

The Problem with Civilization



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Like a vast tide rolling in and inundating the globe, 'civilization' is approaching its maximum extension and will soon begin to recede. All dynamic terrestrial phenomena have cycles of advance and withdrawal, and civilization will be no exception. Whether by the internal collapse of corruption, decadence, and hubris or by the external collapse of exhaustion of the resource base that has fueled its growth, one way or the other, the abstract human construction we have come to know as 'civilization' is reaching its climax point.

The civilization being described has its origins in the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys of Mesopotamia. There, as in other similar suitable alluvial valleys in other parts of the world, humans became sufficient in numbers to be forced by necessity to abandon their hunting-gathering lifestyles and begin the sedentary, compulsive existence of agriculturalists. Acquired rational human knowledge began to supplant the natural order; thus, the human was evicted from Eden.

This new lifestyle was conducive to even greater population concentration: human settlements increased in size as human competition increased in scope. By 3000 B.C. the Sumerian city of Ur had developed, and with it came the dawning of civilization. Having the root word *civitas*, Latin for 'city,' civilization is essentially describing the culture of cities. With the dawning of civilization came a whole new evolutionary system never before seen on Earth; it was an abstract, entirely human-made system seemingly independent of the laws of Nature.

The initial achievements that civilization produced were quite impressive: writing, metal working, trade, irrigation, government, specialization of tasks – and for some, the chance to think, plan, talk and exchange ideas, creating the noetic life of philosophy, science, poetry, music and art. The possibilities seemed limitless. Unfortunately, along with the increased concentration of population, some unintended and less desirable results sprung up as well.

As human settlements passed through the village and onto the city phase, they required more and more to feed off the resources of the surrounding area. As cities grew, they needed more territory to fuel their growth, and inevitably they came into conflict with other expanding cities over ever-scarcer resources. Intersociety anarchy soon prevailed and warfare became a way of life.

This was a crucial bifurcation point. It could have been possible for all these expanding city-states to arrest their growth, to discuss and cooperate and mutually agree to keep their societies at a level where all could share in the available resources. But, alas, eating from the Tree of Knowledge does not guarantee wisdom.

In an anarchic situation like the one that developed on the ancient plains of Mesopotamia, with no enforceable laws, once one actor chose force and the rule of power, all eventually needed to mirror the action of the first aggressor. And so, in our cradle of civilization, the willingness or necessity of some expanding societies to take by force that which belonged to their neighbors inexorably led to a situation where all must be prepared for force – either to initiate aggression, defend against it, or be swallowed up and oppressed by it. Right from the outset, civilization was characterized by a need for the maximization of arbitrary power.

In such a life or death situation, as populations continued to increase, those societies that could effectively harness and project power would continue to grow and prosper while those who could not or were unwilling to wield arbitrary power would eventually succumb to their stronger and more aggressive neighbors. By imposing their will on others, the hostile societies precluded any other options or choices by surrounding civilized societies. What ensued was a power maximization race where the belligerent and aggressive would continue to grow while the peaceful and self-contained would fade away.

The need for power maximization meant that the entire character of civilized societies would be shaped by the need to incorporate the rule of power in all their institutions to ensure inter-societal competitiveness: economically, by increased production; technologically, by the invention of more destructive weapons; politically, by the increased centralization of power in a hierarchical form, ready to give the command; psychologically, by the need for a frustrated and willing-to-fight populace. Once one society increased their power through innovation, all would need to copy this new power-form in order to survive. Eventually civilization came to be creating the human as much as the human was creating civilization.

This last point needs to be stressed. Civilization is an entirely abstract, human construction that we have seen is largely characterized by the need to consolidate and project arbitrary power. It does not necessarily represent the inner needs of human beings, and by definition is disconnected from the greater Web of Life of which humans are a part. It merely exists for the satisfaction of its own insatiable growth. Humans, from the start, had very little control over its eventual direction just because the need for power was the super-ordinate directive in all social evolutionary growth, relegating any other, more desirable directions to a subsidiary position. Any fanciful notions about human spiritual enlightenment, or full self-actualization of human potential, or Utopian

societies where all human beings could flourish would inevitably and necessarily have to pass the reality test of whether they would promote power in inter-societal competition.

The structure of civilization is entirely in contradiction with and divergent from the needs and laws of Nature. Nature is a synergistic and highly evolved system where the needs of 'each' correspond to the needs of 'all;' each part provides a function for and contributes to the health of the whole. Civilization is a system where the needs of the whole are subsumed to the wants of a few, where each part must maximize its power at the expense of the health of the whole. Nature is a system designed for the long-term maintenance and continued vitality of Life. Civilization is a system that feeds off Life for its short-term, immediate success at the expense of the future and continued viability. Nature is a primordial, time-tested interaction of relationships arranged to serve the collective good, which is the continuance of Life. Civilization is a human-made, abstract, recent invention that has not withstood the tests of time and at its core undermines and is hostile to the collective good, which is the continuation of Life. Civilization, to say the least, is in need of radical revision.

Unfortunately, those with the power to make decisions to thwart this unnatural advance are those with the highest stake in seeing civilization, in its present form, continue. The social evolutionary selection process for power that has chosen the institutions and kinds of people that would direct our collective destiny, quite irregardless of what the people would have chosen for themselves, has provided us with people and institutions that are antagonistic to the requirement that their power be controlled – and the abuse of power is at the heart of the deathly serious problem with civilization.

Civilization in its present form is not a given, although most seem to act as if it were the only possible world that could exist. There are a multitude of possible human social conditions that could better affect the maximization of human potential and the full unfolding of Life, but the need for arbitrary power to survive in the inter-societal anarchy becomes the overarching principle in human social evolution and mitigates any other system from being attempted.

Before the rise of civilization, humans lived in egalitarian bands and tribes where coercion, domination, and force were not necessary. Authority and respect were given according to competency, and the natural order was for the most part preserved. For many thousands of years this kind of human being flourished, with brains as large as ours, and over a very long time developed what we call 'human nature.' Then, almost in a flash, civilization jumped into prominence, and in a short few thousand years we've had to accommodate and adjust to this new artificial environment with its stressful social conditions and life-negating power relations.

This is at the heart of our present day predicament. We live as in zoos, tortured by our psychological condition. We attribute to maladjustment our maladies and seek to find emotional solutions when the real cause of our discomfort stems from the fact that we are forced to live in the artificial environments we've created that fail to meet the needs of our human nature. What is more important here? Conforming to the requirements of our abstract human constructions or providing for the needs of our organic roots? The challenge and solution to the human dilemma lies in the synthesis of the two.

We cannot go back to our ancestral roots and start over – we have come too far and learned too much. Nor can we continue on our present path for it will inevitably lead to destruction. Now we must come together, as a global human body, as a collective consciousness, to find the maturity and wisdom to limit our human growth so that we halt our continued separation from the creative life source. Intrinsic to this maturity and wisdom, and essential to our very survival, we, as a collective humanity, must find a way to contain this pernicious contaminant of unbridled, unrestrained power.

Civilization seems to have a life of its own: it is shaping the human condition more so than the human condition is shaping it. Like a vast tide washing over the face of the Earth, it has too much inertia and momentum for us to thwart its advance before it reaches its maximum extension. Whatever its climax point will be cannot be known. Maybe like a fire it will eventually burn up all its fuel and simply extinguish. Or maybe, like a dark star, its cumbersome density and over-extension will implode in on itself. A more tragic prospect would be that the concentrated power of civilization, sensing its inevitable demise, will begin to lash out with all its fury and try to take as much as it can with it as it goes down. Whatever the outcome, one thing is certain: civilization in its present form cannot continue because it is contrary to the needs and laws of Life.

Those of us with enough awareness and capability to see this eventual demise must begin to act now – for the honor and dignity of Life. Wherever we can we must begin to create models and systems of our own that imitate and respect the synergy and long-term viability of Nature. In our personal lives, in our families, and in our neighborhoods and communities, we must somehow shake off the dehumanizing power systems that have molded our existence and enslaved us, and reaffirm Life by creating our own modes of being compatible with our primordial human nature. Then, as the arbitrary power systems begin to collapse, we will have systems of our own in place capable of synthesizing the needs of our organic natures with our newfound individuality. We can live as tribes of fully conscious individuals.

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