VII – The Decline and Fall of a Civilization

The society in which I was born, raised, and work, and into which my wife and I brought our children, is now in a state of rapid decline. But as most of us are wont to do when informed of the impending death of a loved one, we desperately reach out for a remedy which we hope will reverse the fatal condition. Surely there is some new "leader" who can reinspire us, or some as yet undiscovered legislative nostrum which, if unable to reverse our apparent fate, may at least disguise the symptoms for a period of time.

Because civilizations transcend individual lives, we are unaccustomed to thinking that the society in which we live could ever have an end point or, if it did, that we might find ourselves in its final days. I strongly suspect that those who lived in the civilizations that preceded our own, were thoroughly convinced that their social structures, practices, and culture would endure forever. But history teaches us otherwise. Just as small children must eventually confront the mortality of their parents – and, in the process, theirs as well – there is nothing remarkable in the pattern of civilizations, like human beings, being born, growing into adulthood, and eventually dying.

What defines a great civilization, and what conditions are necessary to its existence? Is it wondrous buildings and monuments to its political leaders, or a succession of military conquests and elaborate systems of social control? These are the features that government schools have trained us to consider, characteristics that define the aspirations of political institutions.

To my mind, such a view is far too noun-oriented, conceiving of greatness more in terms of the things produced, rather than the verb-oriented processes by which such civilizations function. Has Western civilization been great because of the works of such people as Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Einstein, as well as the life-enhancing products of industrialization, or because of the existence of conditions in which such creativity could take place?

Because the principle of entropy maintains its constant influence in the world, all living systems must generate new energy (or "negative entropy") if they are to resist – at least temporarily – their collapse into their ultimate fate. We eat, in other words, not because someone has prepared an attractive meal for us, but because our continuing failure to do so will soon bring about our death.

The health of any system – be it an individual or a society – depends upon the production of those values necessary for that system's survival. The production and distribution of goods and services, technology, the sciences, medicine, the arts, and agriculture, are just a few of the more prominent examples of the values upon which Western societies have depended.

If we misfocus our attention, we may erroneously conclude that our material well-being is dependent upon the creation of the "things" that we consume in our efforts to sustain ourselves. In so doing, we tend to ignore the underlying conditions that make the production of such values possible. We come to value, and depend upon, the goose that lays the golden egg, rather than upon the processes by which creative individuals might produce more geese, or more efficient means of generating gold.

In such ways do we create institutions (i.e., systems that have become their own reasons for being, rather than means for producing life-sustaining values). Having accepted the primacy of such agencies over our lives, most of us express nary a doubt about the necessity of taxpayers coming to the rescue of such systems when they face difficulties. When banks faced substantial losses as a result of New York City's financial crisis in the 1970s, only a handful of people found any flaw in having the taxpayers bail them out. So, too, with major corporations, or professional baseball and football franchises, calling upon the taxpayers to underwrite their expenses. The government schools have also relied upon our worship of institutions to get taxpayers to continually fund a system that should have been allowed to die its entropic death decades ago. And now, in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks at the World Trade Center, airlines, insurance companies, and various other institutions have managed to get whisked through Congress, legislation to force the taxpayers to recompense them for their losses. Even commercial advertising can dredge up no more meaningful response to these events than for us to equate spending our money – with such advertisers, of course – as acts of patriotism!

"But what is wrong with coming to the rescue of these institutions?", it may be asked. "Think of all the money that has been invested, and all the men and women who are employed by such firms." The same argument might well have been made, a century ago, when the buggy whip and carriage manufacturers, horse ranchers, and hay farmers, were faced with bankruptcy as a consequence of the automobile. Or what of the motion picture industry, which has regularly sent lobbyists to Washington to fight the "threat" of television, then cable television, and then VCR's – all of which ended up being boons to Hollywood: should they have, as they continue to demand, government funding for their enterprises?

The problem with all of this, as historians advise us, is that the institutionalization of the systems that produce the values upon which a civilization depends, ultimately bring about the destruction of that civilization. Arnold Toynbee observed that a civilization begins to break down when there is "a loss of creative power in the souls of creative individuals," and, in time, the "differentiation and diversity" that characterized a dynamic civilization, is

replaced by "a tendency towards standardization and uniformity." The emergence of a "universal state," and increased militarism, represent later stages in the disintegration of a civilization.

Will and Ariel Durant have reached similar conclusions, observing that the health of a civilization depends upon "individuals with clarity of mind and energy of will . . . capable of effective responses to new situations." Carroll Quigley has demonstrated how the maintenance of static, equilibrium conditions can lead to the collapse of civilizations, a process he directly relates to the institutionalization of what he calls the "instruments of expansion."

A creative civilization, in other words, is dynamic, not stable; adaptive to change, not seeking equilibrium. It is characterized not by those who seek to preserve what they have, but by those who seek to produce what their minds tell them they can have. Individual liberty abounds in such a society, as men and women advance new ideas, new technologies, and new practices.

The explanation for the interrelatedness of institutionalism and the collapse of civilizations is not difficult. Because of their size and bureaucratic sluggishness, institutions tend to become less adaptable to the constancies of change inherent in all living systems. Life is a continuing process of making adjustments and creative responses in a world too complex to be predictable. But institutions insist not only upon their illusions of predictability, but their systems of control by which they imagine they can direct the world to their ends. This is why institutions have always aligned themselves with the forces of power, in order to compel the rest of nature – particularly mankind – to conform to their interests.

But power wars against life, for power seeks to force life to become what it does not choose to be. Because "life" expresses itself as autonomous and spontaneous activity, it is inextricably dependent upon the liberty of individuals. Liberty is not simply some ideological proposition designed to placate intellectuals who might otherwise become disruptive. It is, rather, the condition in which individuals – and the societies in which they live – can remain resilient, adaptive to changing conditions, and thus maintain the creative impulses necessary for their vibrancy.

The individual, with his or her uniqueness and self-directed nature, is the expression of life on this planet. As such, a condition of liberty tends to generate variation and nonuniformity, with social order arising as the unintended consequence of individuals pursuing their varied self-interests. Manners, customs, the dynamics of the marketplace, cooperation, negotiation, and other social pressures, help to regularize human behavior while keeping it flexible. The antisocial conduct of the few is met with ostracism, boycotts, and other refusals to deal.

But institutions are uncomfortable with liberty, for the processes of change that are implicit therein run counter to their purposes of a structured permanency. Because of their size and scope of operation, institutions deal with people on a mass, rather than individualized, basis. As our world becomes more institutionalized, standardization and uniformity become more dominant values. The informal systems and practices that connect people to one another are replaced by coercive rules, violence and the threats of violence, SWAT teams, enhanced punishments, longer prison sentences for an ever-widening group of offenses. As such coercive practices proliferate, there is a continual weakening of the informal social mechanisms and, like muscles that fall into disuse after a serious illness or injury, begin to atrophy. Manners and social habits soon give way to speech codes, "hate" crimes, and other forms of institutionally-mandated standards of conduct. When a civilization reaches the point at which only coercive force is capable of holding it together, it is finished as a viable system.

Civilizations die out for the same reason organisms do: their failure to maintain a sufficient resiliency that will permit them to overcome entropy. As the Durants put it, they then "linger on as stagnant pools left by once life-giving streams." Still, there is no historical determinism at work that would make the collapse of Western civilization inevitable. The health of any system depends on its being sufficiently resilient to allow it to adapt to the constancy of change that is inherent in all of life. In any society, there has always been an underlying current of energy through which the life processes seek expression. Political systems, grounded in coercion and violence, have always represented a continuing war against such life processes.

Just as water can be dammed up for only so long until it either bursts through or circumvents the structure kept in its way, life energies will continue to seek their expression. To the extent a civilization welcomes such expression, it will prosper and extend its beneficent influences to the rest of mankind. Indeed, in recent decades, Western society has been exhibiting a sufficient resiliency to overcome many of the institutionalizing tendencies of a pyramidally-structured world. Organizations have been moving from systems of centralized, vertical authority, to decentralized horizontal networks. The pyramid has been collapsing in favor of what I call a holographic organizational model, wherein authority is distributed throughout the system rather than concentrated at the top.

Well-managed business firms now recognize the greater productivity and profitability of having increased decision-making decentralized into the hands of employees. Alternative health care, educational, religious, and dispute resolution systems have been challenging the Kafkaesque bureaucratic structures of the institutional order. The recent proliferation of private schools and homeschooling reflect such transformations. The Internet, and other computerized technologies, have decentralized the flow of information, as well as banking and other business practices.

These decentralizing changes have been occurring in the political realm as well, with the collapse of the Soviet Union providing the most vivid example. Secession movements are challenging centralized political authority in cities and countries throughout the world. The erstwhile solidity of a mass-minded culture – exemplified in the phrase e pluribus unum – has centrifuged into numerous hyphenated identities based upon race, gender, religion, nationality, or lifestyles of various groups.

While these changes were taking place long before the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the events of that day portend a much deeper psychic meaning than most of us have begun to realize. As brutal and horrific as these atrocities were, the shock they brought on goes far beyond the numbers of casualties. Nor does the trauma lie in the fact that America, itself, had been attacked by terrorists: the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the downing of Pan Am Flight 103, and the suicide attack of the U.S.S. Cole, preceded September 11th.

It is in the symbolism of the World Trade Center's demolition that the deeper psychological meaning is to be found. On one level, of course, the WTC symbolized private capitalism, whose virtues and efficiencies had so recently won out over socialism and other forms of state planning as the system best able to maximize the material well-being of humanity. This, no doubt, was a major consideration, by the terrorists, in its being selected as the principal target.

But the World Trade Center symbolized something else, something that I suspect its brutish attackers would never have sensed, but which, I believe, underlies the deeper shock all of us are experiencing. Almost like a pair of Jungian archetypes, the WTC buildings stood, at the base of Wall Street, as towering symbols of a vertically structured, institutionalized world. Such symbols were utterly destroyed by a handful of box-cutter-armed terrorists, who symbolized to the world that war, itself, has become decentralized. For Americans who still think of "defense" in terms of nuclear missiles; fleets of battleships, aircraft carriers, and atomic submarines; and tens of thousands of hierarchically disciplined soldiers, the confluence of these symbolic forces has generated much turbulence within our minds.

The present "war against terrorism" goes much deeper than simply trying to eradicate cadres of maniacal butchers – as desirable as such ends would be if capable of being realized through warfare. The decentralizing influences that have been at work throughout our world for a number of years – and whose processes are becoming better understood through the study of chaos and complexity, marketplace economics, biological systems, psychology, and systems analysis – are proving to be incompatible with the hierarchically-structured forms through which institutions have come to dominate Western civilization. Institutions tend to lack resiliency. They are generally less-interested in adapting their systems and methodologies to a changing environment, than in forcing the environment – including people – to adapt their behavior to conform to institutional interests.

It is just such attitudes, as we have seen, that have brought down prior civilizations. Considered from a broader historical perspective, it becomes evident that terrorists have not been the cause of the decline of Western civilization any more than were the invading barbarians the cause of the fall of the western Roman Empire. Each such group was but a symptom, among many, of the vulnerability of a civilization that had become weakened by its own contradictions and lack of responsiveness to the conditions upon which life depends.

Understood in its broader context, this war could more properly be defined as a War for the Preservation of Institutional Hierarchies, a war against the processes of change that are working against vertically-structured, command-and-control social systems. That this has been declared to be a "permanent" war against humanity in general (i.e., "if you're not with us, you're against us") should awaken us to its broader implications. It is ironic – but understandable – that, at a time when the world is becoming more decentralized, institutional interests have been hard at work to expand upon their mechanisms of centralized control. Whether flying the banner of the "New World Order," or NATO, or the United Nations, or the European Community, or the World Trade Organization, the institutional order continues to insist upon its command-and-control mechanisms.

As this war continues, those of us who persist in conducting our lives outside institutional walls, or who continue to use the Internet as though it were a tool by which free minds communicate with one another, or who insist upon the privacy of our lives and business transactions, will discover ourselves thrown into the new suspect class of "terrorists." As the state increases its demands for national identity cards, secret trials conducted by the military (rather than by untrustworthy juries), the use of torture against suspects, greater surveillance of our lives – including having police enter our homes without our knowledge or consent – and military patrolling of American streets, we should become aware of the truth of Pogo Possum's observation: "we have met the enemy and they is us."

Though our civilization finds itself in a state of turbulence, it is not fated to collapse. While the institutional order lacks resiliency, there is a life force within nature that insists upon adaptability. In the dynamics of the marketplace we find the most vibrant expression of the creative, life-sustaining nature of resilient behavior. When institutional interests conspire against change, they have declared themselves to be in a state of war with life itself!

But you and I are part of this same life force, and our resiliency may be the means through which our civilization reenergizes itself and allows all of the institutional entropy to work its way out of a fundamentally new social system. Just as the creative energies of the Industrial Revolution replaced the rigidly structured and stultifying system of feudalism, our present civilization may – if you and I are up to the task – transform itself into an even more productive society.

But to do so, we must be prepared to move beyond the vertically-structured, institutionalized thinking in which we have been carefully conditioned. You and I can bring civilization back into order neither by seizing political power, nor by attacking it, but by moving away from it, by diverting our focus from marbled temples and legislative halls to the conduct of our daily lives. The "order" of a creative civilization will emerge in much the same way that order manifests itself throughout the rest of nature: not from those who fashion themselves leaders of others, but from the interconnectedness of individuals pursuing their respective self-interests.

In the institutional order's war to preserve itself against the life-sustaining processes of change, the most treasonable of propositions will be that which affirms that life belongs to the living, not to institutional power structures! We must learn to love our children more than we do the dehumanizing agencies of restraint and destruction that now threaten their futures with announced plans for an endless war against all. The time is now upon us, as individuals, to assert that life is going to prevail on this planet; that we shall reclaim our free and creative spirit and, in so doing, revitalize Western civilization; and that those structured systems that insist upon exploiting and destroying life in the course of advancing their own interests must now stand aside.

The Best of Butler Shaffer