

A Historian's Disturbing Take on Why a Civilization Breaks Down

In his famous work *A Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee examines why some civilizations break down. Interestingly, he concludes that the reason for civilizations breaking down is contained within the very reason for their growth:

"[T]he very process by which growth is sustained is inherently risky: the creative leadership of a society has to resort to social 'drill' in order to carry along the uncreative mass, and this mechanical device turns against its masters when their creative inspiration fails."

Let me explain...

According to Toynbee, civilization first comes to be through the activities and contributions of a creative minority of people. However, this creative minority immediately faces a difficulty: how to move the rest of men and women forward with them.

There are two options for this:

- 1) The one that respects personal freedom: "the 'strenuous intellectual communion and intimate personal intercourse' that impart the divine fire from one soul to another..."
- 2) The one that depends upon drilling the creative minority's values and vision into the majority.

Civilizations have tended to go with second option:

"The world in which the creative personality finds himself, and in which he has to work, is a society in which his

fellows are ordinary human beings. His task is to make his fellows into his followers; and Mankind in the mass can only be set in motion towards a goal beyond itself by enlisting the faculty of drill; and the dull ears that are deaf to the unearthly music of Orpheus's lyre are well attuned to the drill-sergeant's raucous word of command."

But problems inevitably arise with this mechanical method of building a civilization. The "machine" that the minority creates to train the majority—such as, for instance, an education system—eventually turns against its masters. It begins to fall apart when the majority starts to question its principles, methods, and effectiveness. The creative minority become less creative—falling prey to "the hypnotism which they have deliberately induced in their followers"—and become increasingly despotic as they seek to fortify the machine by force.

Thus, ironically, the very means by which the minority propped up a civilization in its early stages eventually becomes the means of its destruction.

Do you see the pattern Toynbee describes being repeated in America?

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