a deterministic point of view. But it is all too easy to assign some particular deterministic label to a writer. Sometimes this label merely indicates the bias of the labeller. More often a writer may be eclectic in his deterministic approach, now emphasizing the biological, now the geographic, now the cultural, now the technological, or some other factor. Frequently, there is genuine semantic confusion when such terms as cultural determinism or historical determinism are used.

One practical solution to this problem of classification is to consider what deterministic motifs seem dominant in developing the major theme of social change, at the same time recognizing that an author may have contrapuntal themes of social change which will in turn affect the deterministic motifs. Thus in one context a writer might be considered an economic determinist, in another an ideological determinist, and possibly in yet another a cultural determinist.

For the purposes of this paper I shall classify the writers as follows: Toynbee is considered to be an ideological determinist because of his emphasis on the role of religion in social change. Spengler, in his insistence on an organically predetermined growth-cycle for civilizations, may be viewed analogically as a biological determinist. Sorokin is classified as a cultural determinist because of his development of the theme that social change occurs as particular cultural systems rise to dominance. Kroeber is also a cultural determinist and is characterized by his use of geniuses as indices of a stimulating cultural environment rather than as agents of cultural florescence.

## II The "Grand Historians"

In his analysis of the growth of civilizations, Toynbee examines two traditional, commonly held views of the relations of society to the individual, the one depicting a society as merely an aggregate of 'atomic' individuals and the other representing society as an organism.<sup>1</sup> In this latter view, individuals are conceived as having identity only so far as they are members or 'cells' of their own societies. Toynbee rejects these two views in favor of the view of the social interactionists that a society is characterized by the system of social relationships existing between its members.

The growth of any civilization implies a satisfactory social organization. This is achieved by creative individuals or by creative minorities who have a dual task: (1) the achievement of their inspiration or discovery, and (2) the winning over of their society to this new way of life. This conversion may be accomplished in one of two ways: (1) by the majority of the society actually experiencing the phenomenon which transformed the creative individuals, or (2) by mimesis (imitation). In practice, mimesis is the only real alternative open to the masses.<sup>2</sup>

Toynbee employs the concept of "Withdrawal-and-Return" extensively in his discussion of creative individuals and creative minorities. He shows the important roles played by individuals or groups who, for some reason, have withdrawn from their normal roles in society only to return with a new energy and inspiration which have enabled them to transform their civilization. Nowhere does he make clear the source of these new creative powers which have been gained during the "Withdrawal" period. Instead, he falls back on the mystical Bergsonian concept of the elan vital. This concept is expository rather than explanatory. At best it is a circuitous way of acknowledging that we presently possess insufficient knowledge of individual or group psychology and that we yet have much to learn about the processes of personal and social adjustment.

It is in his discussion of the breakdown of civilizations that Toynbee presents his theory of personal and social disorganization. He rejects those theories which hold that civilizations debilitate their members and that this debilitation can only be counteracted by infusions of barbaric 'new blood'. He also cites several examples showing that the decay of technical achievement, geographical contraction caused by military aggression, and other criteria used from time to time by historians to indicate social disorganization, are the results and not the causes of social disorganization.

To Toynbee, the key to social disorganization lies in what he terms the "mechanicalness of mimesis". When a society loses its capacity for self-determination and resorts to blind copying, social disorganization is the inevitable result. This thesis reminds one strongly of Pareto's "Circulation of the elite", wherein the men of faith (the "lions") become men of cunning (the "foxes").<sup>3</sup>

The major criterion of disintegration or disorganization is the schism of society into three parts: (1) the dominant minority which always seeks to maintain its position, qua se, although it has none of the attributes of leadership except force or cunning; (2) the internal proletariat which comprises those members of society who feel they are in but not of it and who are held firmly in place by the dominant minority; and (3) the external proletariat which consists of those people who live on the fringes of society and who constitute a large fraction of the uncreative majority. In times of social disorganization this external proletariat (the barbarians) becomes hostile and is separated from the internal proletariat and the dominant minority of any civilization by military barriers.

Toynbee's expression for what we have termed personal disorganization or personal maladjustment is "schism in the soul." When a society begins to collapse, the folkways and mores which were previously characteristic of its members are found to be inadequate. They are replaced by alternative substitutes, one passive and the other active. Individuals are torn between these alternatives. They have no social yardsticks with which to measure the "rightness" or "wrongness" of any particular course of action. Mental confusion, anguish, frustration, and insecurity inevitably follow. Hurried, frantic efforts are made to impose a specious and inadequate standardization on society in place of the "standardization" which comes from the normal growth of a well-integrated society. As differentiation and integration are the marks of growth, so standardization is the mark of social disorganization.

In a growing civilization a creative leader is a conqueror or lawgiver, in a disintegrating civilization a savior. As a savior he will fail if he resorts to arms or anarchy. Thus, there is a place for the creative leader or the creative minority regardless of whether a society is organized or disorganized. Disorganization must inevitably occur when creative leadership is transformed into leadership maintained by force or by the "cake of custom."

Toynbee's approach is impressionistic rather than empirical. He presents a series of shrewd insights based on an imposing array of supporting facts. However, it is possible to make a different selection of facts and thus present an entirely different version of the development of the various societies he has discussed. Despite this, the fact remains that, in his interpretation of world history, he has employed the concepts of personal and social disorganization. He views these concepts as processes rather than as states. However, his account of history remains essentially expository rather than explanatory or analytical. Words and phrases such as 'clan', 'palingenesia', 'schism in the body social', and 'schism in the soul' explain nothing. He has made no attempt to ferret out the actual processes at work in the 'organization' or 'adjustment' cycle. At the same time, Toynbee does not regard the growth and decline of civilization as something organically predetermined. He does not concede the 'death' of a society. In this he stands in sharp contrast to Spengler.

Oswald Spengler's general theory consists of five main principles: (1) the existence of certain fundamental patterns characteristic of each major culture; (2) these occur in limited growths; (3) the basic patterns of each culture can necessarily be reduced to a single master or key pattern which controls the culture; (4) the cultures necessarily develop through essentially parallel stages; and (5) they die of themselves.<sup>4</sup> He regards cultures as organisms, and world history as their collective biography. He turned to the 'morphology of history', and presented an organic rather than a mathematical or systematic view of its form and structure.

Spengler claims that world history is city history, the history of urban or civic man. The peasant or countryman is historyless. It is in the cities we find the death of a culture. In each culture a handful of gigantic cities disenfranchises and disvalues the whole hinterland (and birth-place) of that culture by slightly referring to it as "the provinces". It is important to note also the new role of money. The city distinguished between the absolute idea of money and goods. Money becomes abstract. It no longer values things between each other, but with reference to monetary thought just as there is a mathematical or juristic one. Civilization is always a dictatorship of money.

It is only in his discussion of civilization and the world-city that Spengler deals with the concepts of personal and social disorganization. Disorganization is brought about by the separation of city and country. The old folkways and mores prove to be both inadequate and unacceptable in the megalopolis. They are despised and rejected; but, according to Spengler, it is impossible for a new and more satisfactory set of mores to take their place. There is no place in Spengler's scheme for Toynbee's concept of palingeneisa. To him, civilization means decadence, and marked the last step on the inexorable and irreversible road to the death of a society.

There is no attempt to account for the growth of these world-cities at the expense of the countryside. There is no explanation as to how the mores of the peasant are displaced. No concession is made to the view that, perhaps, a new and satisfactory set of mores, satisfactorily adapted to the new urban way of life, could be evolved. The energies and the will of mankind of subordinated to fate or destiny. Man is powerless to help himself. Toynbee's treatment in this regard is more satisfactory intellectually in that it allows for the fact that man can help himself and is not the slave of some mystical, blind Fate.

Spengler's conception of the life histories of societies is closely related to the view of those sociologists who described the process of social disorganization in terms of biological analogy. His conception of civilization is remarkably similar to Cooley's concept of formalism. Plasticity and growth are marks of culture, and crystallization and formalism of decadence. He makes no attempt to discuss personal disorganization. In his preoccupation with society, he overlooks the individuals who compose it. This is yet another weakness of the "organic" approach to history. Spengler emphasized the Verstehen approach rather than empiricism. The former approach minimized the quest for the etiology of social or individual processes.

P. A. Sorokin is one of the few sociologists to attempt an interpretation of world history.<sup>5</sup> The process of social change comes about through what Sorokin terms the "principle of immanent causation." He expresses this inevitability to change in dialectical form.<sup>6</sup> There has been no linear trend in history, but instead an oscillation between the three major cultural systems because no single system comprises the whole of truth, nor is it entirely false. If one cultural system represented the whole truth and the others were completely erroneous, fluctuations could not occur. In his scheme, none of the fluctuations has a regular, temporal periodicity.

According to Sorokin, social disorganization occurs when the organized network of social relationships breaks down. This process usually follows a definite pattern: "(1) breakdown of the crystallized system of relationships; (2) ensuing confusion; (3) increase of conflicts and antagonisms; (4) outburst of overt compulsion and violence in the relationship of the members of the group, or between the interacting groups."<sup>7</sup> Thus wars and revolutions are logical, external indices of social disorganization. Sorokin devotes much time to a discussion of wars and internal disturbances.<sup>8</sup> Neither the Ideational nor the Sensate culture is more warlike than the other, although religious wars occur more frequently in the former. Periods of transition from one type of culture to another are marked by an increase both in the number of wars and the number of participants. Sorokin asks why such transitional periods should be so warlike. His answer is framed in terms of his theory of social disorganization.

Nowhere does Sorokin give a causal explanation of social disorganization. His whole discussion is expository rather than explanatory. He makes no real search for causes. Again, he spends a whole chapter, heavily laden with statistics, dealing with war magnitudes. No attempt is made to show how the figures representing these magnitudes could be used as indices of social disorganization. Only fleeting references are made concerning the process of personal disorganization. He seems to take for granted that social disorganization can exist apart from personal disorganization. At best this is a very dubious assumption.

In sharp contrast to Toynbee, Spengler, and Sorokin, who have attempted to present finished theoretical systems by which history may be interpreted, A. L. Kroeber makes it clear that he is neither seeking causes nor formulating a theory of historical causation.<sup>9</sup> He states that a surer understanding of how cultures behave as they do seems historically antecedent to why they behave as they do. His treatment of history, thus, is behavioristically factual rather than explanatory.

The principal criterion used by Kroeber in determining the historic configuration of the growth of culture patterns is the work produced by geniuses.<sup>10</sup> In using this criterion, Kroeber makes it clear that he does not regard geniuses as the producers of "causers" or higher cultural values and forms, that is, that he does not subscribe to the "great man" theory of historical causality. His interest centers around what geniuses express and how, not who is doing the expressing. The particular persons are merely measures, or indicators, of cultural

expression. Following Galton's lead, and using the theory of probability, Kroeber reasons that a certain percentage of physiologically and psychologically potential geniuses are born in every ethnic and racial and religious group in every geographical area in every age. He attempts to discover why this potentiality is realized only spasmodically and in clusterings. He believes the answer lies in the inhibiting or stimulating effects of the cultural environment. If this were not so, he reasons, geniuses would be scattered throughout history instead of clustering in definite space-time relationships.

It is clear that Kroeber views historical change in terms of both the personal and social organization-disorganization (or, better, adjustment-maladjustment) cycles. His conclusions only partially take account of this implicit thesis. However, certain of them are germane:

- (1) Universals in history are very doubtful. There is nothing cyclical, regularly repetitive, or "necessary" about history which can be inferred from the evidence.
- (2) Persons are viewed as indices not as agents. Although his assumption is that geniuses tend to cluster in time and space as well as in their relation to particular growth patterns, the existence of isolated geniuses (for example, Leibnitz in philosophy, Copernicus and Kepler science, Goya in painting, Villon in literature) suggests to Kroeber that "all human beings are the products of their culture to a much greater degree than we ordinarily imagine, and that these cultures appear to grow in patterns and to fulfill or exhaust these."<sup>11</sup>
- (3) "For the peak of productivity of individuals...the Greek acme or Latin fluorit at age 40 is an unusually sound average estimate. Reputation and influence of course tend to arrive later and to persist after important productivity has ceased."<sup>12</sup>
- (4) In explaining cultural activity on the peripheries of existing large cultures, Kroeber proposes that "the peripheral and younger settlements were, on the whole, in a state of greater ferment and activity, and therefore readier for new undertakings, cultural as well as political, than the relatively conservative populations which had remained on the long-settled Greek mainland."<sup>13</sup>
- (5) "The real question is why particular cultures die. Usually, the cause no doubt is the impingement of other cultures which are in some way 'superior' or more viable. In what the superiority consists we really do not know. The specific causes which are alleged in particular instances may or may not be the real ones. Essentially, the culture which survives in competition is the viable and therefore the one we consider superior; though under different circumstances the qualities which make it superior may differ widely. It may be armaments or organization or training in physical courage or numbers or wealth or cohesion fanaticism or mechanical inventions or habits of

adaptability or education or the lack of it which seem to be the decisive factors in this or that case."<sup>14</sup>

Kroeber's study concludes with many more questions raised than answered. For example, he suggests that it may be possible to arrive at quantitative indices of social organization and disorganization in history. Further, the fact that geniuses achieve their optimum productivity at an average age of 40 may have important implications in our consideration of the concepts of adjustment and maladjustment. Is there an optimum chronological age for adjustment? Are there certain stages in life when an individual is more susceptible to maladjustment? Can individuals be used as indices of social disorganization in much the same way as Kroeber uses geniuses as indices of high cultural achievement? Kroeber gives no indications as to whether or not cultural florescences occur in periods of social organization or disorganization. However, it seems reasonable to infer that cultural growth occurs when a culture is not shackled with unsuitable mores, customs, or habits, or with vested interests.

### III Some Concluding Comments

All of the authors, with the possible exception of Kroeber, give some consideration to the concept of social disorganization in their interpretations of history. However, their accounts are, in the main, expository rather than analytical. Facts are apparently drawn at random from the kaleidoscopic panorama of history to support their particular views or to embellish their particular expositions. No systematic attempt is made to collect or to interpret these facts; nor is a systematic, inductive theory built upon them. Instead, their theories are deductive and those facts have been selected that best suit them. Sorokin does attempt a more rigidly scientific treatment of his historical materials; however, despite his statistical pretensions, his effort fails for the same reason. Kroeber skirts this problem by stating that his work is behavioristically factual. This would seem to be begging the issue.

None of these men pays much attention to social institutions, small groups, or individuals (apart from "great men"). In general they have contributed little to, and have not made much use of, the concept of personal disorganization. This is in sharp contrast to their use of, and contributions to, the concept of social disorganization both theoretically and empirically. In their efforts to deal with societies on a grand scale, they seem to overlook the fact that these societies are composed of individuals and that a consideration of the process of personal disorganization or maladjustment might shed additional light on the process of social disorganization.

The musical term "counterpoint" indicates that two themes are being carried along at the same time; at one time the one is dominant, at one time the other. The parallel in society is that social disorganization and reorganization are concomitant processes. Similarly, in the individual, the processes of disorganization and reorganization may be going on at the same time. A "grand history" incorporating this hypothesis would enrich our understanding of these basic social processes

and make them more intelligible. None of the authors reviewed has made adequate use of the theory of personal and social disorganization in his analysis of social change from his deterministic position.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History. For purposes of this paper reference will be made to the abridgement of Volumes I-VI by R. C. Somervell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1947.
2. Ibid., p. 577. Mimesis is a 'short cut,' but it is a route by which the rank and file, en masse, can follow the leaders.
3. Vilfredo Pareto, The Mind and Society, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935, "History is a graveyard of aristocracies." No. 2053.
4. Oswald Spengler, The Decline and Fall of the West, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947. This classification is based on the discussion of Spengler's work contained in A. L. Kroeber, Configurations of Culture Growth, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1944.
5. Pitrim A. Sorokin, Social and Cultural Dynamics, New York: American Book Co., 1937-41, Volumes I-IV.
6. Ibid., IV, 590. "...change is...immanent in any sociocultural system, inherent in it, and inalienable from it. It bears itself the seeds of its change." See also Ibid., IV, 619-620.
7. Ibid., Volume III, p. 261.
8. Ibid., Volume III, passim.
9. A. L. Kroeber, op. cit.
10. Two reasons are adduced to support this criterion: Ibid., 7, (1) "Most of the readily accessible data of history are attached to personalities"; Ibid., 10, (2) "apparently greater, culturally productive individuals appear in history, on the whole, prevailing in clusters."
11. Ibid., p. 838.
12. Ibid., p. 27.
13. Ibid., p. 814.
14. Ibid., pp. 819-820.