

CIVILIZATION IN CRISIS: EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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Unlike the previous edition of *Cosmos & History* which focussed on the work of Hilan Bensusan, the contributions to this edition were not solicited. On the surface of it, they do not appear to be focussed on any particular theme. However, a theme can be detected. They are in various ways symptomatic of a civilization in crisis. This is most clearly evident in the contributions examining or responding to the global ecological crisis. It is also evident in those showing concern for the state of civilization and responding to the lack of effective action to deal with any major crisis, and efforts to explain this. And it is evident in efforts to re-examine, re-interpret and re-evaluate philosophers of the past who had diagnosed a malaise of modern civilization and sought to overcome it. The revived interest in the work of Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Whitehead and Deleuze illustrates this. It is even evident in those who have set out to re-examine the more distant past of Western civilization. Interest in the Ancient Greeks or early medieval thought suggests interest in ways of thinking radically different from current thinking in order to gain a distance from the culture of modernity, to reveal new possibilities, or at least to reveal that culture could be radically different.

Of course, civilization has been in crisis for some time. In fact, it could be argued that it is the nature of civilizations to always be in crisis. This is why civilizations require philosophers, the ‘physicians of culture’ as they were characterized by Nietzsche. There are a number of things different about the present crisis, however. To begin with, despite many of Samuel Huntington’s predictions of the clash of civilizations being realized, there is now one global civilization of modernity permeating this apparent diversity and conflict. This is a world civilization dominated by transnational corporations and rapid advances in technology with extreme concentrations of wealth and economic and political

power, with the vast majority of the world's population disempowered and depoliticized. Political institutions are dominated by the most powerful economic actors and only very weakly represent the general population. The super-wealthy under the banner of neoliberalism have promoted financial deregulation, created tax havens, facilitated anti-competitive business practices and forced through lower tax rates on high incomes together with cuts in public services for the rest of the population. The result is, despite (or perhaps because of) technological advances, a world order with billions living in extreme poverty struggling daily for food and shelter, and hundreds of millions of workers extremely poorly paid working incredibly long hours in factories in the developing economies of the semi-peripheries of the world economy to supply goods to people in core zones. Along with these, there is a growing class of poor consumers, mostly in the deindustrialized core zones of the world economy, educated but without economic security. They have evolved into a politically disengaged class, apart from the pseudo-politics of upholding political correctness in speech, with no interest in being productive or taking responsibility for the future. If they work, it is mostly in what David Graeber characterized as 'bullshit jobs'. All this has been associated with massive ecological destruction, at its most severe in the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world economy, but driven for the most part by people in these core zones with the help of comprador elites.

The extreme complexity of this globalized world has made it very difficult for most people to understand what is going on, and this is exacerbated by domination of the media by transnational media moguls and the corruption of educational and other public institutions through the new public management philosophy whereby public institutions are forced to function like business corporations. Democracy, that is, people governing themselves through political institutions, has been hollowed out and rendered meaningless. At best it has been transformed into the manufacture of consent, and with this breaking down, it is being challenged by a new authoritarianism contemptuous of the very idea of democracy. Trumpism is only one example of this. While in the past the failure of a civilization could cost the lives of tens of millions, the failure of the current global civilization to change its current direction and avoid ecological destruction will cost the lives of billions of people, and most of the world's other species. It could result in a new regime of the global ecosystem unsuitable to humans. In the

face of all this, philosophy is bound to appear a weak force, yet it is only through philosophy dedicated to overcoming the fragmentation of culture, questioning and replacing prevailing assumptions and orienting the whole of humanity to create a different world order, that this disaster might be avoided.

With this in mind, Daniel Dombrowski's article, 'Toynbee and the Process of Civilizations' has been placed first in this edition. Influenced by Spengler while influencing a range of major thinkers, including Alfred North Whitehead and Henri Bergson, Toynbee examined the dynamics of civilizations to reveal the causes of their rise and decline. The second paper by Alexi Anisin examines the work of Nicolai Berdayev who, as Anisin argued, predicted our current era 'marked by a new form of global subjugation – in the merging of technology with the state and our enslavement to our own discoveries.' He also predicted the overthrow of this system, reviving spirituality and liberating labour. While the notion of spirituality is suspect to many, spirituality can be understood, as it was by Joel Kovel, as being inspired by life to overcome oppression and actualize as yet unrealized possibilities to create a better world and augment life. That this is even possible is denied by those who argue that humans are really nothing but survival machines for reproducing genes, a notion supported by the development of information science that equates human intelligence with information processing destined to be surpassed by artificial intelligence. A third paper by Alex Hankey examining the contest by the world's leading chess player and a computer supports the argument of J.R. Lucas based on the work of Gödel that the mind is more than a digital machine. A fourth paper by Bo Dahlin, 'Epistemology, Technology and Spiritual Science' argues for a participatory epistemology to overcome the dualism between mind and world and generate technologies through which we would cooperate with nature rather than strive to conquer it. To this end he defends Rudolf Steiner's Goethe inspired philosophy of education. John Mandalios offers a reinterpretation of Nietzsche, showing how he was inspired by the exuberance of the Ancient Greeks. 'Nietzsche conceived knowing not as a contemplative 'spectator' who distances himself from experience or the surfaces of the world' Mandalios claimed. 'Instead, the knower engages the festival of knowing which unfolds the spectra of worlds through which Logos is transformed and made transformative.'

Nietzsche's work has been a major inspiration to those combatting the

nihilism of modernity. As far as dealing with ecological destruction, some philosophers influenced by the earlier work of Nietzsche have argued that we should see our participation in nature as producing nature as a work of art. This sounds attractive, but Daniel Anderssen in 'Aesthetic Ideology in the Anthropocene' points out the sinister implications of such view. Examining Ernst Jünger's early work and its influence in Germany in the 1920's and 30's, he cautions against the aestheticizing of politics and suggests that 'by reifying the cybernetic disclosure of the earth as a natural-artificial hybrid into a naturalistic ontology of work, we are liable to render our planet perfectly functional to its sustained instrumental appropriation as standing-reserve.' What appears to be required is a recovery of political philosophy.

The following article in this edition focussing on precisely this is Markus Freseha's study 'The Problem of Political Sovereignty: Hegel and Schmitt'. Carl Schmitt, another figure associated with Weimar German culture and the rise of Naziism, has drawn a great deal of attention in recent years. Freseha challenges the status accorded to Schmitt and argues that Hegel had provided a better solution to the 'liberal predicament' that Schmitt was concerned to avoid: that the liberal state gives rise to totalitarian tendencies by undermining political sovereignty. As Freseha put it: 'Hegel goes beyond Schmittian liberal authoritarianism by proposing a more nuanced solution to the threat of liberal totalitarianism.'

Freseha's turn to Hegel can be seen as part of a revival of interest in Hegel's work and its possible relevance for the present. Hegel identified himself as an Idealist, and this is usually taken as a warning sign by environmentalists who are suspicious of any philosophy that would elevate Spirit above Nature. Ekin Erkan's study of Hegel's treatment of possibility in his Philosophy of Nature provides reasons for allaying such suspicions, arguing that when properly understood, Hegel has to be seen as a naturalist, even if only a weak naturalist. For Hegel, the human mind presupposes that we are biological beings, and so has to be seen as emergent from nature. This contention is supported by another contribution, Emmanuel Chaput's study of the influence on Hegel of the French biologist Bichat, showing how it was through his study of Chaput that Hegel developed not only his conception of life and mind, but his ideas on aesthetics and freedom.

A more conventional interpretation of Hegel is defended by Petteni and

Sacilotto, however. Petteni argues in ‘Breaking Free from Material Terrestrial Contingency’ that Hegel had chartered the path to liberating us from the flux of becoming and the contingencies of nature through the development of new forms of information technology. From this perspective, Hegel is a precursor to posthumanism. Sacilotto’s interpretation of Hegel does not go to this extreme, but his concern is to show that by virtue of Hegel’s failure to account for the reality of coming to be, his whole philosophy must be regarded as defective. However, Sacilotto argues that Deleuze also was unsuccessful in his efforts to characterize coming into being. These critiques are used by Sacilotto to develop and present an original approach to philosophy capable of doing justice to the reality of coming into being.

Sacilotto’s article can be seen as a continuation of the effort to break with the ‘Egyptianism’ of philosophers criticised by Nietzsche, that is, the tendency of philosophers to worship what they have ‘mummified’, denying reality to all that is creative, exemplified by the truths of science which Nietzsche characterized in his early notebooks as a columbarium of dead metaphors. Reacting against this has been associated with efforts to redefine the goals and very nature of philosophy, and science. In the modern world, this really originated in the work of Schelling (who strongly influenced Nietzsche) with his break from Hegel and his ‘geometrized’ dialectic, with his more resolute embracing of biology and naturalism and concern to do justice to the reality of human freedom and the individual. Central to Schelling’s philosophy was the significance he accorded to preconceptual thought as the condition for conceptual thought, appreciating the unprethinkable being (*unvordenkliche Zeit*), presupposed by all thought. It is from this unprethinkable being that individuated beings that can be grasped through concepts, emerge. In another article, Darcy Forster examines Schelling’s philosophy by contrasting it with Aldous Huxley’s work to defend a place for this preconceptual experience.

Schelling’s quest to redefine philosophy to overcome this Egyptianism, and to overcome the division between the sciences, the humanities and the arts, was continued in the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, C.S. Peirce, William James, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, various phenomenologists, including Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Ernst Bloch and Gilles Deleuze. In the following paper, Michel Weber expounds the conception of philosophy developed

and defended by Whitehead. This is followed by Mathias Schönher's article on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work, *What is Philosophy?* (strongly influenced by Whitehead). It focusses on and defends their underappreciated notion of the conceptual persona. This was introduced as 'the tool that a philosopher invents in order to create new concepts with which to bring forth new events.'

As noted, Sacilotto argued that Deleuze had not succeeded in giving a place to coming to be. Alain Badiou also rejected Deleuze's philosophy, but while lauding the achievements of mathematics, he is still concerned to oppose the deterministic block universe purveyed by mainstream science. Arguing along lines similar to those of Hankey, he argues that advances in mathematics have shown that it is necessary to recognize the ontological status of events, and celebrates events of truth and fidelity to these events. Evan Supple in his article builds on the work of Badiou. He argues for 'an emancipatory environmental politics ... [taking] the form of what Alain Badiou terms a 'truth procedure', [a] form of processual politics structured around an affirmative norm disclosed by an Event.' Supple claims this Event 'to be the emerging ecological crises vis-a-vis modern States — and determined by what Badiou designates the generic will, [which] has the potential to maintain a receptive and reciprocal relation with the environment within which it is situated.'

The emerging ecological crisis was a discovery of post-reductionist science influenced by the tradition of natural philosophy inspired by Schelling. In the following article, such science is defended by Michael Lieber, building on the work of his father, Paul Lieber. Paul Lieber was aligned with the theoretical biology movement led by the embryologist C.H. Waddington, a major opponent of reductionist biology who drew on the work of Whitehead to develop a new approach to understanding morphogenesis. Paul and Michael Lieber can be seen as building on this work, drawing also on the work of Lev Belousov, to characterize all biological and physical processes as morphogenetic. On this basis, a biologically based epistemology is suggested.

This work accords with the articles by Arran Gare and Gennady Shklierasky concerned with creating a future that is not ecologically destructive based on accepting that we are creative participants in a creative nature. Gare builds on Aldo Leopold's land ethic, arguing that it concurs with efforts to revive the communitarian ethics and political philosophy of Aristotle and Hegel, and that it

can be further developed through recent developments ecology and human ecology incorporating thermodynamics, complexity theory and biosemiotics. Human ecology also facilitates an appreciation and defence of primitive cultures who experienced themselves as members of biotic communities, while integrating this experience with advanced developments of civilization. Shkliarasky defends the effort to overcome anthropocentrism that has given rise to the Anthropocene, but argues that anthropocentrism originated with humans, and it will require much more than is usually acknowledged by environmental philosophers to create a non-anthropocentric future. It will have to ‘embrace the process of creation.’

The next two articles by Otisk and Segovia are devoted to achieving a better understanding of ideas from the past, from Ancient Greece and early medieval Europe to recent philosophers influenced by Greek thinking. The study of the distant past might not appear to be relevant to current civilization being in crisis, but by opening new vistas, they are relevant to facing up to this crisis. Otisk provides a picture of early medieval thinking, influenced by the same Platonism and Aristotelianism that inspired the Seventeenth Century scientific revolution, yet fundamentally different from it and from current thinking. Although this is not made explicit, the article suggests that current culture, including mainstream science based on Newtonian assumptions, will appear equally bizarre in a future civilization that has successfully met the challenges of the present. Segovia traces the four ways in which the metaphor of fire has been used, untangling these and the different uses to which they have been put to engage with Hölderlin, Hegel and Heidegger along with very recent philosophers such as Malabou and Negasterani. As an alternative to the fashionable quest for general connectivity ‘that cannot be deemed a true solution to the worldlessness to which our pretension to submit everything to our will has inevitably carried us’ he argues for a return to the notion of cosmos