



COMMENTARY

History and its Becoming between Past and Future

Fabrizio Pezzani

Department of Social and Political Sciences, Bocconi University, Italy

History and its Becoming between Past and Future

People have always asked themselves about the meaning of life by seeking the answer to essential questions, a search that began in a systematic manner in ancient Greece. The Greeks continually questioned themselves, they wanted to know how things are, take place and become in the world, and answers remained open during their untiring search. The path pursued by the Greeks was not hampered by dogma, experience was gained by starting from varied and dissimilar premises that not only led to acquiring knowledge but also to possible concepts and attitudes. In this way the Greeks were free to investigate in an unbiased way and did this in various fields of knowledge. But in doing so the central point was always human nature and the meaning of life, and so they developed philosophic thought. All Greek scholars in their various fields of interest – medicine, mathematics, geometry, architecture, literature, sculpture, astrology – were at heart philosophers. They saw human beings as being the factor from which to start and to whom they continually made reference, which led them to make an ongoing comparison between different disciplines, so deriving reciprocally creative insights. This gave rise to a cultural environment in which the free association of ideas flourished.

It was in an extraordinary period starting from the 5th century BC that Greek philosophy really blossomed and laid the foundation for modern thought, probably even paving the way for the advent of Christianity. The assumption in this book is that Greek philosophy was the seed of European philosophy and formed the basis for an uninterrupted relationship with Western thought over the following centuries. Greek scholars, first and foremost Herodotus, were the first to study history in a manner that provided an analytical explanation of the facts. But as in the case of Thucydides they also attempted to understand the meaning of the facts, far from seeing history as being the result of intervention of the gods, they realized that the true driver was human nature. Thucydides, Athenian general and scholar, wrote eight tomes on the History of the Peloponnesian War and tried to interpret the facts in a way that made it possible to find a key to the becoming of history. He believed that a historian should provide political decision-makers with tools to understand the present and predict the future of those polis that were at war. Thucydides held that

such forecasting was possible because there was a constant in the way history unfolds, one that never changes, namely, human nature. And given this constant it was possible to pinpoint the existence of laws that determine the behaviour people grouped in a society, in doing so drawing on the doctrine of Hippocrates. This illustrates the importance during that period of a continuous contamination between various areas of study for the development of knowledge in their respective fields.

The Greeks refused to elect a single philosophy and sole principle of truth to the status of dogma, and it was they who indicated to us that this was the most fruitful approach to develop all fields of study. A similar cultural context was again seen during the Italian Renaissance, which encouraged yet another period of amazing creative development. The 1500s prepared the conditions for the clash between Galileo and the Church, and as Guardini said, ‘from that moment on science established its independence as an autonomous domain of culture, as opposed to that unity of life and action that had been determined by religion’. A term that the vitality of the two periods indicated above have in common is harmony – which in ancient Greek indicated space to be left between two bodies to reduce friction, *concordia discors* – magnificently expressed by Raphael in *The School of Athens* that he painted starting 1508 [or 1509] at the age 25 when the Italian Renaissance was in full bloom. The harmony of the fresco reflects the ideal harmony of that time, in which all men of wisdom had the right to citizenship without exclusion or prejudice. The painting tells us that our primary duty is to acquire knowledge: knowing and understanding ourselves and the world around us isn’t just an option, it is an aesthetic duty. In this sense science is secular, it does not and cannot have religious connotations – this is why it can be cohabited by Epicurus, an atheist, the Muslim, Averroes, and the cynic, Diogenes. For a period that was to see the trial of Galileo it represents an extraordinary message of mental freedom, clear thinking and modernity of vision.

According to Thucydides mankind’s primary, most deep-rooted characteristic is an endless desire for growth, which can

Correspondence to: Fabrizio Pezzani, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Bocconi University, Italy; E-mail: [fabrizio\[DOT\]pezzani\[AT\]unibocconi\[DOT\]it](mailto:fabrizio[DOT]pezzani[AT]unibocconi[DOT]it)

Received: July 02, 2018; **Accepted:** July 05, 2018; **Published:** July 09, 2018

only be limited and countered by an equal opposing force. This is the characteristic trait of human society – and even, quite likely, of an individual – organized politically. Every time and in every place these forces will determine how history, truces and peaceful coexistence unfold: alliances will only exist for limited periods of time. For Thucydides the actions that move the human physis are: fear and the instinct of self-preservation that drives people to commit terrible actions in order to save their own life; the desire for honour and prestige; and the principle of utility. From time to time these forces set in motion either attack or defence but always with the same result – war. Based on this premise Thucydides lays the foundations for modern historiography and the idea that history repeats itself.

After Thucydides, who was only able to observe a limited timeframe, history has enabled those who wished to understand it to have a broader view of what course it takes. Observation of history over longer periods of time avoids having to make a merely descriptive, superficial analysis, instead it helps us see the bigger picture. And this can help us understand the meaning of repetition as we can observe how over long cycles it is tied inseparably to the nature of the main actors, namely, human beings. At this point it is time to take another look at considerations made at the outset of this book: Sigmund Freud's thoughts expressed in reply to a letter sent to him by Albert Einstein on 30 July 1932 on behalf of the League of Nations. Einstein asked: 'Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war? It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for civilization as we know it; nevertheless, for all the zeal displayed, every attempt at its solution has ended in a lamentable breakdown. [...] Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychosis of hate and destructiveness? Here I am thinking by no means only of the so-called uncultured masses. Experience proves that it is rather the so-called "intelligentsia" that is most apt to yield to these disastrous collective suggestions, since the intellectual has no direct contact with life in the raw but encounters it in its easiest, synthetic form – upon the printed page. [...] it would be of the greatest service to us all were you to present the problem of world peace in the light of your most recent discoveries, for such a presentation well might blaze the trail for new and fruitful modes of action. Yours very sincerely, Albert Einstein'

In other words Einstein asks if we are condemned by history to resort to war as the opposition of rival forces or whether the evolution of society can represent a virtuous course to tackle our destiny? Freud's answer is very detailed. In summary, first he states the need to avoid using the word 'might' and instead replace it by 'violence', because conflicts between men are generally decided by the use of violence. Warfare ends up with winners and losers and the latter are either wiped out or subjugated, however, in this case the winner will have to come to terms with the latter's desire for revenge (World War II). Given the fact that the strongest wins, the answer is the union between as many parties or institutions as possible, but these unions must be stable and enduring, otherwise when the

purpose of such unions ceases they will end too. '[...] there are two factors of cohesion in a community: violent compulsion and ties of sentiment ("identifications," in technical parlance) between the members of the group'. So again Freud comes back to the two drives that dictate the rules of human nature, that of Eros, which tends to preserve and unite, and that of Thanatos, that tends to destroy and kill, but both must coexist within an equilibrium continually questioned by human nature, and he ends his answer in these terms: 'Now war runs most emphatically counter to the psychic disposition imposed on us by the growth of culture [...] we find it utterly intolerable. [...] With pacifists like us it is not merely an intellectual and affective repulsion, but a constitutional intolerance, an idiosyncrasy in its most drastic form. [...] How long have we to wait before the rest of men turn pacifist? Impossible to say, and yet perhaps our hope that these two factors – man's cultural disposition and a well-founded dread of the form that future wars will take – may serve to put an end to war in the near future, is not chimerical. But by what ways or byways this will come about, we cannot guess. Meanwhile we may rest on the assurance that whatever makes for cultural development is working also against war.'

With kindest regards and, should this exposé prove a disappointment to you, my sincere regrets. Yours, Sigmund Freud'. The correspondence between these two great men was to find a dramatic response some seven years later with the outbreak of World War II and the ensuing devastation and suffering that was to make people think again of the model of civil development mentioned by Freud. In essence the issue hasn't changed much from what Thucydides observed some 2,300 years ago because people haven't changed, although perhaps perception of the times has evolved. The issues are always the same, people's social sense – social capital – must prevail over their aggressive instinct – the never-ending search to accumulate and increase economic capital – by means of competition regulated also by value, not only by rules – cooperative competition. Over the long term history seems to reveal periods when a metaphysical dimension of values prevails alternating with others in which the value system is heavily oriented towards a solely physical dimension of social accomplishment. When the latter prevails a strongly egoistic and conflictual personality tends to emerge. And so humanity is, in a sense, continually going back to square one. On the subject of the sense of history, the role of human nature and its possible cyclical trend, there have been several representatives of European philosophy whose considerations are worthy of note, starting from the Neapolitan political philosopher, historian and jurist, Giambattista Vico (1668-1744).

Vico: "History Repeats Itself"

An analysis of Giambattista Vico's philosophy is essential to understand the sense of the development and ebb and flow of history. Vico was the first scholar to take an innovative approach to analyzing history, which he saw as a science although at the time it wasn't considered as such. For centuries his philosophy was given little consideration until it was re-

examined by Benedetto Croce in the 1920s. Later, other scholars developed his intuitions, among these the already mentioned Pitirim Sorokin and Arnold Toynbee, in an attempt to interpret the lifecycles of civilizations. We will see that in the end the philosophy of all of Europe's great scholars – historians, philosophers, theologians, humanists and the Freudian school – arrived at the same conclusions concerning the evolution of our times, albeit by pursuing different paths. Vico remained obscure during his lifetime because his philosophy went against the grain given that at the time the Cartesian approach to scientific method prevailed. A method that proposed a dogmatic theoretical approach whereas according to Vico scientific method based on Cartesian rationality could lose sight of the integral human dimension, by presenting itself as the only correct method. In this way, he noted, there was the risk that weight was only given to physically constructed science, so losing sight of many other sectors of knowledge. He emphasized the need to pay special attention to humanistic disciplines, investigating not just what is true but also what is plausible. And he remarked on the usefulness of looking at those disciplines that are considered human sciences, which require different methods and criteria from those used in natural sciences (the first edition of his work *The New Science* was published in 1725 – today we can say that his intuitions are still relevant).

In his work *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* [On the most ancient wisdom of the Italians] he referred for the first time to the principle of *verum ipsum factum* [that truth is verified through creation or invention], a cornerstone of philosophy that he later developed. The essence of nature can only be known by God, who is its creator, however, Vico is adamant in reaffirming and appreciating mankind's role as both the subject of true knowledge and as the subject of a different knowledge from that studied by the natural sciences. People make history, said Vico, and direct it based on the specific nature of their being, a nature that is unchanging. People create history and experience it not as passive spectators, because they can know this becoming – made up of reasons, intentions, actions, fears, hopes, language, legends, laws of civil institutions – from the inside, given that they are the actors and protagonists in that world. Within the nature of the human mind, within the 'force of our understanding', there is the trace of those universal and eternal principles 'that must be part of every science and that agree to speak of history as a science, indeed, as a new science'.

Publication of his masterpiece, *The New Science*, presented the implication of his studies. It indicated a different way of studying history that became the subject of his analysis, a practical approach to understand how it evolved and to provide knowledge to make, transform and improve our lives and that of the societies in which we live. Vico tried to answer the question as to whether it was possible to find constants for all societies that have evolved over time in order to offer those responsible for giving guidance to and governing societies a course to follow. And in this regard he gave the following indications:

- phenomena that concern people take place in the becoming of history;
- the psychological component of individuals is closely correlated with their life in society;
- a path can be found that history follows as human circumstances change.

Vico focuses on the analysis of human nature and especially the emotional sphere. People are moved by reason, but also by strong emotions, and these specific aspects condition the course of history and society, which can be seen as the play of causes and effects that depend on their psychological dimension. For Vico the religious sphere was decisive, because Divine Providence intervenes in people's lives when their path strays too far from a righteous meaning of existence. He also studied the importance of language and poetry, the 'ars poetica'. For him poetry was the expression of a sensitivity that he associated with creativity and knowledge – 'at first people feel without realizing, then they realize and their souls are shaken and moved'. Vico's philosophy is in line with Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts*, a philosopher who like himself saw the limits of Cartesian materialism, that is, the inability of reason to penetrate the fundamental truth on which human existence must be based. In the second book of *The New Science* Vico identifies myth and poetry and uses the term poetic; in various forms poetic wisdom expresses metaphysics, logic, politics, physics, astronomy, etc. Through this a world finds expression that cannot be interpreted based solely on the logic of Cartesian reasoning. Reference to feeling, to sensitivity to what is outside as an element of knowledge is fundamental in Vico's philosophy and makes it incredibly up to date when thinking back to considerations concerning technical knowledge highlighted previously. Knowledge of reality mediated by technology curtails possibilities to have personal experiences. It makes us sterile, incapable of true relationships and of understanding the meaning of history because it cuts us off from what is going on: we see it but don't experience it. There are stages in the evolution of history as there are in life, stages similar to moving from childhood through to old age. A succession of periods – that of the gods, that of heroes and, lastly, that of mankind, on a path that leads us to wisdom by means of subsequent and related events.

History develops following its own intrinsic rationality. It is necessary to understand the rules and laws that regulate and mark this path in order to discover the meaning of history (which for Vico is the ideal, eternal history). The meaning of history for Vico is within it, inasmuch as it is reflected by what people do, but outside it and providential as it reasserts the principles of justice, excellence and truth whenever these are betrayed by the facts. So the course of civilizations is progressive. Every civilization has its own basic course that reaches a peak, stalls and then precipitates into a crisis. Principles and lifestyles are undermined, become corrupted and degenerate, initiating a phase reverting towards barbarism in which more primitive social forms re-emerge marked by egoism and violence. There is a need to find a way or means

to bring people back to a transcendental dimension. And what brings people back from barbarism is 'Providence'. 'But if civilizations decay in that ultimate civil illness [...] in which individuals are accustomed to thinking of nothing but their very own needs [...] then Providence will come to the rescue [...] in order to reinstate piety, faith, truth, which are the natural foundations for justice and are the grace and beauty of God's eternal order'. (Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*)

This continual alternation of periods of decadence and then a return to a more elevated dimension of being is the "ebb and flow of history". Vico's basic idea masks a profound intuition as regards the meaning of history, which today can be clearly understood as a way to interpret the current crisis. For Vico, in the becoming of history there are ages when the meaning of a certain category of values is stronger, followed by ages when other values develop. By observing history over long periods it is possible to see and comprehend the alternation of value models that affect expressions of human activity in those periods. So the past helps us to understand the present and to cast an eye towards the future. But to better understand where we stand today we have to observe the continuity of history over time. "History repeats itself", says Vico, because by observing the long periods of historical cycles it can be seen that these phases recur: periods marked by a metaphysical vision – classical Greece and the late Middle Ages – or those marked by a more materialistic and opportunistic vision – the late Roman Empire. And where can we place this current period? There can be little doubt that this is a period of moral decadence, a period of "the barbarians". Let us try and ask ourselves the question posed at the outset of this book. Is the source of the crisis we are experiencing due to the failure of economic mechanisms or has the time come to rethink people's values and role within the economy? The solution to our problems changes completely depending on which of these two assumptions we endorse.

The Crisis of Our Age: Pitirim Sorokin and Arnold Toynbee

Whoever has read and studied the philosophies of these two great historians, who looked back over thousands of years to identify a key to interpret how history has unfolded, will be really amazed that today these scholars are largely overlooked. How is it possible that people who have pinpointed the becoming of our times over sixty years ago can be forgotten? An analysis of their works is fundamental when attempting to understand the course of history, but instead the current focus tends to be on bestsellers that have nothing new to say today and by tomorrow will be forgotten. In recent years we have been inundated with comments, solemn and scholarly critiques, books, various types of pamphlet, newspaper articles, and then conventions, TV debates and talk-shows, films and everything else the media has managed to dream up to keep spectators absorbed in what is often nothing really worthwhile. No one has ever tried to propose a different philosophy, an alternative approach, no one has ever attempted to look at the broader picture offered by history. Just by reading the works of some

of the great thinkers of the past century must surely suggest the need today for a wider-ranging field of investigation.

The development path of knowledge has been conditioned by a highly criticizable cultural model, the solely technical-rational philosophy that ends up by stifling creativity and forcibly directing studies towards exasperated forms of specialization. An approach that is certainly needed for in-depth study of specific fields but one that is incapable of creating links between different disciplines and the value of humanistic knowledge. As a research path becomes ever more detailed it starts to lose sight of the overall broader picture. While this risk is less dangerous in positive sciences that respond to their own intrinsic rationality, it becomes extremely damaging for those studying social sciences, because the focus on assembling data clashes with limitations posed by the field of analysis if this fails to consider factors that regulate human behaviour and abandons the humanistic culture. The prevailing focus on logical rationality loses sight of the social sphere of life with the result that social sciences have ended up by investigating human societies as one would colonies of termites, bees or ants. In this way humanity's role in history is lost.

All great scholars of the past, including the great economists and scientists who changed their interpretation of physics – Einstein, Heisenberg, Bohr – were also philosophers, inasmuch as they never lost sight of the human dimension in their work. For instance, Einstein believed that the value of individuals for the community in which they live above all depends on the degree in which their feelings, thoughts and actions contribute to the development of other people's lives. Indeed these scholars were all well aware that it was essential to harmonize scientific research by subordinating it to the need to adapt it to history and human nature. After all people were intended to be the beneficiaries of their research results. Sorokin and Toynbee were among the last scholars to have made a comprehensive review of history in an attempt to discover how historical facts had unfolded over time. The trace they have left is largely forgotten but those now reading will find their intuitions in full agreement with today's facts. Both of them systematically used the term "Weltanschauung", which in German means a profound and broad sense of a people's social culture and societies. By comparison, today's scholars, who have available infinitely more powerful and versatile research tools coupled with a close-up view of the events, have almost always managed to interpret the facts incorrectly. While the lives and experiences of Sorokin and Toynbee were different they managed to meet up in the 1960s and shared two apparently parallel paths of study that ended up by converging.

Pitirim Sorokin: "Creative Altruism" as the Solution

Sorokin was born in 1889 in rural Tsarist Russia and had strong Christian roots. His father, a repairer of icons, moved from village to village but while doing so made sure that his son studied. Later they separated and Sorokin ended up in St Petersburg where he got to know urban Russia and obtained a degree, also meeting and working with Pavlov who was

then studying conditioned reflexes. He was imprisoned for criticizing the Tsarist regime and later joined the cause of the October Revolution, going on to become Prime Minister Kerensky's personal secretary. But he accused Lenin of having applied the socialist model badly and for this was imprisoned and condemned to death. Only after his letter of apology was published in Pravda was he released and in 1918 he went on to found the first ever faculty of sociology in Russia. Always a dissident he was expelled from his own country and ended up in Czechoslovakia where he met the sociologist, Masaryk, who was championing the socialist model in that country. After moving to Paris, in 1923 he was invited to the United States to give a series of lectures on the October Revolution. Some years later, in 1930, he was asked to found the Department of Sociology at Harvard University where he continued his studies. Publication of his book *The Crisis of Our Age* in 1941 summarised his impressive body of research – but his conclusions, which seem written today, at the time made him seem like a visionary prophet and so the growing predominance of the technical culture cast him into oblivion. In 1949 he founded a centre in Harvard to develop a study path that he felt was fundamental to bring humanity back to an ancient wisdom. He called it the Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism, the purpose of which was to study appropriate social and political actions to modify social relations in an altruistic sense. During his lifetime he personally saw and experienced the epoch-making events of the past century and also asked himself: “Does history repeat itself?”

In order to find an answer to this question he embarked on the colossal task of studying history starting from the initial forms of civilization and in particular everything that in the different periods of history had characterized the spirit of the period in question. It was Sorokin who invented the term “sociocultural”. The intuition from which he started and that he wanted to demonstrate was that history follows an alternating course, in line with Vico's ideas, given that periods differed based on the system of values existing at the time. The model of values that marked any given period covered all human activities in every field. Sorokin set out to verify the laws of social and cultural trends and principles that gave rise to these by reviewing the entire span of history from the times of classical Greece up to the end of the 1930s and '40s. This, without ever losing sight of the ancient oriental civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia and, above all, India. But unlike Toynbee he never specifically covered China. Sorokin's analysis led him to see the alternating of two sociocultural models definable as being ideal archetypes. He specified that while neither of the two had ever existed in a pure form, every integrated culture had comprised a certain mix of the two. Some cultures tended towards one form or the other, whereas others showed a balanced synthesis of the two pure forms. The two cultures identified as archetypes to which the evolution of society refers over time are:

- Ideational: reality is seen as being non-sensate and non-material, needs have eminently spiritual characteristics that at the highest level can be satisfied by minimizing or eliminating the majority of one's physical needs;

- Sensate: the sensate mentality holds that reality is only that which can be perceived by the senses. It neither seeks nor believes in any suprasensate reality and is conceived as being becoming, process, change, evolutionary flow, transformational progress. Its needs are fundamentally physical and seek to provide maximum satisfaction. To satisfy desires doesn't involve changing the individuals who are part of a culture but by modifying or exploiting the external world. In essence the sensate culture is the exact opposite of the ideational culture. English philosopher and physician John Locke (1632-1704) claimed that “*nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*” [nothing is in the intellect without first being in the senses].

There can be sociocultural models that over time come more or less near to the extremes of the two models indicated. Sorokin identified a model representing a balance between the two that he defined as “idealistic”, a mixed form that summarizes the value premises of both types in an intimately coherent and harmonious unity. According to this view reality is many faceted. It can be found in the material and the spiritual, both from the aspect of being eternal and from that of a continually changing becoming. But while ends and needs are spiritual and material, the material is subordinate to the spiritual. Methods for satisfying these needs imply both a modification of the ego and a transformation of the sensate external world. In other words this point of view gives the “*sum cuique [to each his own]*” to both the ideational and sensate cultures. His analysis of societies throughout history, started from the Cretan-Minoan civilization dating from the 12-11th century BC, up to modern times – his time but de facto also ours. This led him to identify periods and cultures correlated in a kind of alternation whereby the collapse of one form as a result of its evident shortcomings in terms of responding to society's needs gave rise to a new cultural model that replaced the former one. Clearly these changes took place over a long time and transition from one form to another was marked by bitter conflicts.

Sociocultural models are characterized by their prevalent truth. So in an ideational model the principle of truth will be mainly linked to a transcendental religious or fideistic dimension – the Middle Ages – while in the idealistic model it will be largely the truth of reason that governs people's minds – classical Greece and the Renaissance. In the sensate model the truth of the senses prevails, only what can be seen, touched and measured is true – the period of the Hellenic culture, the late Roman Empire and our own times. According to Sorokin it was vital to grasp the significant difference between the truth of ideational faith and that of the senses or sensate truth. If either of these is considered to be “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” then no conciliation is possible. What is considered to be true from an ideational standpoint will be considered the fruit of ignorance and superstition from the sensate point of view and vice versa. In fact many religious truths revealed are considered to be absolutely false when seen exclusively from the standpoint of the senses. This explains why there is a bitter clash between the two models during the transition period.

Sorokin built an impressive empirical documentation using facts to explain why people acted as they did during different moments of history and this led him to identify the sociocultural model of our times as being sensate, based on the truth of the senses. In reconstructing the details of the various phases of history in his works – in 1939 and 1941 – he described the cultural characteristics that are the mark of our times with amazing accuracy. The transition from a sensate model to one capable of establishing a renewed spiritual dimension (or rediscovering that sense of eternity of the soul that inspired Plato when composing his dialogue, *Phaedo*) occurs based on a sequence of events of the type “crisis-ordeal-catharsis-charisma-resurrection”. As confirmation of the claim that a period of transition is under way we should remember that the century in human history marked by more wars was, in fact, the 20th century. And in this new century, in a time everyone likes to define as one of peace, we have had the Twin Towers terrorist attack, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq the standoff with Iran, while in the past five years the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences has awarded two Nobel prizes for peace to Al Gore and Barack Obama. No personal slight is intended, however, both happen to be eminent representatives of the most warlike nation in the early years of the 21st century!

Also Sorokin criticized the exclusivity of the technological culture. In fact he believed that the tree of our civilization with all its fruits, from the most luxuriant to the most poisonous, has roots in the premise that the sensate world is the sole truth and value. Its most beneficial fruit is the unprecedented development of science and technology, whereas the most pernicious is the fatal limitation of its perspective to a single criterion in terms of value. As has been said before, the fatal limit was reached when technical sciences were elevated to the status of moral value. In order to rebuild a society more focused on the value of social relations, Sorokin took as the starting point the role of the family. He believed that in a technical sense any form of social organization representing a way out from the reign of bloody conflicts must be based on and apply family-type principles. It is difficult for those who have read Sorokin’s works to disregard his interpretations. These were based on a vast amount of empirical evidence – his assistants examined and classified 400,000 works of art to determine the roots of the philosophy that had inspired them. During his lifetime his writings made him seem like an eccentric, a religious prophet, but the reality of the facts (or as Sorokin would have said, the reality of the senses) continues to show the significance of his ideas and conclusions.

Arnold Toynbee: Mother Earth and Human Nature

Toynbee was born in London in 1889, just three months after Sorokin and like him he tried to picture the unfolding of history over long periods in an attempt to comprehend the lifecycles of societies, not in such a well-defined manner as Sorokin but by using the same logic. Observation of long periods helps understand the factors that cause the rise and fall of civilizations while indicating that the same conditions are always repeated. Toynbee is strongly critical of the limited

timeframe based on which history tends to be observed and studied, comparing this limited vision to that of a horse wearing blinkers or what a submarine captain can expect to see through a periscope. Toynbee’s life was less adventurous than Sorokin’s but even so was full of many different experiences. He worked for the Foreign Office and the Political Intelligence Department, which gave him an opportunity to observe a significant period of history in every sense, starting from events leading up to World War I right through to the times of the Cold War. He even participated in the Paris Peace Conference after the end of World War I. Toynbee grew up in the final decade of the Victorian era and studied classical authors, both Greek and Latin, in depth. He then worked in government offices during a period in British history that helped him gain a better understanding of those societies that the Commonwealth had to deal with, either by dominating them, governing them or by means of alliances. Both the Chinese and Indian civilizations form part of his historical analysis. The history of Britain’s civilizing and governing other peoples and other civilizations with different histories and cultures enabled him to see the consequences of the evolutionary model during the process of westernization and how possible conflict must lead to a broader view of the common good.

His literary production is vast and like Sorokin’s starts from the dawning of civilization. A reconstruction of history and its alternating periods that leads to a vision of future events which based on past recurrences is impressive in terms of its clarity and accuracy. His last work published posthumously is the history of the human race and associated forms of social aggregation from early civilizations to the 1960s (he died in 1967). He pinpoints the correlation between the course of history and human nature and in fact the title of the book is *Mankind and Mother Earth*. In conclusion, given the link between history and human nature he asked himself if mankind will destroy Mother Earth or redeem her. Mankind could certainly destroy her by making an evil use of growing technological power but could also redeem her by defeating that aggressive, suicidal greed that represents in all creatures, human beings included, the price of the gift of life. This was and still is the enigma facing us. An enigma that neatly sums up Toynbee’s entire philosophy. Like Sorokin, he had a vision of the becoming of history that leads towards a progressive evolution of humanity through stages of superior civilization. This is how he put it: ‘In the vision seen by the Prophets of Israel, Judah, and Iran, history is not a cyclic and not a mechanical process. It is the masterful and progressive execution, on the narrow stage of this world, of a divine plan which is revealed to us in this fragmentary glimpse, but which transcends or human powers of vision and understanding in every dimension. Moreover, the Prophets, through their own experience, anticipated Aeschylus’ discovery that learning comes through suffering – discovery which we, in our time and circumstances, have been making too. While civilizations rise and fall and, in falling, give rise to others, some purposeful enterprise, higher than theirs, may all the time be making headway, and, in a divine plan, the learning that comes through

the suffering cause by the failures of civilizations may be the sovereign means of progress' (Civilization of Trial).

Examining the course of civilizations and societies Toynbee realized that certain factors were repeated over time like lifecycles and in particular he noted a process that today we call globalization (but that during his day was more correctly called westernization), a phase of integration and clashes between civilizations. Already almost fifty years ago he was able to clearly discern the determinants of this evolution. The rise and fall of societies depends in essence on values that characterize their governing classes and that he identified as being their creative capability. Thanks to this component societies evolve by means of a "challenge and response" mechanism, that is, interaction between the external environment and the ability to exploit/dominate external events that enables civilizations/societies to progress and improve. And if this challenge and response mechanism explains the inexplicable and unforeseeable origins and growth of civilizations, it also explains their downfall and disintegration, which begins when the elite that governs them loses the creativity that can respond in a new way to the new challenges arising in the external environment. So as a result of incompetence or arrogance society slowly loses its vital force and begins to collapse.

Toynbee did not see a close correlation between technical progress and that of society, for him it was a secondary factor although he admitted it did contribute, while he attributed a critical importance to creative minorities. In times of change the leader's role is significant and for Toynbee is the determining factor. In his opinion what is needed is a leader who is neither a schemer nor a demagogue but a person who has moral and intellectual qualities thanks to which people follow them willingly without being forced or plagiarized. It is what Freud defined as the "principle of identification": a leader must first guide society with feelings and the heart, then by means of technology, not vice versa as seems to be the case today. When these qualities are lacking in history civilizations begin to break up, independent of material conditions prevailing at the time, because as Vico rightly said it is people and their nature

that determine how history evolves. So decadence sets in and the sickness that inhibits the children of this decadence is not a paralysis of their natural faculties but a collapse of their social heritage. A condition that interrupts every exercise of their unaltered faculties as regards effective and creative social activity. The source of decadence is not technical but spiritual. Even the absence of full political, administrative and military control is not a sufficient, exhaustive cause to explain the collapse of a society because this happens when the decadent phase is already under way. In other words civilizations don't disappear as a result of a violent death, they "commit suicide".

We have witnessed the process described by Toynbee in the collapse of the Soviet empire, we are seeing it in the USA and we are experiencing it in Italy too. Like other scholars Toynbee asked himself if history repeats itself, not in the sense that it "must" do so but in the sense that it "may" do, therefore not in a deterministic manner based systematically on cause and effect. The evolution of historical facts is based on a determinant dictated by human nature, however, Toynbee also saw the enigma of how it takes place as being something that is inherent in history. History is free, not predetermined. It follows recurring patterns that can be foreseen, although not in terms of the timing and chronology of the facts concerned. While paths are indicated, Toynbee reminds us that people must manage to interpret the ages of history and criticize the predominant technological culture and dimension of happiness expressed in material terms that suffocates their creative power by reducing the guiding principle to a sensorial truth. This is where his ideas and those of Pitirim Sorokin converge. The ability to respond in an innovative way to the challenges of history means that civilization is not condemned mechanistically to ruin. 'There is nothing to prevent our Western civilization from following historical precedent, if it chooses, by committing social suicide. But we are not doomed to make history repeat itself; it is open to us, through our own efforts, to give history, in our case, some new and unprecedented turn. As human beings, we are endowed with this freedom of choice, and we cannot shuffle off our responsibility upon the shoulders of God or nature. We must shoulder it ourselves. It is up to us' (Civilization on Trial).

Citation: Pezzani F (2018) History and its Becoming between Past and Future. *Sociol Insights* 2: 001-007.

Copyright: © 2018 Pezzani F. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.