



A Study of History

Arnold Joseph Toynbee , Jane Caplan (Editor)

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Mr. Toynbee's analysis of the rise and fall of civilizations has been acknowledged as an achievement without parallel in modern scholarship. In its way, Mr. Somervell's abridgement of this monumental work is also an unparalleled achievement, for while reducing the work to one-sixth of its original size, he has, preserved its method, atmosphere, texture, and, for the most part, the author's very words. Indeed, through this miracle of condensation, he has provided a concise version that is no mere summary but the very essence of Mr. Toynbee's work.

A Study of History Details

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Author : Arnold Joseph Toynbee , Jane Caplan (Editor)

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Download and Read Free Online A Study of History Arnold Joseph Toynbee , Jane Caplan (Editor)

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Chander says

A superb narrative in the History of how civilizations came into being with an insight of how the balances between internal stagnancy against external pressures (there was interesting a golden ratio theory to this too !!!) leads to rise and fall of civilizations, nations and societies. A must read.

Med says

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Nadine Al lahham says

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Adam Cherson says

I rate this book a 4.14 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being best. I read an abridged version. I was very impressed at the time with certain of the historical patterns observed by this writer. In particular I remember his observation, with multiple examples, of how the conquerors often wind up adopting major cultural attributes of the vanquished. This is a must for those looking at the panoramic view of the entire sweep.

Clay Kallam says

I first read "A Study of History" in the 1970s and found it fascinating and insightful. Rather than looking at one nation or area or time span, Arnold Toynbee compared what he called "civilizations" to see if he could find common denominators in their development or their structure. A 2017 re-read, though, revealed some issues.

First, the definition of "civilization" is a little murky, as, for example, he counts the Roman Empire as part of the Hellenic "civilization." At one level, certainly there is continuity and connection, but to say that Sparta and Pergamon, separated by hundreds of years and a vast cultural chasm, are from the same civilization is a stretch. But it only takes a little squinting to make it easy enough to swallow, and the grand idea overrides the pesky little details.

Second, as Toynbee freely admits, there are fewer common patterns than one might expect, and his in-depth

examination of one or two aspects of a particular civilization tend to appear more anecdotal than substantial.

Finally, in terms of overall concerns, Toynbee places a major emphasis on the role of what he calls "higher religions." The fact that these religions sometimes bleed over into more than one civilization complicates his original argument that comparing civilizations is an effort that makes sense, and it also leads to perhaps the most fundamental criticism of this extremely impressive work of scholarship and grand analysis.

Though Toynbee identifies 30-some civilizations and can trace the historical record back more than 5,000 years, it's not at all clear that we have any kind of perspective on these large-scale trends Toynbee seeks to identify and trace. Are, for example, the higher religions an artifact of a stage of development, or an enduring aspect of human history that will always be in play? If so, then his emphasis on their importance makes sense; if not, they are as evanescent as the importance of stirrups in warfare -- crucial for a brief time but not fundamental in any sense.

Toynbee also discusses his idea of "creative" and "dominant" minorities that are the driving force in civilizations. When the civilization is on the rise, the creative minority leads the way, and the mass of people follow happily, adopting the ideology and goals of that minority (he calls the process "mimesis.") When the civilization begins to stagnate, the creative minority shifts to a dominant minority, and imposes its values (and desire to retain power) on the majority. This was very likely true when only a minority of people had access to education, to the ability to manipulate the levers of power, to economic clout, but with a broader segment of society much more capable of being involved in the processes of civilization, it's unclear if that kind of minority retains the power to create consensus it once had.

And of course the entire idea of the Internet was non-existent when Toynbee finished his work on this edition in 1972, and the global village of Marshall McLuhan was just some academic pipedream. Toynbee's belief that a world government was not only necessary but also inevitable seems more than a little outdated in these fragmented days, though of course the wheels of history grind very slowly and who knows how the planet will be governed after climate change shifts the paradigm.

(There is one very contemporary note that Toynbee anticipated that I can't help but mention. He says that civilizations on the decline deal with barbarians in two ways: They build walls and sell them weapons. Donald Trump, of course, wants to "build that wall," and for generations, the United States has been arms seller to the world, and many of the weapons wielded by the terrorists that Toynbee would likely identify as the 21st century version of barbarians are of American origin.)

All in all, "A Study of History" is very much a creature of its time and place. Toynbee's style old-fashioned and ornate, and he is fond of inserting quotes in their original languages (German, French, Latin) as he assumes his readership is of course somewhat fluent in more than English. He also lingers too long on examples and anecdotes, and after a while, the mind numbs from historical detail piled on top of historical detail.

Nonetheless, "A Study of History" will reward the patient reader. Toynbee views the world and its stories from a vast distance, detached (as best he can) from the random walk of historical events. We are all so caught up in today's disasters and misadventures, and how the recent past has scarred the present and future, that we forget that history does repeat itself in many ways, and that we can shed light on today and tomorrow by looking carefully at centuries long past. "A Study of History" does just that, and though it seems to us that the world has passed it by, it's also possible that future generations will look on it as one of the great achievements of 20th century thought.

Ex Leftist Orwell Is Spinning says

This 1972 edition (ISBN 0192152548) is NOT Somervell's abridgement but a newer revision by the author himself with Jane Caplan.

Peter says

So, the particular questions raised on p38, namely, 'What is the intelligible field of study which Western historians will discover for themselves in this new age?' and 'Is there some intelligible field of of historical study which is absolute and not merely relative to the particular social environment of particular historians?' would appear to need to address difficulties on pp32-3 in particular (and the issues raised on p46) in the context of issues and arguments presenting elsewhere at,in an appropriate time, possibly.

#aphids - p70-1, p85, p86, p89, p109, p111, p115

The arguments on p106 appear to be substantially incomplete by twenty-first century standards. And on p107, "The resignation comes, not through a spiritual intuition in the soul, but through a physical manifestation to the eye of God's irresistible force." requires a dignified response at,in an appropriate time,setting. On p109, the reader is offered a prelude - that was quick! The acute difficulties presented by the emergence of the cyberspace domain, mediated by the ethernet and wireless connections, and the activities within it in the context of the schism-and-palingenesia need to be addressed at,in an appropriate setting: this one has no objection to parties to such conversations discussing approaches to the subject matter unless they are left to rot, in which case, he has.

Considering the opening argument of Chapter 14 on p111, namely, "...we decided that the cause of the geneses of civilizations must be sought in a pattern of interaction which we have called 'challenge-and-response.', what are the difficulties associated with arguments constructed on a premise based on we-amongst-the-inherent-usness-of-us-over-here, and what might suitable remedies include?

On p114, the reader is offered: "Now that we have found that a harsh environment is not inimical to civilization but rather the contrary, are we warranted in formulating the further proposition that the stimulus towards civilization grows stronger in proportion as the environment grows more difficult?" to which this reviewer might respond that the answer would surely beg the question as to how much is enough? And, again, similarly, with respect to the aphid presenting in the first sentence of chapter 17 on p123.

On p123, to what extent would the answer to 'Do the growths of civilizations present a genuine problem?' be valid were 'What did the Romans ever do for us?' be considered initially and the content of this initial response be valued appropriately? It may be worth considering what 'But what if the creative personality fails to carry society with him, or allows his spiritual leadership to degenerate into an oppressive and sterile tyranny?' may assume elsewhere at an appropriate time.

On p154, what does 'One of the perennial infirmities of human beings is to ascribe their own failures to the operation of forces which are entirely beyond their control and immeasurably wider in range than the compass of human action.' assume? What else appears to be relevant with respect the arguments on p276?

On p159, if we take at face value 'The simple truth is that, in any analysis of rhythm, we have to distinguish

between the movements of the part and those of the whole, and between the natures of the means and of the ends.', what might the normative considerations include, taking into account 'The truth is rarely pure and never simple.'? What else may be relevant in this context?

:-o p294

The difficulties associated with we're-us-over-here-and-we're-over-there-in-a-mangled-form-already need to be addressed at,in an appropriate time, setting.

Muhammad Hassan says

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Justpassingby says

(review based on the 1972 one-volume edition by the original author and Jane Caplan)

Arnold J. Toynbee does not subscribe to the rules of modern science as exemplified by Karl Popper's falsifiability criterion. He explicitly assigns to historians the task of imposing their own reference frame and vocabulary to make sense of the scattered evidence from documents, archeological finds and oral tradition. The purpose of the historian is not to argue in favour of a *Hauptsatz*, but to achieve spiritual fulfilment by recognizing connections between people who live thousands of kilometers or thousands of years apart from each other.

The basic unit of study in Toynbee's work is the class *civilization*. Civilizations are objects that can be compared, differentiated and classified. Pioneers in the field that would later be labeled *comparative history* had to infer analogies and conclusions based on limited knowledge of 2 or 3 civilizations; Toynbee calls himself lucky to be able to draw on sources that pertain to no less than 31 of them.

In the abstract passages it is not always easy to ignore the rambling tone of the author. He is frequently arguing, not always equally convincingly, in favour of the spiritual or religious dimension of history. He elevates the "higher religions" above the level of mere civilizations because they have demonstrated, in his view, the capacity to bridge the barbarian gaps between successive civilizations. And I am sure there must be a better marxist term for what he labels the "schism in the soul" of a civilization. (Marx, by the way, is not necessarily less rambling than Toynbee)

On the other hand the book, even in this abridged edition, contains a wealth of references to factual material in world history that would appear distinctly less interesting when merely presented as such, but that gains significance through his narrative of growth and decline of civilizations. Whether or not one accepts civilizations as objective, falsifiable givens: they certainly make sense as abstractions (if not metaphors) to

tie the story together.

The book is also a useful correction on the rather appallingly biased history program in Flemish (and probably other European) secondary schools. Here I want to single out two examples that mattered to me personally: the importance of the clash between Hellenism and Syriac culture to explain the creation of Christianity and Islam; and the role of the Bactrian empire for the contact between Asian and European/Near Eastern cultures.

Modern comparative history tries to identify parallels at a rather more specific level than the broad, sweeping notions of Toynbee; yet the ambition of Toynbee's program seems to make up for his occasional lack of scientific distance.

Giovanni Emmanuel says

Great book, one of the best written on human history; one book everyone should read.

Toon Pepermans says

(I didn't read parts VI to XI)

This book tells more about the time (and place) in which it was written than about history itself.

How Toynbee manages to totally ignore something like economy is beyond me.

His (mis)use of the yin-yang concept is embarrassing and his other interpretations of mythology often questionable.

His arguments against environmental determinism are nowadays completely laughable: he proves the opposite of what he wants to prove. (There may be better arguments, but he doesn't give them.)

An upside is that the illustrations in this edition are very well-chosen.

Dan Waniek says

This is a Cathedral...

by Dr Dan Waniek, MD

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A Study of History : Introduction to the Geneses of Civilizations by Arnold Joseph Toynbee, 1979

This is not a Book !... This is a Cathedral... Its well cut corner stones are great ideas developed by the last masters of history of our times. And the master of them all is as cautious as an engineer, as talented as any genius and - especially - as creative as some great lawyers and most great architects are about their lifetime's work. Montaigne once wrote something like " My work of art is my life". After reading Toynbee, one feels almost compelled to say just the opposite: Well, it may be only a book - even one originally published in twelve volumes - but this is his work of art. For many other lives have been lived, and never lost, in the

shadows of this construction and into the blessed light of its interior. Sources for the whole master plan in Toynbee's masterpiece include perhaps less Thucydides, Vico and Cantemir and more of such names as Abd al-Rahman Ibn Mohammad Ibn Khaldun, Gibbon, de Gobineau, Smuts, and Lord Acton.

Countless, sometime arcane shelves of dusty bibliographical materials are treaded here into a delicate work of Gothic stone. Looking like fine laces, and sometimes like solid monoliths, the strong and yet delicate architecture of the book is both visible in any detail and compelling in toto, to say the least. Criteria for such modestly named "a" study appeared to the author almost all by themselves. It further took only some simple empirical development to turn the "knowledgeable field of studies" into a land of plenty. But what helped most, throughout the process of creation was the mind of the great master, Toynbee, bringing everything into one piece.

And then again, it's really the vision which commended a sense of wholeness and oneness in this blessed accomplishment of human genius. Toynbee had it while travelling by train somewhere in South-Eastern Europe and dutifully translated it into an incredibly simple grand project that - subsequently - took thirty years to complete. It's perhaps a small tribute to the author - but not an avoidable choice - to read the whole set of volumes and not the many abridgements and the few but strange full editions of this masterpiece. If you do so, the results are incredibly deep and certainly worth the effort. You'll laugh for instance finding famous French historians busy at work - seeing their mind-entrenched "hexagone" wherever it never existed, by virtue of some retrospectoscope-minded methodology.

You'll almost hear a lawyer pleading in court in a feast of intellectual cases, like that of Mahmud of Gazana. You'll grasp the desperately - and terminally - futile emptiness of "the West and the Rest" frame of mind. And you'll see how ideas pass from one mind to another as if by miracle, in the gentle light of spiritual and caring understanding. Like Sfântul Duh, this isn't straightforward, and could be invoked but not produced. As Jean Cocteau wrote, in an ironical epitome of ambient nationalistic fury, about France, "C'est le coq sur le fumier. Enlevez le fumier et le coq se meurt". Arnold Joseph Toynbee's twelve-volume masterpiece is by far the greatest book of the 20-th century produced by a single mind. The other one, which is unrestricted, is Father Dumitru Stăniloae's translation of the Church Fathers, collected in *Filocalia românească*?. If the professor Toynbee were not the greatest historian since Thucydides, he would no doubt be a prophet. Written with profound wit - sometimes deeper than we may grasp at our first reading, but always tasty - such a text could be easily produced in any court of law. It would win the day ! No juror and few judges would afford to take it superficially... Especially nowadays... For here you will read nothing less than a crystalline mind in the process of thinking clearly and expressing itself simply and completely on the matter of civilization. It's a cardinal paradigm. It's a dream came true.

Toynbee extracted historical knowledge from the countless nationalistic shelves and transported it into the realm of metaknowledge, using empirical as well as historiographical science. Much unlike relativists and other nonsense-"historiographers" (the name of Boia comes to mind as one of the worst counter-examples), he did not destroy national histories in the process. He only did what he knew best, telling the truth : He paid homage to "the last infirmity of noble minds". Do not take this book with a grain of salt, with easy-going coffee-table albums or even with your usual intellectual arrogance. Take it into the island where you would retire! It's more than a book you are contemplating here ! It's the epitaph of the Western Civilization, carved in lasting, if delicately and well cut stone.

ISBN : 0192152076, BOBE-2648-REFS-0001, RANK : # Who cares, really ?, There are, of course, thousands of pages, This is the Oxford University Press edition, using Toynbee's own sketches and maps.

Mai says

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Ahmed Omer says

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Stone says

Toynbee's *A Study of History* is one of those voluminous treatises that I simply can't think of any specific points to include in my review, for the book itself already includes virtually everything worth consideration within the field of study. The topics in which this book concerned were on the cultural level of civilizations and on the spatiotemporal level of the globe in millennia. The main parts of discussion were divided into three sections: concerning peace, war, and confrontation between civilizations, while for each individual civilization four phases of its lifespan are primary targets of concern: genesis, growth, breakdown, and disintegration. In my review, instead of detailing and paraphrasing the words of Toynbee, I would simply focus on a few interesting ideas/assertions from the book and talk a little bit about my personal understandings regarding these ideas.

First is the idea of substituting capacities -- an idea that's no stranger to us, for we apply the same idea to individuals all the time: we tell people with physical disabilities not to lose hope in sports but to explore with their mental capacity, we encourage students who are bad at sitting inside classrooms to pursue careers in outdoor activities. We see this phenomenon in larger entities such as societies and states as well: countries with limited resources often developed alternative sources of profit, with prime examples such as Japan and Singapore. In Toynbee's book, however, he further extended this idea to civilizations with some modifications. As it turned out, civilizations are also capable of developing substituting capacities -- the conquered colonies of the Roman Empire were able to profoundly influence Rome through their prevailing arts and culture (Greek mythology and philosophy, Eastern architecture, and Christianity are all good examples), while the conquered peoples were often able to form more cohesive national identity under oppression (Jews are the best example). As a Chinese, the history of China seems to me another fitting example of substituting capacity: while China was frequently attacked and conquered by nomads, the nomadic culture of the north would always be assimilated into the mainstream Chinese culture. This idea does seem quite convincing, although I do have some doubts because we see many counterexamples in history, too. Not all those conquered nations were able to rise up on a different battlefield and subjugate their master culturally, and not all those conquered peoples were able to repel the suppression and rejuvenate after centuries of diasporas. There are certainly merits in Toynbee's theory, but the interesting thing about history is that there is never a definite rule of thumb that would always work.

Another very thought-provoking statement in the book was that technological advances were results, instead of causes of the development of civilizations. A converse of this statement goes, the lag in technological development is an indication of the decline of civilization. Toynbee used the "All roads lead to Rome" example -- which was not an exaggeration of Roman transportation at its pinnacle, but as the imperial power declined and centralized government faded away, warlords and local kings built passes and outposts all around their territories, essentially destroying the old Roman road system and leading to the Dark Ages. Again, as a Chinese, this inevitably reminded me of the decline of Chinese civilization in the later imperial periods -- the stagnation in technological breakthroughs wasn't a reason for China's decline, it was a precursor to it. The reason I find this way of thinking important is because that we often invert causes and effects, moreover we also mix causal relations with random occurrences; a right way of looking at history involves correctly analyzing the relations between various historical events.

Last but not least, I would like to quickly touch on futurism -- a topic Toynbee spent quite some chapters on. Futurism, in a historical sense, can refer to anything that seeks to cut the ties to the past and traditions and focus solely on tomorrow. This stream of thoughts often caused intense social conflicts and resulted in neither a continuation of the status quo nor a world without any traces of the past. Qin Shi Huang's political and cultural unification of China is a prime example of the effects of futurism; the radical policies of burning all the classics and massacring scholars possessing unwanted knowledge turned out to be ineffective and harmful, eventually contributing to Qin's quick downfall. Byzantine's Leo III initiated iconoclasm for purer religions, but only infuriated his Christian neighbors and further caused damages to his empire. Beyond the definition of futurism, I'd argue that any civilization under the guidance of idealism is destined to fall, for history is never a construction of human ideals and reasons.

As aforementioned, *A Study of History* is a voluminous treatise and certainly requires a much longer period of time for digesting the contents than simply reading through the pages. I will almost certainly come back in the future and seek new understandings.

Paul Bryant says

Well I used to have a giant hardback abridgement of this. I remember how it used to near cripple me every time I moved my books around or moved house. You almost needed two guys just to lift this one volume. Or two strong women, of course. Or nine freakishly strong children. I used to read it in bed, and that's why I walk with a limp to this day. Anyway, this guy Toynbee, man alive he never stopped writing, have you seen how many books he wrote? This particular elephantine work is one of those grandiose Spenglerian surveys of absolutely everything, and he has a Theory. Wikipedia, in a rare burst of fun, describes *A Study of History* thus -

Of the 26 civilizations Toynbee identified, sixteen were dead by 1940 and nine of the remaining ten were shown to have already broken down. Only western civilization was left standing. He explained breakdowns as a failure of creative power in the creative minority, which henceforth becomes a merely 'dominant' minority; that is followed by an answering withdrawal of allegiance and mimesis on the part of the majority; finally there is a consequent loss of social unity in the society as a whole. Toynbee explained decline as due to their moral failure. Many readers, especially in America, rejoiced in his implication (in vols. 1-6) that only a return to some form of Catholicism could halt the breakdown of western civilization which began with the Reformation.

Since he wrote this corpulent classic between 1934 and 1956 but he survived another 20 years, I wonder if he

would have been wagging his old head over the evident connections that so many people miss. You may begin with what you feel is a justifiable and harmless Reformation but you do not realise that you are now on a slippery slope which leads straight to boys wearing long hair, girls riding motorcycles, and LSD being put into the water supply.

Toynbee describes the rise and fall of civilisations not as some kind of mystical-natural organisms like Spengler, but like organisations that adapt or die. Those are the important things, nations and ethnicities are just the wallpaper in the rooms. He judges on results - "the Sumerians exploited the intractable swamps of southern Iraq by organizing the Neolithic inhabitants into a society capable of carrying out large-scale irrigation projects" - I wonder if he lived just long enough to call Pol Pot a neo-Sumerian.

Historians mostly sneered at all this overarching giantism but allegedly the public lapped it up – they must have been made of sterner stuff, but it was in the days before junk food had made people's limbs go all floppy, so they had the physical strength to stagger home with it from the bookshop. Historians these days don't do this Toynbee Spengler My Great Big Theory of God the Universe and Everything, instead they write about the Guild of Oat-Cake Re-Grinders in Lehenbreinheimgavau, Upper Munster, 1341 to 1374 and suchlike.

As you know, I think that history will teach us nothing and I firmly reject any supposed link between Martin Luther's 95 Theses and Johnny Rotten's Anarchy in the UK. The sex Pistols would have happened anyway, even if the Sumerians had still been in charge.

Omar Sharif says

Very informative, although some concepts were a bit new to me.
