

Foundations of World Civilization: Notes 4
Grand narratives and Grand theories

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- If you won't have *Guns, Germs, and Steel* in time to do the readings for next Tuesday, watch the class website. I will try (no promises!) to post online versions of the next reading assignments from it.
- Last time, we saw that an essential feature of modern history (that is, since Ibn Khaldun wrote in about 1380 CE!) is that it seeks larger meaning or significance in the stories it recounts
- Today's readings are about some attempts to find larger meaning in history
- Grand Narratives and Grand Theories
 - Discussed by Arnold, Ch. 5, and illustrated with the other readings as examples
 - Arnold suggests that we need “Grand Theories” or “Grand Narratives” (or both) in order to synthesize the chaos of historical facts into something intelligible
 - that is, to create narratives or stories
 - stories with a beginning, plot, and end
 - that make sense
 - and seem to mean something
 - these stories are not “out there” in the piles of facts that historians sift through
 - narratives have to be created
 - the historian has to decide what to focus on
 - where to start
 - where to end
 - what to make of it
 - Grand theories and grand narratives give us a framework, logic, structure with which to make sense of historical facts and see the significance of historical stories
 - so what are they?
 - Grand Narratives
 - mentioned by Arnold (p 82)
 - Broad “stories” of history, usually that could complete a phrase like “All of history can be seen as the story of...”
 - these are long-term stories, often lasting centuries or millennia, about a large theme
 - such as a “grand narrative” of
 - progress from the Stone Age to the Space Age
 - that is, the advancement of technology and science
 - an extreme version: the history of humans harnessing ever more energy from the natural world (Leslie White)
 - the development and spread of democratic government
 - the “rise” of western-style democracy
 - note a little value judgment in how Grand Narratives are often stated or thought of?
 - the origin and spread of civilizations
 - the battle of good versus evil
 - can be a cyclical, never-ending narrative

- or a story arc with a beginning and an end
 - as in the Biblical version, from Creation to the Second Coming of Christ
- the development and spread of monotheism
 - or other religious or philosophical “progress” towards “truth”
- the development and spread of socialist society
 - that is, of economies and their associated social organizations, from the simplest societies, through capitalism, to socialism (the Marxist grand narrative)
- others?
- Grand narratives are sometimes stated explicitly, but often not
- Grand narratives are often assumed and unconsidered
 - reflecting cultural values and/or political ideology the author learned growing up
 - reflect the author’s assumptions about what matters
 - the facts and stories of history can be selected and interpreted as being interesting and important for their roles in such a grand narrative
 - people often think in terms of a grand narrative without realizing that they are doing so
 - the notion of general progress was common in the 19th century, and still today
 - many modern historians, anthropologists, and others see this as naïve and ethnocentric
- the grand narrative has its own meaning, which gives meaning to all the bits of history that contribute to it
- the meaning is often one of progress and positive value
 - so, the grand narrative of scientific progress “means” that science is good, powerful, shows the power and potential of human intellect, etc.
 - the grand narrative of the rise of democracy in Europe and the New World “means” that democracy is the best political system yet
 - we find the study of history that relates to this grand narrative interesting and satisfying because it reinforces our appreciation of democracy
 - the grand narrative of the origin of civilizations “means” that civilization is good, an achievement to be proud of, an important feature of our lives and of humanity
 - all of these suggest that in general, society is advancing, getting better (better political systems, better technology, etc.)
- the meaning of a grand narrative can also justify action or beliefs
 - once we understand history as a grand narrative of the development of economic complexity, we can understand why workers feel oppressed, and why they might (or should) try to change the economic system to improve their lives
- there are other kinds of grand narratives
 - ones that are cyclical
 - ones that emphasize decline
 - etc.
- it is often useful to identify a historian’s Grand Narrative
 - gives clues about his/her
 - purposes
 - assumptions
 - biases
 - puts the work in context

- what other histories or positions is it aligned with, based on, or part of?
- what other histories or positions is it opposed to?
- What is Jared Diamond’s Grand Narrative in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*?
 - the long arc of the rise of Eurasian societies to dominate the world
 - what might we learn from this?
 - Diamond thinks that political and economic power (essentially coercion) are among the most important things about life
 - he apparently sees religion, philosophy, art, etc. as secondary
 - he even sees science and technology as secondary, just factors involved in how power gets allocated
- grand narratives do not necessarily explain *why* things happen
- instead, they are just broad conceptions of what happened, and what was important
 - a grand narrative is a selection of what is worth looking at in history
 - what are the important themes, versus what we can safely ignore
 - if we emphasize a grand narrative about the development of individual freedom, for example, we will not focus on wars, gender roles, economics, etc. except to shoehorn them into the grand narrative
- Note that Grand Narratives (and Grand Theories) are features of how historians write history
 - not features of the past itself
 - they are not actually “out there” in the evidence of the past
 - they are just thought constructs in the heads of historians
 - that help them organize the chaos of past events into intelligible, meaningful stories
- Grand Theories
 - Also discussed by Arnold
 - Grand Theories are broad explanations of history
 - Two general kinds:
 - Historical Particularist theories
 - Social Evolution theories
 - Historical Particularist theories
 - locate the causes of things in unique people, conditions, or events
 - specific to every case
 - Classic example: Great Men theory
 - or, as Arnold quips “Really Awful Men” theory
 - an old theory, widely assumed by historians for centuries, if not millennia
 - most prominently advanced by Thomas Carlyle in the mid-1800s
 - “Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here” (Carlyle 1840:1)
 - the occasional Great Man leads people to do things, models behavior, creates ideas, is an overwhelming influence on what everyone else thinks and does
 - assumes that what shapes history is the decisions of such “Great Men”
 - is this reasonable?
 - suggest some “Great Men” (and/or “Great Women”)

- as Arnold says, this view has gone very much out of fashion
 - should it?
- problems with “Great Men” theory
 - what about just “competent men”? don’t they, too, make a big difference?
 - in fact, doesn’t what everyone does, even the incompetent, influence history?
 - don’t things often happen that seem to be beyond any one person’s control?
 - don’t leaders often seem to be riding the wave of what people are doing, rather than causing and controlling it?
 - Great Men may make decisions, but what about people’s reactions and responses to them?
 - Great Men cannot be great without followers,
 - so shouldn’t we ask why people follow them, and not others, or noone?
 - why those followers are effective, or not? etc.
 - also, isn’t much of history about unintended consequences?
 - if things don’t work out as the Great Man intended, does that conflict with the theory?
 - Arnold’s discussion of Martin Luther (pp 83-84)
 - Luther did not intend to split the Church into Protestant and Catholic, cause wars between them, etc.
 - he was not the first to nail up complaints
 - so, why did people respond to his complaints in a way that led to Protestantism and all the subsequent events?
 - was it due to his greatness, or was it a social current that was ready to happen anyway?
 - Herbert Spencer 1873 reading: disputes Great Man theory on two main grounds
 - 1. Great Men are *created by society*
 - they absorb the ideas of their time
 - they deal with the problems of their time, with the tools available at the time
 - all of which were produced by society before them
 - they “stand on the shoulders of giants”
 - so are they the *cause* of future changes and events in society, or are they the *effects* of previous changes and events, just the particular individuals who happen to arise and be in the right place and time to play their role?
 - 2. Great Men only have an effect to the extent that people respond to them
 - the Great Man is powerless without an audience ready to hear and respond to what he has to say
 - no matter how great the military general, for example, he can only win battles with a lot of willing and capable soldiers
 - Great Men theory ignores the “latent power” of the society that the Great Man unlocks
 - Because of these, Spencer attacks Great Men theories by saying they are terribly incomplete
 - like explaining the sinking of a battleship by considering only the chemistry of the gunpowder

- but not the cannons, engineers, sailors, strategies, etc. that allowed the gunpowder to have its effect
- Spencer suggests that maybe Great Men theory works for early history, in which most political events were military destruction and domination
 - but as other aspects of society and events developed, such as
 - social complexity
 - greater size and population
 - new institutions
 - new ideas and practices
 - the important changes and events become far too complex and large-scale to attribute to any one Great Man
 - the biography of Great Men cannot explain changes in culture, economics, social history
- Spencer even makes the same joke as Arnold about “Really Awful Men” theory: he refers snidely to “Frederick the Greedy” and “Napoleon the Treacherous”
- The alternative: social evolution theories
 - discussed by Arnold, too
 - locate causes in broad processes of social evolution, which apply in general to most or all cases
 - more detail and examples in a moment...
- which is right?
 - can both be right?
 - is this like the issue between Toynbee and Arnold
 - Toynbee saying different periods of the past and present are essentially the same and comparable to each other
 - vs. Arnold saying that “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” – people of different periods and cultures of the past were fundamentally, importantly different from each other and us today
 - in that both are opposed, but both can be true
- Arnold (p 81, 86) suggests that the choice of evidence a historian looks at affects the kind of story he or she tells
 - looking at narrative accounts about kings, governments, etc. tends to lead to writing political history
 - a story of events, leaders, shifting power
 - the kinds of causes cited in political history are often
 - individual competence or incompetence
 - often “Great Men” theory
 - the features or strength of ideologies
 - as in a political science professor who assigned students to write about how the different political systems of Athens and Sparta affected the outcome of the war between them (the Peloponnesian war, chronicled by Thucydides)
 - this student irritated his professor by finding that in general, battles were won by the largest, best equipped force, regardless of the political system that sent it
 - but years later, I do see his point...

- chance outcomes
- these are typically based on a historical particularist view
 - the outcome is determined by the competence or incompetence of particular leaders
 - or of the very specific circumstances of a given time and place
 - rather than any general tendency of certain kinds of things to happen, as social evolution theories propose
- looking at local records, law cases, accounting, etc. tends to lead to writing social history
 - changes and events in terms of masses or classes of people
 - typically based on one or more kinds of social evolutionary theory
 - that is, social historical events are thought to have
 - responded to general pressures or forces
 - rather than the details of any given leader or specific events
 - these are assumed to result from, or reflect, social trends, rather than to direct or cause them
 - but which is the cause, and which the effect?
 - do the kinds of records a historian studies affects his/her focus or view of history?
 - or does his/her view of what is interesting and important – his/her Grand Narrative or Grand Theory – determines what kinds of records he/she seeks out?
- Within the general category of social evolution theories, there have been many different approaches
 - Ibn Khaldun, 1370s
 - civilizations evolve according to the interplay of town peoples and nomadic people
 - civilizations / dynasties arise in cities
 - become sophisticated
 - then become decadent
 - nomadic people live in small groups and deal with harsh realities
 - giving them strong group feelings: ethnic solidarity
 - and making them physically and socially strong and aggressive
 - nomads conquer a decadent urban civilization
 - then adopt civilization, become decadent themselves
 - and are, in turn, conquered by another group of nomads...
 - a cyclical view
 - Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West*, 1918
 - almost a mystical view of civilizations rising and falling through an internal cycle similar to individual plants or animals being born, maturing, aging, and dying
 - Toynbee's challenge and response theory
 - described by Pieter Geyl extract
 - civilizations rise due the features they develop when they successfully respond to challenges that they face
 - example: challenge: a growing population has to maintain and elaborate their lifestyle in Mesopotamia, where there are few resources of stone for tools, building, sculpture, jewelry, etc.

- response: the Sumerians develop mechanisms of long-distance exchange to get those resources from far away
- this increases their social complexity, concentration of wealth, record-keeping methods (leading to writing), etc.
- the challenges could also be social, like circumstances of frequent warfare
- civilizations arise in environmental and social settings that present such challenges, not in settings that allow for easy living
- but they arise only in environments where these challenges are not so severe that the society cannot meet them
 - that is, challenging, but not too challenging
- civilizations decline and disappear when they fail to respond successfully to a challenge, and then another, etc.
- so explaining the rise and fall of civilizations involves identifying the challenges and the responses in each case, and explaining why the society was able to respond successfully, and in that particular way
- this is a cyclical view of civilizations rising and falling
 - civilizations are larger units than countries (nation states)
 - what would “rise” and “fall” mean here?
- Dialectical materialism (Marxism)
 - Karl Marx (and Friedrich Engels) developed several major theoretical schemes for different purposes
 - the reading by Bertrand Russell explains some of this
 - Marx and Engels’ writing tends to be complicated and long-winded, so we trust Russell here to explain and give us a few key quotations
 - one, a theory of economics and value, which we won’t cover here
 - another, relevant to history: dialectical materialism
 - several main ideas
 - 1. society and the changes in it over time (history) are logical, intelligible by someone smart and well-enough informed, even predictable into the future
 - 2. materialism: the activities of production and exchange (economics) underlay and determine all the rest of society and culture
 - economics is the prime cause of social phenomena
 - specifically, the mode of production
 - that includes not only technology, methods, etc. of production
 - but also the social arrangements, such as who owns the tools
 - who controls the product, etc.
 - and the mode of exchange
 - general or balanced reciprocity
 - redistributive economy
 - market economy
 - the modes of production and exchange structure everything else so strongly that one can explain art, language, etc. based on them
 - 3. the dialectic
 - there is a constant interplay between

- economic structure (the modes of production and exchange)
- and the social structure (arrangements of roles, hierarchies of power, patterns of distribution of wealth and status, etc.
- when the economic structure changes, for example with the rise of capitalism and industry
 - due to changes in technology or some internal social logic
 - the social structure initially lags behind, retaining the arrangements that suited the previous mode of production
 - this results in unfairness, oppression, unhappiness among some (the workers, in this case)
 - which eventually results in the dissatisfied class changing the system to treat them better
 - through revolution, if necessary
 - and revolution is necessary when a wealthy, powerful elite does not want to give up their privileged position
- so all of history is made up of struggles between classes due to the changing modes of production and exchange
- interesting parallel with Arnold's discussion of political history
 - Marx: class struggle occurs when workers feel that the world as currently organized is unjust, disjoint, wrong... and unstable enough to be changed
 - Arnold: the English civil war occurred in part because ordinary people felt that the world was unjust, disordered, "upside down", and unstable enough to change...
- note that dialectical materialism is a grand theory that explains the process of what Marx and Engels saw as a grand narrative: the development of social and economic organization
 - from "primitive communism"
 - through various stages including capitalism
 - to socialism
 - which they only predicted, because it had not yet actually arisen
- also note that this is absolutely opposed to any great man theory
 - causes of historical events are economic and social forces
 - expressed by lots of ordinary people who make up the various classes
 - not particularly influenced by any individuals, specific decision, ideas, leadership, etc.
 - it is all going to happen more or less according to inevitable logic, regardless of any individuals who come along to help or hinder the process
- Jared Diamond's environmental determinism
 - we will look at this next time