

TOYNBEE: A STUDY OF HISTORY'S PATTERNS

Coordinator: James Gould

History is usually presented in the narrow focus of a kingdom, an empire, an era. But is there an overall structure that can organize and analyze all 21 civilizations to understand how they arose from primitive societies? Why some grow and thrive and others freeze or wither? How some survive successive blows and others break down and disintegrate? What roles government and religions play in their survival? Arnold Toynbee answered these questions and more in his *A Study of History*, which has been praised as brilliant and vilified as oversimplistic for positing patterns in history. We study Toynbee and his critics and debate whether it is possible to forecast the future from the past, or at least to make better decisions by considering history.

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

A Study of History by Arnold J. Toynbee

Any publisher or printing will do, so long as it is the two volume abridgment by D.C. Somervell. Used copies of set \$20 (more or less), \$9.95 for each volume on Kindle.

Coursepack: 106 pages, \$10 or less.

James Gould - a past patent litigator, present day motorcyclist, world traveler, devourer of NYC culture and books and learning-to-be writer.

* * * * * **Syllabus – A Work in Progress** * * * * *

Week 1: Comparative Study of Civilizations – Does History have Patterns?

A Study of History: I. Introduction.

Coursepack:

“Oswald Spengler: An Introduction to his Life and Ideas (Institute for Historical Review)

“The Disturbing Freshness of Gibbon’s Decline and Fall (The Atlantic)

Practicing History by Barbara Tuchman

The Pattern of the Past by Pieter Geyl & Arnold Toynbee

What is the purpose of studying history?

Is each civilization unique or can they be put in categories as Toynbee did?

Do civilizations follow patterns over their lives?

Can history forecast the future or at least help us make better decisions?

Week 2: The Geneses of Civilizations

A Study of History Section II.

Coursepack:

The Icelandic Sagas

What distinguishes a civilization from a primitive society?

How and why do civilizations start?

Is there a “sweet spot” of challenges that makes a civilization thrive?

What part did the challenge of Islam play in the genesis of Western civilization?

Week 3: The Growth of Civilizations

A Study of History, Section III.

Course Pack:

The Pattern of the Past by Pitirim A. Sorokin

Why do some civilizations grow and others freeze or fossilize?

Does a civilization grow faster in response to pressure and blows?

When does a barbarian society have an advantage over a civilization?

What part does creativity play in the growth of a civilization?

Week 4: The Breakdown of Civilizations

A Study of History, Section IV.

Coursepack:

The Pattern of the Past by Pieter Geyl

Collapse by Jared Diamond

Why do civilizations break down?

Is internal decay or external pressure more likely to cause a civilization to break down?

Do moral factors play a part in breakdown of a civilization?

Is militarism suicidal to a civilization?

Week 5: The Disintegration of Civilizations

A Study of History, Section V.

Course pack:

“Oswald Spengler: An Introduction to his Life and Idea”. *See*, Week 1.

“The Disturbing Freshness of Gibbon’s Decline and Fall”. *See*, Week 1

The Pattern of the Past by Pieter Geyl

What is the difference between breakdown and disintegration of a civilization?

Do civilizations disintegrate because of environmental disaster, invasion, economics, moral decay or something else?

When civilizations disintegrate, do they leave residues, set up the next civilization or disappear?

When can a savior with a book or a sword reverse disintegration?

Week 6: Universal States

A Study of History, Section VI.

Course pack:

Is the EU a Universal State?

Are there such things as universal states?

Was the Roman Empire a universal state?

Was the Ottoman Empire a universal state?

Must a universal state have a standing army, and if so, why?

Week 7: Role of Religion in the Life of a Civilization

A Study of History, Section VII.

Course Pack:

Natural History by David Hume

The Pattern of the Past by Pieter Geyl

What role does religion play in a civilization?

Do churches sustain civilizations [or political leaders] or do civilizations sustain churches?

How would Western civilization have differed without the Catholic Church in the Dark Ages?

Does separation of state and religion strengthen or weaken a civilization compared to a theocracy?

Week 8: Heroic Ages.

A Study of History, Section VIII.

Course pack:

Icelandic Sagas

What are the qualities of a heroic age?

Did Greece have a Heroic Age?

Did the Scandinavians have a Heroic Age?

Toynbee says Heroic Ages accumulate pressure until a cataclysm. Does that always happen?

Week 9: Contacts between Civilizations in Space.

A Study of History, Section IX.

Course pack:

Islam: Religion, History and Civilization by Sayyed Hossein Nasr

What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East by Bernard Lewis

What effect does contact between equal and between unequal civilizations have upon their development?

What role did the Silk Road play in the diffusion of civilizations' technology and culture?

Were the Crusades a net positive or negative in the growth of Western civilization?

What are the responses of Islam to defeat by the West and what are their prospects for

success?

Week 10: Contacts between Civilizations in Time.

A Study of History, Section X.

Coursepack:

The Italian Renaissance by Paula Findlen

Power & Imagination – City-States in Renaissance Italy by Lauro Martines

What impact did ancient writing and art have on the Italian Renaissance?

Why did modern Western civilization derive from Greco – Roman civilizations?

Can art, literature and law from the past shape a civilization?

Why do civilizations create origin myths?

Week 11: Law and Freedom in History.

A Study of History, Section XI.

Course Pack:

The Icelandic Sagas

Federalist Papers

Do you agree with Madison in the Federalist Papers when he said, “But what is government but the greatest reflection of human nature?”

What part does human nature, human psychology, play in the fate of a civilization?

Is a codified body of law that survives a ruler necessary for a civilization over the long term?

What form of government has historically been the most robust?

Week 12: The Prospects of the Western Civilization.

A Study of History, Section XII.

Course pack:

“The Disturbing Freshness of Gibbon’s Decline and Fall”. *See*, Week 1.

The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich

The Art of War by Sun Tzu

“Bhutan’s 2015 Gross National Happiness Index”

Does evolution’s teaching that adapting to the changing world is the best means of survival apply to nations like the United States?

What can history teach America about mistakes to avoid?

What does history teach us about how to achieve reasonable harmony in a civilization so it does not tear itself apart?

Is Gross National Product or Gross National Happiness more important to survival of a civilization?