

## **A Framework for World History**

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- Why study history? Toynbee 1948
  - This reading is interesting for two reasons
    - both for some beautiful explanations of why history matters
    - and as an exercise in reading old-fashioned, unfamiliar writing: a taste of what historians do a lot, and many love
  - Suggestions
    - print the reading and highlight, write comments in the margins, etc.
      - this keeps you actively thinking about the material
      - and you can refer to your marked-up copy for class discussions, studying, etc.
    - read with a laptop, Google phone, etc. handy. Whenever you come to a word you don't know, like "torpor", just Google "define: torpor"
      - this is really fast and easy
      - you will be able to follow the reading much better
      - and you may learn new words
  - Background
    - Toynbee was an upper-class, well educated British intellectual
    - He assumed that his readers were the same
    - He is not trying to impress anyone or be pompous; this is just the way he knew to communicate clearly
  - What is the context of this piece?
    - First sentence: "The general war of 1914"
      - what war is that?
      - why does he refer to it that way, and not with the term we would use?
      - Here, in the first words of the entire class, is an example of how historians divide up the past into categories and use concepts that the people of the time would not recognize, or might even disagree with
        - a lot about history is put onto the past later, by historians
        - rather than simply "being there" in the events or the evidence of them
  - What was he doing?
    - "expounding Thucydides to Balliol undergraduates"
      - teaching college students at Balliol college, part of Oxford University
      - Thucydides is generally regarded as the second historian in the world (a generation after the first, Herodotus)
      - Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian war
        - one that started in a world of many rival polities
        - bound by a tangle of alliances
        - much like the beginning of World War I
        - we will read a little Thucydides later in this course
    - so he was teaching history... just like I am here
      - (although Toynbee was a thousand times more knowledgeable!)

- What insight did he have?
  - “The experience that we were having in our world now had been experienced by Thucydides in his world already.”
    - this history was not just similar to the present, it was like a window into our own future
  - “I was re-reading him now with a new perception—perceiving meanings in his words, and feelings behind his phrases, to which I had been insensible until I, in my turn, had run into that historical crisis that had inspired him to write his work”
    - suddenly, the history makes sense, has meaning and relevance to Toynbee, because he is experiencing the same things himself in real life
  - “Thucydides, it now appeared, had been over this ground before. He and his generation had been ahead of me and mine...”
    - reading this history was like talking to someone who has experience with something you are about to try for the first time
  - “Whatever chronology might say, Thucydides’ world and my world had now proved to be philosophically contemporary.”
    - what does he mean by “philosophically contemporary”?
    - that even though the Peloponnesian war was over 2400 years ago, in effect, it and World War I were not really much different in time
      - they are comparable
      - the difference in time between them does not really make them very different
  - Toynbee then discusses how long the history of earth, life, and humans is, so that the written history we study is all jammed into a short span at the recent end of this long time
    - compared to the whole span of human existence, all events in written history happened at close to the same time
  - so we can think of all the civilizations of history, all the wars, etc. as being basically a bunch of attempts or experiments at almost the same time, in almost the same conditions
    - true, technology has changed things since the Greeks
    - but human nature, politics, economics, power have not changed much in that time
    - what happened to them, and they wrote down, is like what happens to us, with only minor adjustments
  - Toynbee also notes that humans spent much of their time on earth in a long, almost unchanging state of “primitive human life”
    - and people in a few parts of the world still do today
    - so what caused certain societies, very recently, to suddenly start changing, to develop civilization?
      - this is exactly what Jared Diamond proposes to explain in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which we will read later in this class
    - Toynbee has his own idea, which we will touch on briefly next week
- History’s place in the broad view of time: My attempt to make one of Toynbee’s points more specific

- For the vast majority of humans' existence on earth, people have lived as foragers (hunters and gatherers)
- Chart: Civilization's place in the big picture (see the PowerPoint slides)
  - "BP" means "Before Present"
- Analogy to this semester-long class
  - if the class covered the existence of our own species, from the first archaic *Homo sapiens* to the present, it would start at least 500,000 years ago
    - a semester-long class has 30 meetings of 75 minutes each, or 2,250 minutes; that is 222 years/minute
      - that is about one generation every 5 seconds for the whole semester...
    - we would study foragers all the way into the last class meeting, totaling 36 hours, or 98% of the course
    - we would not get to the first farmers (10,000 years ago) until 30 minutes into the last class meeting
    - and we would only get to the first sizable cities, states, and civilizations (about 5,500 years ago) until 50 minutes into the last class meeting
    - all of written history would fit into the last 25 minutes of the semester
  - so: farming and civilization are very recent aberrations for the human race.
    - we evolved biologically as foragers
    - that includes not only our bodies, but also our capacity for thought and planning
    - our propensities for social relations
    - and our emotions
  - So how did we get from foraging to civilization? Why change after such a long run of success?  
  - A more detailed framework for world history
    - See the PowerPoint slides
    - blank chart starting around 11,000 BCE
      - why that date?
        - end of the Pleistocene
        - beginning of roughly modern climate, sea level, shorelines, ecological zones, etc.
        - naturally, the end of the Pleistocene was a very gradual change
          - different sources place the “end” differently, depending on what they are looking at
          - Jared Diamond uses 11,000 BCE as the “starting line” in his book, and that figure is as good as any
      - You might consider printing this blank chart (will be posted on the class website) and plotting things on it throughout the class
        - or make your own with scales that fit whatever you are taking notes about; timelines are helpful for seeing the relationships of events
    - Adoption of agriculture: see slide
      - faster in some places, very gradual in others
      - earlier in some places, later in others
    - Development of cities: see slide
      - a good bit later than the adoption of agriculture in any given region

- but still at different times in different places
- Classical empires in various regions: see slide
  - again, a good bit later than the rise of cities in any given region
  - what is an empire?
    - a political unit in which one city or region controls, usually by military conquest, many others in a larger region, in order to extract taxes, tribute, labor, etc. from them
- Now, let's overlay the kind of conventional periods used by our textbook
  - “Early complex societies” from 3500 to 500 BCE
    - note how this leaves out much of the development of agriculture
    - note how it only roughly fits the rise of cities
      - some started a bit earlier (as in Mesopotamia)
      - and some developed mostly after this “period” ended
        - Andes, Mesoamerica
    - this “period” is obviously not “real”; it is a rough generalization for the convenience of historians
    - like “World War I” for Toynbee, this is a creation by later historians that would have had no meaning to the people of the time
      - and only has a very rough meaning for us
  - “Classical Societies” from 500 BCE to 500 CE
    - rise of early empires in some areas, but other areas don't independently develop empires until later
    - Mesoamerica and the Andes are particularly poor fits for this “period”, which is obviously based on Eurasian history
  - “Post-classical societies” from 500 to 1000 CE
    - Byzantine empire, Dar al-Islam, early Middle Ages
  - “Age of interaction” from 1000 to 1500 CE
    - we will cover this towards the end of the course
  - Point: look how poorly these general periods fit even the very simplified events on this chart
    - these periods are arbitrary creations by historians
    - don't take them too literally
- Prepare for Assignment #1