The concept of ‘civilization’ was one of the lynchpins of the European self-image in the nineteenth century. It provided a unifying concept that brought the various imagined achievements of the continent together within a universal philosophy of history that, at the same time, offered a legitimation of the imperial control of ‘non-civilized’ communities. It was pervasive and fundamental because it ordered global space by arranging every society onto a single hierarchical time-scale of progress. On this view, ‘civilization’ was a unique achievement of Europe. The wider world languished in a ‘primitive’ or ‘barbarous’ state, with perhaps the partial exception of the European settler colonies and China. One of the reasons that ‘civilizing’ arguments became a hallmark of liberal justifications of imperialism is that it admits the possibility of improving ‘backwards’ societies. For it treats all societies as qualitatively the same kinds of things. The differences that exist between societies are a product of historical time. Hypothetically, every society has the same capacity for development: savagery led to barbarism, that led to civilization. These are ‘stages’ along a shared historical path. Economic, geopolitical, racial, and martial justifications of imperialism do not possess the same moral or altruistic quality. In practice, however, when genetic racism had not already foreclosed this horizon of possibility, the maturation of imperial subjects was perpetually deferred into the remote future. The time for the non-civilized was always ‘not yet’.

One of the great stories of modern global political thought is the petrification and death of the traditional idea of civilization. It declined in tandem with the fortunes of empire. Karuna Mantena has shown that paternalist arguments for the civilizing of non-Western subjects were shaken by the resistance of those in whose benefit it was supposedly undertaken for. The Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, and the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, were turning points in British attitudes towards the ‘civilizing mission’. But it was not until the interwar period that it suffered a full frontal attack, and was truly dislodged from the heart of the Western imaginary. The goal of this paper is to retrace one of the most important streams of that wider story, focusing the plural and fatalistic reconception of ‘civilization’ in the writings of Quincy Wright and Arnold Toynbee. Let me first say something briefly about these two figures, before setting out the plan for the rest of the paper.

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Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) was perhaps the best known historian in the English-speaking world at the peak of his influence. He passed through the premier training grounds of the British Empire, winning a scholarship

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to Winchester College, and then Balliol College, Oxford. But the Great War was something of a caesura in his life. He abandoned his career as a classicist, and turned his intellect to world politics. Although this was a not an unusual step by any means: Gilbert Murray, Alfred Zimmern, and E.H. Carr were all classicists. After a brief stint at the Foreign Office, one that gave Toynbee the chance to join the British delegation at Versailles, and a short and unhappy Professorship in Byzantine and Modern Greek History at King’s College London, he joined the Royal Institute of International Affairs in 1924 as Director of Studies. He split the next twenty years of his life between two activities. One the one hand, he wrote the weighty annual Survey of International Affair for the institute, and maintained a distinct presence within British foreign policy circles. On the other, he worked on a grand theory of the history of civilizations. This would become A Study of History, a 12-volume historical tour de force. Its Thucydidean fatalism caught the imagination of the early twentieth century world.

Quincy Wright (1890-1970) was one of the pre-eminent scholars of global politics in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Originally a rising star in the field of international law, he was recruited by Charles Merriam to the ‘Chicago School of Political Science’ in 1923. Merriam was trying to forge a unified science of politics that cut across disciplinary borders. He built an ecosystem of social scientific institutions at the University of Chicago committed to that vision, bankrolled by the largesse of the Rockefeller Foundation. Wright’s role was to lead the inter-disciplinary study of international relations. He founded the first graduate course in the field in the United States, chaired the Harris Foundation – an influential annual roundtable that brought together leading voices in the study of world politics – and led the ‘Study of War Project’.

The Study of War Project was everything that Merriam had envisaged. Founded in 1926, it brought a team of scholars together from eight Chicago departments to undertake a systematic investigation into the ‘causes of war’. It produced sixty-six manuscripts, employed twenty-five research assistants, and guided the research of scholars of world politics at Chicago for the next twenty years. Besides Wright, it included work by Jacob Viner, William T. R. Fox, Bernard Brodie, Frederick L. Schuman, and Harrold Lasswell. The culmination of the project was the publication of Wright’s A Study of War in 1942. It was this book which made Wright’s reputation, and which shall be our primary concern.

Toynbee and Wright both conceived of civilization as the inverse of what it had once been. They rejected the notion that civilization was a uniquely European achievement, and that ‘European civilization’ would progress indefinitely. Rather, Wright and Toynbee viewed civilization as something pervasive and fatalistic. Civilizations had emerged in every part of the world since around 4,000 BC, and every one of them had ultimately stagnated and collapsed. European civilization was no different and, they feared, might already be in its final throes. For it was being torn apart by competing national particularisms. The only way to forestall the collapse of Western

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civilization was, they argued, to take the unprecedented leap to world government. Both of them placed great hopes in the League of Nations and the United Nations.

This pluralisation of the traditional, nineteenth century idea of civilization is an important part of the story of its demise. Whilst the idea that other civilizations had existed in the distant past was not new, the conditions of the interwar period gave it a new-found purchase. The rosy belle époque was shattered by war, revolution and depression. For the first time, there were widespread fears that European civilization as a whole may fall into the dust of time. At the same time, the world continued to globalise apace. The ‘Wilsonian moment’ and the creation of the League of Nations upon the principle of national self-determination created a more equal map of global political space in the minds of many Westerners, even if this ‘right’ was denied to many of those who clamoured for it in the global South. The European empires groaned under the pressure of insurgent anti-colonial nationalism; triggering mounting fears of the ascent of non-European world. It was this combination of circumstances that catalysed the transformation of ‘civilization’ into something plural that was distributed across time and space. This signalled a wider shift in the global imagination. Europe was no longer seen as the centre of the world as it had once been; the ground was laid for the emergence of globalism. I treat Toynbee and Wright as symptomatic of these amorphous intellectual sea-changes.

The plan of the paper is as follows. First, I retrace the birth of the idea of civilization and its basic cosmographic and ethnological assumptions. I argue that it can be thought of as a new, temporal register of difference. The homogenous depiction of geometric space that emerged in the Renaissance was supervened by a hierarchical timescale of progress. Second, I briefly review the sudden collapse of faith in European civilization during the interwar years, and the new racial, economic and geopolitical anxieties that these doubts gave expression to. I focus upon the catalysing role played by Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West. Third, I juxtapose Toynbee’s two concurrent streams of work: his basic research into the nature of civilization in A Study of History, and his annual Surveys of global affairs for the Royal Institute of International Affairs. I draw out the backdrop against which Toynbee came to reconceive of ‘civilization’, and his changing views of globalism. Fourth, I reconstruct the spine of Wright’s argument in A Study of War. I show that while Wright shared Toynbee’s fatalistic theory of the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations, he believed that the progress of technical knowledge over time had created a level of global integration that enabled and required a world government. Throughout, I remark on Toynbee and Wright’s contrasting views of global difference.

The Birth of European Civilization

In this section, I briefly outline the origins of the idea of ‘civilization’ and the cosmological and ethnological assumptions which made it possible. I place special emphasis on the fact that it provided the European world with a matrix of difference through which it understood its relation to the non-European world. It was able to supervene the homogenous conception of space that had emerged out of the Renaissance with a hierarchical
conception of time, ordering communities into vertical timescale of ‘past’ and ‘future’. This acted to forestall any genuinely global understanding of world politics. In many ways this was the intellectual correlate of what has often been called the ‘great divergence’ that opened up between Europe and ‘the rest’ in the nineteenth century. But as we shall see, its relative decline in the interwar years precipitated a re-balancing of the global imagination. Europe was no longer the undisputed centre of the world. But globalism brought with it its own challenges for how to deal with difference, which I explore in the thought of Toynbee and Wright.

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The concept of ‘civilization’ is a neologism which appeared in the late eighteenth century. A family of words descended from the Latin civitas had long been in circulation. But neither civil or civilize, or the related words poli (polite) and policè (organised), had a corresponding noun. In a simple sense, then, it was invented for the sake of linguistic convenience. It was briefly used as a jurisprudential term the early eighteenth century, but its first (albeit unrepresentative) modern usage was in Victor de Riquetti, marquis de Mirabeau’s A Treatise on Population in 1756. It reached the shores of Britain no later than 1767, when it appeared at the centre of one of the great works of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Ferguson’s An Essay on the History of Civil Society. It then spread rapidly across Europe.

I have already outlined its basic definition, so I shall not linger on this point for long. The traditional use of the idea of ‘civilization’ is to describe a stadial theory of progress that culminates in modern Europe. On this view it is both a process and its highest achievement. The most common division of ‘time’ is between a succession of savagery, barbarism and civilization. Each is thought to lead to the next. For this reason, it is an evaluative-descriptive concept. It describes a process of historical development, and evaluates that process with a rank-ordering in which the later stages are thought to be better than the earlier stages. Since classical Greece, the European world has used terms like ‘barbarian’ as a generic pejorative for foreign ‘Others’. Aristotle thought of non-Greeks as natural slaves, no less. What is distinctive about ‘civilization’ is that it orders difference on a global scale through the idea of progress such that it permits paternalism. That is, it is characterised by a new and universal scope, by a re-arranging difference on a single moving timescale, and by the possibility of lifting the ‘Other’ to the level of the ‘Self’ through imperial tutelage. Finally, I should also point out that it can be helpful to distinguish between two things which are often run together when speaking about the idea of

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5 Braudel, A History of Civilizations, p.4.

6 Adam Ferguson, 2007, An Essay on the History of Civil Society. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK. Although we have reason to believe the manuscript itself was prepared as early as 1759.


civilization. Eurocentrism is a broad term for thought and action that unduly privileges the European or Western world. It is usually thought about at the epistemological level. Imperialism is protean form of control of one society by another. It is usually thought about at the political and economic levels. On this rough distinction imperialism is always Eurocentric, but Eurocentrism is not always imperial. I follow John Hobson in making this distinction – in contrast to Edward Said’s Orientalism – because it allows us to make sense of the history of ‘civilization’.

For many of the Enlightenment figures who created the idea of civilization, a profoundly Eurocentric idea that extrapolates the European world into a universal philosophy of history in which the non-European is defined by the absence of that which is European, were also some of the most vociferous anti-imperialists of the late eighteenth century. It is only with the ‘great divergence’ of the nineteenth century that the idea of civilization and the politics of imperialism become coterminous. Of course, this distinction should not elide the fact that the Eurocentrism of ‘civilization’ laid the intellectual groundwork for imperialism, whatever the politics of its progenitors.

But we can only fully understand either ‘civilization’ or its subversion in the interwar years by placing it within the long durée of European cosmography and ethnology. R.G. Collingwood’s dictum that, to understand an idea, we must first recognise the question to which it was formulated as an answer, serves us well in the case of ‘civilization’. The European discovery of the South Seas and the New World raised profound new questions about the nature of the world. Who were these alien peoples, where did they come from, and what does this tell us about who ‘we’ are? ‘Civilization’ was the matrix through which these questions were answered by the time of the late eighteenth century. It represented the culmination of two, opposing revolutions in European representations of the globe.

First, the collapse of the Christian-Aristotelean model of the world, and the rise of a secular cosmography in which space is thought of as homogenous, egalitarian and traversable. We might easily forget that, in the late Middle Ages, the world was a radically different place. The globe consisted of a single tri-continental landmass made up of Europe, Asia and Africa, and surrounded by a vast ocean. Each continent was thought to have been populated by one of the three sons of Adam. The centre of the planet vacillated between Rome and Jerusalem; its liminal spaces were impinged on by theological and mythical forces. Angels hovered at the entrance to the terrestrial world, elevated among the onrushing winds of the oceans; ‘monstrous races’ stalked the Southern hemisphere. Pre-Newtonian physics raised serious complications. The reigning Aristotelian conception of the natural world consisted of four concentric circles starting with the heaviest

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element earth, and then ascending to the higher and lighter elements: water, air and fire. The palpable fact that earth protruded above water – heavier above lighter – was a long-standing paradox. Meanwhile, before the idea of gravity, there were fears that ‘up’ and ‘down’ might be reversed at the world’s antipodes; that people’s heads would reach up toward the earth, while rain would descend from the soil.

Iberian efforts to locate a new route to East Asia, and circumvent the formidable barrier of the Islamic world, pressed them Southward around the Cape of Good Hope, and Westward across the Atlantic. The centuries of global discoveries that that followed, alongside the Copernican and Newtonian revolutions, led to the demise of the traditional Christian view of the world. Space became secular, uniform and tractable. Perhaps the best expression of this transformation was the development of the graticule, in which the earth was re-worked as a geometric space represented by the intersecting lines of longitude and latitude. Space became an abstract, self-consistent whole, in which each unit of space was like-for-like. There was no more metaphysical ‘centre’.

Second, the discovery of new peoples whose very existence defied every canon of received knowledge acted to catalyse an ethnological revolution. The initial register of difference was religious. Cannibalism and other strange, idolatrous practices were seen as evidence of the fall, or as the incarnate work of the devil himself. But these natives were also seen as potential converts. They were not, like the Islamic world, seen as a threat to the integrity of the Christian ecumene. Jens Bartelson has claimed that the Christian belief that all humans share a common descent from Adam, and that the Church is a spiritual community that includes anyone who enters into communion with God, created a surprisingly expansive view of the ‘world community’. This led to a certain missionary zeal. Columbus signed himself ‘Christen-ferrens’, or ‘Christ-bearer’.

Gradually, these differences came to be understood as a product of the development of difference social and economic conditions through historical time. To understand the alien cultural and religious practices of these natives, Europeans reached back into their own history. The pagan customs of the New World were analysed by analogy with antiquity. Soon enough, analogy turned into explanation. The perceived similarities between antiquity and the newly ‘discovered’ peoples gave rise to the inference that the one must ultimately descend from the other. Several possible origin stories were contemplated, linking the New World to the Phoenicians, Scythians, Greeks, Romans, and Jews – among various others. In his pre-eminent history of the ‘comparative science of ignoble savages’, Ronald L. Meek argues that one all-important step in this story was the move from a theory of origins in ‘descent’, to a theory of origins based upon ‘like conditions’. On this view, the common attributes of native and ancient societies were simply a product of the fact that both existed under relatively similar social and economic conditions. The ‘like condition’ that emerged as the key explanation of difference

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was the ‘mode of production’ of a society. For a long time, this view was precluded by the story of *Genesis*, in which hunting, pasture and agriculture were said to have co-existed. Meek argues that we can see this point in a rough form in Locke in the seventeenth century. But it only truly crystallised in the four stage theories of Turgot, Smith and Ferguson in the eighteenth century. These stadial theories held that societies pass through four stages of development based on hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce. Thus the differences of the European and the non-European world came to be mediated through time.

Let us bring all of this together. By the time of the eighteenth century the globe was understood a geometric space without a metaphysical centre, competing physical laws, or an unbridgeable ocean. It was thought of as homogenous, egalitarian and traversable. In a certain abstract sense this cosmography of space laid the basis for globalism. But as Henri Lefebvre and Reinhardt Koselleck point out, space is intersected by time. Europe, in part, came to this understanding of space through imperial ventures to subjugate, convert, and exploit the natives the New World and South Seas. This raised the question of what the relation of Europe to these alien peoples was. Eventually, this difference between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ came to be understood as the outcome of historical time in a stadial theory of progress. Thus, homogenous space was supervened by hierarchical time. It was this image of the world – a uniform globe centred in Europe through a universal philosophy of progress – that civilization came to be the highest conceptual representative of.

**The End of European Civilization**

In this section, I want to very briefly set the scene for my discussion of Toynbee and Wright’s re-conception of ‘civilization’. How did the old assumptions of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries give way a view of civilization as plural and fatalistic? The first thing to note is that the interwar period *in general* was beset by a growing anxiety about cultural, economic and racial decline. One of the most influential catalysts for this kind of civilizational self-doubt was Oswald Spengler. I start with Spengler, before momentarily touching on some of the broader fears of the age about the end of civilization.

Spengler claims to have conceived of *Decline of the West* before the outbreak of the First World War in 1911. But, whether this is true or not, the books success was undoubtedly a direct product of the catastrophes that came to afflict Europe in the following decades. Spengler was an isolated and unknown figure before it came to publication in 1918. But he managed to find philosophical expression of the fatalism of the coming period, and was launched into the centre of one of the great debates of the era as a result. In this respect, Wright and Toynbee were no different. Spengler was an essential touchstone for both of them, and prefigured their own

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re-conception of the idea of ‘civilization’. Yet unlike Wright and Toynbee, Spengler was never a major voice in contemporary global politics. For all these reasons, I want to now survey the kernel of Spengler’s argument.

Spengler wants to diagnose ‘West-European-American’ culture through a ‘morphological history’ that rejects ‘cause-and-effect’ in favour of a hermeneutic analysis of the functional role of symbols in the cultural whole. By comparing symbols both within and between cultures across history, Spengler claims to have discovered a common life-cycle that governs their rise and fall. Spengler held an organicist view of society, inspired by the writings of Goethe and Nietzsche. For him, each particular ‘Culture’ is just one instantiation of a species – the human race – with its own unvarying biological clock. We should note here, that ‘civilization’ has always held a different significance in German. It came to stand for the material, mechanical and commercial elements of the modern world. It was often used in the pejorative. ‘Culture’ was the preferred term for the cultural, spiritual, and moral achievements of Europe. Spengler follows this precedent. Substantively, however, his argument is about what the Anglophone understood as ‘civilization’. Spengler believed that Europe was in the final stages of its life-cycle. He called this decadent period ‘civilization’, that he saw as characterised by the hollowing out of the high culture created in the original grandeur of a society. Practical concerns come to trump everything else, received tradition begins to deteriorate, money becomes the chief symbol of society, democratic politics becomes an empty simulacrum, and imperialism dominates foreign policy. He termed this degenerate state of affairs ‘Caesarism’.

Spengler represents the beginning of a cultural volte-face. Europe’s hubristic self-image as the centre of an invincible march of progress was swiftly upended by the successive crises of the early twentieth century. This reversal became secreted in the literature of the interwar period via the work of Thomas Mann, T.S. Elliot, Aldous Huxley, Hermann Broch, and countless others. This well-worn trope reached parodic self-consciousness as early as 1928 with Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall*. But it also suffused political debate. Charles A. Beard, perhaps the pre-eminent American historian of the moment, edited a ‘symposium on civilization’ among some of the West’s leading thinkers. The aim was to respond to declinism in general, and Spengler in particular. ‘All over the world’, Beard declares, ‘the thinkers and searchers who scan the horizon of the future are attempting to assess the values of civilization’, such as to establish whether ‘the curve of contemporary civilization now rises majestically toward a distant zenith or in reality has already begun to sink rapidly towards a nadir near at hand’. H.G. Wells struck a common note when, in *The Salvaging of Civilization*, he lamented that the ‘easy forward movement of human affairs which for several generations had seemed to

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17 The same held across the arts, e.g. Judith A. Barter, ed., 2016, *America After the Fall: Paintings in the 1930s*. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
19 Ibid., p.1
justify’ a collective sense of inexorable ‘progress... has been checked violently and perhaps arrested altogether’.

The threat of a relapse into total war was just one of the threats arrayed against Western civilization. One of the ‘Great Powers’ of Europe had succumbed to Bolshevism. For a brief period, it appeared as if communism might spread to Central Europe. Even the stolid shores of Britain were not left entirely untouched. When mounting riots in Glasgow sparked fears of a Bolshevik uprising, Whitehall decided to dispatch over ten-thousand soldiers to the city. Inflation and high prices stalked the West after the war, whilst high unemployment endured throughout the 1920s. The ‘Great Depression’ precipitated an intense bout of economic self-doubt. Sidney and Beatrice Webb asked whether capitalism had not already been superseded in their *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization*; Lewis Mumford contended that machine capitalism had corroded social relations in *Technics and Civilization*, and called for what he called ‘basic communism’; and the early works of Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno began to diagnose the ideological effects of capitalism, building on Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*. At the same time, Mahatma Ghandi and Rabindranath Tagore – the two leading voices of the burgeoning anti-colonial movement – castigated the heartless logic of Western capitalism from outside.

In another vein, the threat of the ‘mongrelisation’ of white, aristocratic blood through miscegenation haunted the racial imagination. Following on from Madison Grant’s notorious *The Passing of the Great Race*, and throwing it together with Spengler’s thesis of decline and fall, Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Revolt Against Civilization* argued that civilizations belie a fatal contradiction: they represent an increasingly complex form of social organisation, that requires such effort and time from the best stock of human beings that their rate of reproduction falls behind that of those of weak stock – who, because of their indigent situation, revolt against civilization itself. Stoddard ‘ranked’ immigrants to the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe as ‘decidedly inferior to the north European elements’. He placed ‘negroes’ last, who he calls ‘inferior to all other elements’. This line of thinking constituted a central tributary to the debates behind the introduction of (differential) immigration quotas in America in the early 1920s, which followed the same implicit ranking. Indeed, it was possible for Vice-President Calvin Coolridge to publicly declare that ‘America must be kept American. Biological laws show... that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races’. This fear was often

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21 We get some sense of how real of a possibility this was considered at the time when Eric Hobsbawm reminds us that, ‘in 1919 the Comintern regarded Berlin as the logical place for its headquarters, its location in Moscow was temporary’. See Eric Hobsbawm, 1977, *Revolutionaries*. Quartet Books, London.
24 See p.47 of Lothrop Stoddard, *The Revolt Against the West: The Menace of the Under Man*.
allied with the eugenicist potential of birth control, as in Margaret Sanger’s *The Pivot of Civilization*. From another angle, Robert Vitalis has done yeomen’s work to reconstruct the racial beginnings of the discipline of International Relations, in which race featured as the main unit of analysis, and colonial administration as the main object of analysis. Racism, in a variety of shades, coloured the global outlook of the West.

Let us now step back for a moment. The traditional idea of civilization was a matrix of difference that ordered global homogenous space through a hierarchical timescale of progress. It was a process and an achievement. Europe was the only part of the world to claim the mantle of entering into the time of civilization; though this was extended to North America at the turn of the nineteenth century. It was an exceptional and progressive, world-historical movement without peer. The non-European world was defined by the absence of that which was European, and was thought much the less for it. It languished in savagery and barbarism. Yet, during the interwar years, this idea began to fragment. War, revolution and depression tempered the lofty hubris of the nineteenth century. Europe itself had spiralled into self-destruction, while the non-European world looked as if it was on the ascent. This had a double-effect. On the one hand, the basic temporal plausibility of European progress waned: there was a widespread fear that progress had stalled, or even reversed. One the other, the European world was no longer the undisputed centre of the world. Spengler was prescient in this regard. For he chided the myopia of the conventional idea of progress, in which ‘the great cultures made to follow orbits round us as the presumed centre of all world-happenings’. This was a *cosmographic* revolution, and indeed Spengler saw it as such. He wanted to create a ‘Copernican’ history that ‘admits no sort of privileged position to... Classical or Western Culture as against the culture of India, Babylon, China, Egypt, the Arabs, Mexico’. I should emphasise that these two things are not separate from one another. The idea of exceptional European progress depended on a plausible claim to being the undisputed centre of global power, and vice versa.

Arnold Toynbee and Declinism

In the remainder of this paper, I turn to Toynbee and Wright’s treatment of the idea of civilization, and place their historical theory side-by-side with their analysis of global affairs. This allows us to hold the fundamental theoretical shift in the idea of ‘civilization’ together with concrete politics events in a single narrative. We are thus granted a full view of the relation of the one to the other. This is also the key rationale for focusing upon Toynbee and Wright: both straddled ably between the academic and politics worlds.

I focus upon how Toynbee and Wright reconceived of the idea of civilization as something plural and fatalistic, and feared that European civilization might collapse under the pressure of competing national particularisms.

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27 For an account of racial anxiety in Britain, see ch.3 in Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization, 1919-1939*. Penguin: London, UK

28 Spengler, *Decline of the West*, p.18
Both saw the final days of other civilizations relived in the events of the interwar period. Yet neither Toynbee nor Wright shared the determinism of Spengler. They remained committed liberal internationalists, and held out hope that the scene was set for the leap to world government. European decline acted to undermine the inherited cosmography. While the idea of progress was not dismantled, it began to lose ground as the central organising category of global political space. This paved the way for political globalism. In a certain sense, for Toynbee and Wright, the decline of Europe went hand-in-hand with the emergence of globalism. Europe was fractured into antagonistic nationalisms, it no longer had the power to manage global affairs, and the striking increases in the speed and scope of transport and communication had brought the world into closer contact. For Wright and Toynbee, the crises of the interwar period could only be resolved through world government.

In this section, I retrace Toynbee’s theory of civilizations in *A Study of History*. I then turn the way in which he read this historical thesis into the events of the interwar period in his annual *Surveys* for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and his public lectures. Toynbee saw the ‘Wilsonian moment’ as inaugurating a new age of global national self-determination. In the 1920s he believed that this nationalistic space required an overarching system of administration to meet the needs of a globalised world and to reconcile the fissures among civilizations. In this respect, he saw the League of Nations as a substitute of the waning British Empire: a new project for global governance, imperial administration and inter-civilizational cooperation. Yet, the failures of the League of Nations quickly put paid to these hopes. By the time of the Cold War Toynbee had recanted on his original assessment of global politics. He claimed that a world of self-governing states had been trumped by the rise of large political agglomerations, namely the United States and the Soviet Union. He contemplated a series of possible new organisations: Anglo-American federation, a recrudescent British commonwealth, and European federation. But Toynbee never let go of the belief that civilizations are the most important cleavage in world politics, and argued that non-Western civilizations would – sooner or later – reassert themselves. As such, he came to embrace an ontology of difference based on thick cultural pluralism. This contrasts with the mono-cultural outlook of Wright, who heralded the birth of a ‘global civilization’.

The spark for *A Study of History* was Thucydides. When Toynbee re-read the *History of the Peloponnesian War* in the midst of the Great War, he saw a striking and tragic resemblance between the two. He came to the thesis that the Hellenistic world fell in the Peloponnesian War – that Rome was, as such, a degenerative and stillborn addendum to the real show. At the same time, Toynbee had long known that he wanted to write a grand history that rose high above the circumscribed boundaries of nation-states, to chart the trajectories of entire civilizations. But it was only when Toynbee read Spengler that this idea truly crystallised. Putting these two together, he attempted to write a history of civilizations in the mould of his tragic Thucydidean narrative.

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31 See p.9 of Toynbee, ‘My View of History’.
of the degeneration of the Hellenistic world. In what follows, I concentrate on the first six volumes of A Study of War – of an eventual twelve – that Toynbee published in the interwar period. For it was the circumstances of that time which framed his historical thought.

Let us now turn to the fundamental thesis of A Study of History. Toynbee distinguishes between civilizations and primitive societies. These two kinds of human culture are ‘wholes’ that constitute what Toynbee calls ‘intelligible fields of study’. He does not follow Spengler in regarding them as organisms. Rather, he believes this to be an empirical fact borne out by historical study. For instance, he rejects the idea that one could possibly understand the history of England without situating it within the much larger historical field of ‘Western Christendom’.

Toynbee identifies twenty-six civilizations in total, but judges that only seven are still living: ‘Western Christendom’; ‘Orthodox Christendom’ and its offshoot in Russia; ‘Far Eastern Society’ and its offshoot in Japan; ‘Islamic Society’; and ‘Hindu Society’. Toynbee wants to establish how civilizations emerge and grow, and inversely, how they breakdown and disintegrate. The crux of Toynbee’s answer is that challenges – initially in the environment, but then within society itself – can stimulate commensurate responses among the ‘creative minorities’ of societies. This leads to dynamic self-determination, that stands in contraposition to the static condition of primitive societies captivated by the customs of the past. Because this response depends on a creative minority, however, it can only acquire the assent and cooperation of all society through a process of mimetic ‘drilling’ that inculcates the right habits in the uncreative majority. This creates two potential pitfalls. First, ‘the leaders may infect themselves with the hypnotism which they have induced in their followers’ and begin to act from custom instead of creative initiative. Second, to compensate for their loss of control the creative minority may turn to violence and degenerate into a ‘dominant minority’.

Toynbee finished the twin volumes of A Study of History covering the disintegration of civilizations on the eve of the Second World War. Reflecting on the present conjuncture, he speculates that Western civilization may be passing through the initial stages of breakdown. The creative elites of a civilization ought to continually adjust its institutions to meet the onrush of oncoming events. If this elite begins to lose its self-determination and act from custom, however, disharmonies may start to emerge within the wider civilization. This failure of adjustment is a problem of inertia, or of putting ‘new wine in old bottles’. These maladjustments create

32 Ibid., p.49-50
33 Ibid., p.275-279
34 Ibid., p.278
35 This whole account is conspicuously indebted to the vitalistic conception of life in Henri Bergson’s Creative Evolution. Toynbee first encountered Bergson at Oxford.
36 Ibid., p.279-307
mounting tensions, which either find a sudden and explosive outlet in revolutionary action, or which slowly accumulate within self-destructive ‘social enormities’.

Toynbee believed this to be the present condition of the Western world. In short, ‘the importation of the new driving forces of democracy and industrialism into the old machine of the parochial state has generated the twin enormities of political and economic nationalism’\(^{37}\). Politically, the limited games of war fought between the European monarchs of the eighteenth century have been supplanted by a self-destructive form of ‘total war’. We first witness this ‘totalitarian’ form of war, Toynbee argues, in the American War of Independence and French Revolutionary Wars. It has advanced in lockstep with a nationalistic perversion of democracy, in which war becomes a totalising crusade among competing parochialisms. Economically, the heyday of nineteenth century free trade under the watchful gaze of British hegemony began to fragment in the 1870s. When new powers began to industrialise ‘it suited their parochial interests on a short view to pursue a cut-throat industrial competition’\(^{38}\). Cobden had failed to foresee, Toynbee laments, the effects of rivalrous democratic nationalisms on the economic plane. The core of the problem is that both democracy and industrialism are cosmopolitan by nature, while the sovereign nations in which they emerged are parochial by nature\(^{39}\). The failure to adjust one to the other has generated a totalising form of war that threatens the destruction of the West.

The underlying explanation is that the ‘creative minority’ of Western civilization has become a victim of its own mimetic drilling. It ‘idolizes’ the institution of the sovereign state in a blind form of worship that inhibits its ability to adjust society to oncoming challenges\(^{40}\). This particular idolization has a parallel within the degeneration of the Hellenistic civilization. Toynbee contends that the ‘Solonian’ economic reforms of Athens in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. had the effect of bringing the city-states of the Hellenes into a single economic cosmos. The interdependence that followed called for a corresponding political federation, but all attempts that were made failed to overcome the sovereign city-state. The city-state became idolized, paralysing any creative response. The only effective efforts that did emerge, came from the margins of the Hellenes. First in the form of Alexander’s efforts from Macedonia to bring the Hellenistic world into a voluntary Cosmopolis. If this had not failed Alexander might have salvaged the entire civilization. Second in the form of the imposition of a ‘universal state’ on the Hellenes from Rome. In short the classical parallel to the nationalist in-fighting of the interwar period led ultimately to a degenerate imperialism.

Despite this seemingly cataclysmic diagnosis, Toynbee recoiled from strict determinism. He explicitly rejected Spengler’s organicism, the idea of racial degeneration, and the notion that history is somehow cyclical per se.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p.285
\(^{38}\) Ibid., p.289
\(^{39}\) Ibid., p.287
\(^{40}\) Ibid., p.317-319
The past can inform our self-understanding, and Toynbee believes that one important lesson of history is that all existing civilizations have fallen under circumstances whose beginnings are analogous to our own, but it cannot determine our present. Toynbee dispenses with the idea that we are bound to a pre-determined fate. What hope is there then, that the West can break all precedent?

Arnold Toynbee and Globalism

Toynbee’s pluralised conception of civilization appears to pull in the opposite direction of political globalism. On the one hand, his conception of civilization divides the world into discrete cultural entities with their own endogenous dynamics. On the other, the idea of world government presumes that all peoples can be brought under a single order. Toynbee believes that he can sidestep this tension, however, by distinguishing between cultural, economic and political ‘planes’. His thesis about the genesis, growth, and breakdown of civilizations pertains, in the first instance, to the cultural plane. This allows him to recognise that Western civilization had spread its economic, military and legal practices over the world over the last several centuries. Every society, Toynbee declares, ‘has been caught in the network of relations which our Modern Industrialism has spread all over the habitable world’. These economic relations had created the basis for, and themselves demanded if they were not to lead to catastrophe, an over-arching world government above individual cultures. Toynbee, however, did not believe that economic or political globalism annulled the cultural fact that discrete historical entities – civilizations – were deep parts of the fabric of the world that continued to define global politics. We must step carefully at this point however. Toynbee is clear that the six living non-Western civilizations were in decline before the impact of the West. Yet the accumulated historical sediment of these civilizations continue into the present; they leave an indelible cultural imprint on the societies they leave in their wake. And for this reason, they remain perhaps the salient division in global politics. Toynbee warns that over time, these other civilizations will eventually rise once more. The superiority of the West is, therefore, a necessarily time-bound phenomenon. I will return to this point later, but let us first reflect on the context in which Toynbee’s globalism first emerged.

Toynbee had spent most of the First World War thinking about nationalism. He wrote Nationality and the War at Balliol, spent his time at the Foreign Office detailing the Armenian genocide, and went on to advisee Lloyd George on the division of Ottoman territories at Versailles. The fall of the ‘Concert of Europe’ and the rise of the non-Western world, therefore, loomed large in his mind. He possessed a first-hand view of the Wilsonian moment, and the burst of national self-determination movements onto the global scene.

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41 Ibid., p.254
42 Ibid., p.265-267
The pluralisation of civilization was, in many ways, the intellectual correlate of the material condition of global politics following the First World War. *The World After the Peace Conference* was Toynbee’s first publication for the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Here we see that the fragmentation of the former European empires led, in his mind, to a major global re-balancing. He contrasts the world of 1914 with the world of 1920. *Before the war*, a small group of ‘Great Powers’ presided over nearly the whole world. Four of these powers were European (France, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary), two were half-European (Britain and Russia) and two stood outside Europe (the United States and Japan). Their size and strength placed them ‘beyond the reach of destruction’, and were thus ‘assumed to be permanent features of the landscape’. Yet ‘below the surface’ of this collective pre-eminence stood two forces that would be its undoing: industrialism and democracy. The first tended towards global interdependence from the later nineteenth century onwards. The second was only to truly emerge in the course of the First World War. *After the war*, the European Powers had been decimated. Austria-Hungary collapsed, while Germany and Russia were ‘permanently weakened’. Meanwhile, the global partners of the British Commonwealth, the United States and its sphere of influence in Latin America, and Japan had all increased in relative strength, while the ‘creative power’ of the principle of national self-determination had spread to the colonial territories of Europe. The League of Nations’ attempt to induct all ‘fully self-governing’ states was, Toynbee contends, a ‘deliberate attempt to substitute a worldwide for a European institution’. In so doing, it was ‘in harmony with the realities of the new international situation’, in which “Europe” had been merged with “the World”.

This depicts the immediate global backdrop that framed Toynbee’s re-conception of ‘civilization’. The decline of the European world through its own calamitous self-destruction, and the fragmentation of the world into a space defined by independent self-governing states, undermined the inherited view of the world in which the European continent stood re-eminent. Its upward progress, and its superiority, were no longer undisputed or self-evident truths. The material conditions that had enabled Europe’s civilizational hubris were beginning to recede. Toynbee was alert to the gravity of this change. He observes that, ‘while in 1914 the Westerner, from his commanding position, might be tempted to ignore their existence, in 1920 he was aware that they were more than maintaining their ground’. Recall that it was in the immediate post-war years, on his return from Versailles, that Toynbee struck upon his thesis whilst reflecting on the great war and its consequences. There is clearly a tangible connection, here, between fragmenting global politics and the pluralisation of the idea of civilization. This itself is *symptomatic* of the fact that a great deal of global political thought that grew out of

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45 Ibid., p.13
46 Ibid., p.26-27
47 Ibid., p.26-27, p.17
48 Ibid., p.26-27
49 Ibid., p.68
the declinism of the era. We can think of this both materially and intellectually: strategically, the old European powers no longer brandished the relative superiority to continue a regime of unchallenged global dominance and imperialism; intellectually, old beliefs that ordered global political space through a historical timescale of progress had less and less purchase. The globalisation of economics and nationalism had laid the groundwork for a new, world government. Toynbee saw this as the only way to escape from the ‘time of troubles’ that had divided the old powers into competing national particularisms. For him any viable solution to this predicament had to at once embrace nationalism and overcome it.

Like many of his generation Toynbee saw the British Empire as a prototype for the League of Nations\(^{50}\). In *The World After the Peace Conference*, Toynbee argued that both the British Empire and the United States had managed to retain their ‘dependencies’ where the other Great Powers had failed because of their progressive devolution of power. In the terms of *A Study of History*, they had demonstrated a creative dynamism in the face of new social forces. Britain had granted self-government to its settler colonies, while America had established formal parity of status with its Latin American dependencies at the Pan-American Conference of 1888. Moreover, both groups of dependencies were able to enter the League of Nations as independent sovereign states. This is what Toynbee would later describe as ‘simultaneous unity and multiplicity’\(^{51}\). When the British Empire granted the Dominions autonomous and equal status within the newly coronated ‘British Commonwealth’ in 1926, Toynbee wrote a brief book on *The Conduct of British Empire Foreign Relations Since the Peace Settlement*. He reaffirms the that the ‘centre of gravity’ of the world had relocated, and that the British Empire ‘had ceased to be a European system with overseas appendages and had become a world-wide system in which Europe no longer retained a predominance’\(^{52}\). In this sense, the British Empire was a qualitatively new kind of *global* entity that had successfully reconciled itself to a new era in which global politics was becoming a single ‘indivisible drama enacted on one world-wide stage’\(^{53}\).

In this ‘grand experiment’, ‘Canada and Australia would probably grow into communities of the same stature and species as the United States, New Zealand into an antipodean counterpart of Great Britain, while the Range of potentialities in the destiny of South Africa was extraordinarily wide’ (turning upon whether it remains a small white-majority country or grows into a biracial union). Toynbee envisions India becoming ‘an Oriental type of United States’ within the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, Hongkong is set to become the

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\(^{50}\) Mark Mazower, 2009, *No Enchanted Place*. Princeton University Press, Princeton. Toynbee was evidently influenced by General Smuts, who he spent some time with at the Foreign Office.


\(^{52}\) Ibid., p.30-33

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p.7
commercial hub of the Pacific, Toynbee tells us, ‘not unlike that which had been exercised in the Mediterranean, in certain past age, by Venice and Rhodes’

Toynbee makes the case that the British Empire is embryonic of the League of Nations in three ways. First, the two share a series of structural and legal qualities: both are global communities of fully self-governing members; both reject the powers and functions of a super-state; both manage cooperation through unanimous decision instead of majoritarianism; both are committed to the outlawry of war; and both distinguish between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ belligerency. Second, these global organisations are ‘mutually indispensable’ to one another. The British Empire serves as a bridge to one of two great powers that stands outside of the League, the United States. The League of Nations provides a strong insurance to the Empire against the outbreak of general war. Third, the British Empire is the crucible of growing contact among civilizations, ‘one of the most important world-problems of the age’. The Empire has negotiated gestating conflicts among its ‘subjects’ adeptly, and in doing so, represents an important precedent for the League. In all three respects the two organisations represent an attempt to overcome the self-destructive balance of power system, which has proven ‘hopelessly incapable of regulation by other means that resorting to war periodically’. In the history of civilizations, Toynbee cautions, these defects in the balance of power system have only ever been overcome when one state rose up to impose the outlawry of war. Whilst these powers were guided by the ‘vision of a universal and perpetual peace’, the violence that has been required has invariably brought about a condition of material and spiritual exhaustion. They could preclude war only through the creation of a ‘universal state’ by violence. But, their ultimate ‘downfalls showed that none of them were able to escape the nemesis of their military origins’. Toynbee surmises that, for the British Empire and the League of Nations, the ‘positive object of preserving full national self-government’ is no less important than the abolition of war. For the ‘perpetuation of social vitality and creative power’ depends just as much on the one as on the other. The two organisations represent the ‘great experiments towards the solution of this world-problem... allied both in spirit and in aim’.

Toynbee’s hopes for a peace among self-governing societies within an imperial or global organisation did not survive the next two decades. In the 1930s Toynbee lamented the re-assertion of the ‘idol’ of sovereign

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54 Ibid., p.40-41
55 Ibid., p.18-24. The distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ belligerency means that if either organisation declares war upon another state then, although its members are then committed to a legal state of ‘passive’ war with that state, they are not bound to practically enter into ‘active’ military engagements. As such, they are entitled to determine their own military posture.
56 Ibid., p.24
57 Ibid, p.13
58 Ibid., p.42-44
59 Ibid., p.43
60 Ibid., p.44
independence by the ‘Triangle Powers’ of Germany, Italy and Japan. Japan’s intervention in Manchuria, and Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia, had vitiating the League. The United States mistook its geographical position for a safe-haven and returned to isolation, a misnomer in the air age; the Soviet Union had descended into a ‘gigantic madhouse’ amidst Stalin’s purges; and Britain and France were still horror-struck by the destruction of the First World War. This combined effect was inaction, that opened the door to the triangle powers. But it was the policy of Britain that most animated Toynbee. In the century from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the outbreak of the Great War, the sea-power and industrial capacity of the British Empire had allowed it to ‘provide the rudiments of a world-order out of her own national resources’. But it could no longer uphold this hegemonic function. The ‘Pax Britannica’ had to be put ‘into commission’. From ‘the British point of view’ the League of Nations can be looked on ‘as an attempt to maintain and improve an international public service of British origin’. But the British governing class had failed to register this fact, and had spurned the League. The result was a precarious return to anarchical balance of power politics.

In the 1940s, after the Second World War, Toynbee reassessed the geopolitical landscape. It was now clear, he observed, that the break-up of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires had masked the truly significant consequence of the First World War. For a brief moment it looked ‘as if the tendency was away from the concentration of power in a few centers and towards the distribution of power in a large number of centers’, but the more lasting effect was the destruction of several Great Powers. In the space of a single generation, the number of Great Powers has dwindled from eight to just two: the United States and the Soviet Union. There has been a sudden jump in the scale of material life, in which the old European states have been ‘dwarfed’ by large-scale federal bodies.

Whilst the United Nations may provide a useful forum for discussion for the United States and Soviet Union, neither of these countries are close enough ‘culturally, socially, and spiritually’ to cast off their sovereignty and enter into a joint world federation. In these conditions, ‘playing for time’ to avert a ‘universal state’ is not ‘unreasonable’. The formation of a world federation might be a precondition to the continuance of Western civilization, but given the practical constraints of the moment, all that we can do now is work to avoid another global conflagration. In time the Soviet Union and the United may draw closer together. For this reason, Toynbee defended several different shades of regionalism in the late 1940s. He argued that a federation among the main representations of Western civilization – the United States, Western Europe,
Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa – would both re-energise the smaller European states, and constitute such a formidable power that it would never be challenged by the Soviet Union. Toynbee briefly entertained the idea that British Commonwealth might constitute a third global super-power, but claimed that it was travelling in the wrong direction: it was decentralising and not centralising. He also contemplated a federated Europe as a bulwark to the Soviet Union, but argued that it was beset by two fatal problems. First, Germany would sooner or later ascend to the top, and threaten its partners. Second, like the Commonwealth, the European states are too attached to their liberties to enter into a centralised organisation like the United States or Soviet Union.

Toynbee’s changing visions of global political organisation is a bell-weather of the era. Yet beneath the churn of unfolding events Toynbee held fast to a plural conception of global political space in which Europe was but one of many independent cultural agencies. He did not order space along a hierarchical timescale of progress even if, across the period, he continued to believe in the moral integrity of the British Commonwealth. World War One had, in his mind, led to the fragmentation of the old order. In the 1920s he envisioned this changing space as fundamentally nationalistic. The challenge was for the British Empire – and increasingly – the League of Nations to mediate these particularisms at a level commensurate with economic globalisation. The failure of the League of Nations shattered these hopes, however, while the rise of the United States and Soviet Union to global pre-eminence led Toynbee to reluctantly embrace regionalism.

We have to pause to truly appreciate the magnitude of the change witnessed in the global imaginary over the beginning of the twentieth century. By the end of period, Europe had not only fallen from its place as the pre-eminent centre of global political space and the tip of a hierarchical timescale of progress. It was also pushed to the margins of geopolitics as the Cold War began to take shape, an impotent ancillary to the United States in a political game that was being played over its head. For Toynbee, this had led to a lamentable contraction of the plural nationhood that, during the post-war years, he believed to define the horizon of global affairs. It was these conditions, after all, the catalysed his re-conception of civilization.

Despite this fact, Toynbee did not relinquish the idea that civilizations remained the most important cleavage in world politics. While the West had succeeded in spreading its mechanical social practices across the world, and had come in this way to dominate the political and economic planes of global relations, it was never able to penetrate and displace non-Western culture. For this was not a surface phenomenon but something which

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68 Ibid., p.49-50
69 See p.138-139, Toynbee, ‘The International Outlook’ in Civilization on Trial.
70 Ibid., p.140-141; Toynbee, ‘The Dwarfing of Europe’, p.121-125.
was rooted in thousands of years of accumulated history. Toynbee foresaw an eventual re-balancing of world affairs, as non-Western civilizations began to re-assert themselves:

‘In the course of generations and centuries, a unified world gradually works its way toward an equilibrium between its diverse component cultures, the Western component will gradually be relegated to the modest place which is all that it can expect to retain in virtue of its intrinsic worth by comparison with those other cultures’.

Toynbee also warned of the counter-movement of other civilizations. He saw the Soviet Union as an omen of what lay in wait for the West. It was one of the earliest non-Western civilizations to assimilate the economic, bureaucratic, and political forms of the West under Peter the Great. But this ‘hybridisation’ of the mechanical techniques of the West and the culture of Orthodox Christendom, had created a heretical anti-Western force that challenged its very existence. Toynbee feared more of the same in the future. In this sense, ‘civilizations’ remained thick, autonomous cultural entities that posed lasting problems for cooperation. He saw culture as the fundamental register of difference in global political space.

Quincy Wright: Civilizational Decline, Technological Progress

In this section, I reconstruct the treatment of ‘civilization’ in the work of Quincy Wright in the first half of the twentieth century. Wright drew heavily from Toynbee to construct a theory of the nature of war. He agreed with Toynbee that civilizations have risen and fallen over time, and that their break-down was rooted in their common failure to adjust themselves to social change. Wright did not treat every civilization as structurally self-same, however. He believed that technological progress had generated a level of global integration which permitted new and more effective forms for self-adjustment among states. But technical progress had also increased the number, scale and destructiveness of conflicts in the world. Wright argued that, if the world did not enter into a global federation that could properly adjust itself to these changes, then it would follow the path of all other civilizations into the grave. Whilst Toynbee believed that the world of the twentieth century remained divided between distinct civilizations with their own endogenous cultural dynamics, Wright argued that global integration had led to the emergence of a ‘global civilization’. This was not simply an economic or political phenomenon, but one which united societies on the cultural plane. He saw the potential for a world united by a thin layer of symbols that emphasise global over national interests. This led to a flattened view of global political space, defined by common values, institutions and practices. But while this admitted a greater measure of inter-cultural dialogue than the traditional idea of ‘civilization’, it replayed Eurocentrism in a new key: instead of denigrating the non-West as barbaric and savage by virtue of its absence of that which is seen

71 See p.158, ‘Civilization on Trial’, in Civilization on Trial.
72 See, for instance, ‘Encounters Between Civilizations’, in Civilization on Trial, and ‘Russia and the West’ in The World and the West. 1952 BBC Reith Lectures.
to be Western, it came to assimilate the non-West into the values and developmental trajectory of the West. In other words, it shifted from a negative Eurocentrism to a positive Eurocentrism.

Wright’s enduring work was his encyclopaedic tome published in 1942, *A Study of War*. The book is a synthesis of the collective work of the ‘Causes of War Project’. But that raw material is pushed and pulled into a generic model for the study of global politics. I believe that the spine of the argument is defined by two key historical claims: that civilizations have risen and fall over time through a series of common stages detailed by Toynbee in *A Study of War*, but that technological progress has both accentuated contradictions in Western civilization such as to threaten its collapse, and founded the spatio-temporal basis for a ‘global civilization’ through ever-fastening communication and transport. This meant that global politics was both in a state of unprecedented danger, and ready to make the unprecedented jump to a just and peaceful world government. But before we unpack this argument, it will be instructive to touch on Wright’s method.

Wright was a pragmatist, in that he thought that ‘knowledge’ should be judged relative to its ability to satisfy our practical interests in the specific situation that we face. Wright was also a historicist. One can only properly understand any given part of the social world, Wright thought, when one understands its place in the historical ‘whole’. Finally, Wright considered himself a ‘relativist’. By this, he simply meant that every claim to knowledge is relative to a particular perspective. There is no single and apodictic science of world politics, then, but only a number of points-of-view to be judged relative to their pragmatic value. Of course science had proven itself effective, and so should not be discarded. But so had other methods of investigation.

These three beliefs – pragmatism, historicism, relativism – are the starting assumptions of *A Study of War*.

Wright divides the book into three parts. First, he maps the history of war through what he takes to be its four most important epochs: animal warfare, primitive warfare, historic civilization, and world civilization. Wright treats each of these epochs as a discrete whole, with their own internal dynamics. War has a different quality in each of these historical systems. Second, Wright analyses the nature of war in the present historical juncture relative to four perspectives: psychological, technical, military, and legal. Wright does not grant an a priori priority to any one of these perspectives, even if empirical analysis bears out that some factors are especially important in some ways (more on this in the discussion below). Speaking broadly, Wright argues that war is generated by a complex of factors from all four of these areas. But those factors are always relative to the socio-historical moment with which one is concerned. Third, Wright offers a series of practical suggestions for mitigating the worst effects of war in the short-run, and for creating a ‘world community’ in the long-run. He would go on to call these ‘tactical’ and ‘strategic’ forms of political thinking. Wright was an astute judge of politics and, throughout his life, tried his best to align that which was tactically prudent in the present, with that which was strategically imperative in the future. Despite the fact that Wright is all too often lumped

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together with the idealists targeted by E.H. Carr in The Twenty Years’ Crisis, he explicitly criticised ‘idealists’ who refused to adapt their thinking to the rapidly changing environment of global politics. He later showed sage judgement when he criticised the caricature of ‘idealism’ among post-war realists as an ideological prop – a line of argument ultimately vindicated by recent revisionist scholarship.

The name of A Study of War is a fairly accurate indication of its debt to A Study of History. Wright was clearly intent on constructing a panoramic account of war on the scale of Toynbee’s universal history. But the two also share a common starting point. Wright was a historicist, or a contextual ‘holist’, and couched a large part of the first section of A Study of War in an idiosyncratic reading of Toynbee. Like Toynbee, he distinguishes between ‘primitive’ societies and ‘civilizations’, and defines this distinction on similarly Bergsonian terms. Primitive societies are trapped in unthinking custom, and languish in a ‘static’ condition that cannot easily adapt to social change. Civilizations, in contrast, exhibit ‘dynamic motion along a course of change and growth’. They have a level of rational self-understanding which permits them to predict and control social phenomenon. Unlike Toynbee, however, Wright does not believe that the discrete civilizational groupings handed down from the past are immutable ‘cultural’ entities. Instead he foregrounds the material integration of the world into a single nexus. Wright believed that the world was undergoing a world-historical transition, in which the civilizational divisions of the past would be overcome by global integration. But this process was radically incomplete. The world was teetering between the self-destructive oscillations of historic civilizations, and the stability of modern civilization. The only way to avoid cataclysm, then, was to complete the transition to a truly global civilization. How is this possible?

Wright makes this case in three steps. First, he accepts Toynbee’s basic historical explanation of the decline and fall of civilizations. Civilizations have collapsed when they have been unable to adjust themselves to social change, and this collapse has begun with a ‘time of troubles’, and climaxed with a ‘universal state’ mired in violence. The survival of a civilization, then, depends wholly on the extent of its capacity for creative self-adjustment. For Toynbee, this was something uniform. Sooner or later, self-adjustment would fail, and the civilization would collapse. Whilst Toynbee shrank from determinism, he never explained how societies could overcome the problem of ‘social enormities’. Second, Wright believes that human history exhibits a steady increase in technical knowledge over time. While states have risen and fallen, while civilizations have

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74 Wright, A Study of War, p.195 & p.1091.  
76 The revisionist literature on interwar idealism has ballooned in recent years. For its first major statement, see Peter Wilson and Peter Wilson, ed., 1995, Thinkers of the Twenty Years’ Crisis: Inter-War Idealism Reassessed. Clarendon Press, Oxford.  
77 Wright, A Study of War, p.53-100  
78 Ibid., p.49  
79 Wright gives his clearest account of this distinction in the first two chapters of Quincy Wright, 1954, Problems of Stability and Progress in International Relations. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.  
80 Wright, A Study of War, p.115-119; see also p.393-394.
developed and decayed... there has been continuous and accelerating progress in knowledge and control of nature. This is a self-compounding development in that new technical knowledge itself increases human’s capacity for new technical knowledge. He draws on Lewis Mumford’s division of technological progress into eotechnics (wooden materials, wind and water power), paleotechnics (iron and steel materials, coal power), and neotechnics (alloy materials, electric power), and on William Ogburn’s statistics of the accelerating rate of technological change over time. Wright believed that increasing technical knowledge granted communities an increasing capacity for creative self-control. In this sense, Wright saw a potential for technological progress to overcome the fundamental cause of the cyclical rise and fall of communities.

Indeed, Wright defines each of his historical epochs by its level of integration and differentiation. He thought that the absence of writing and recorded history circumscribed the level of self-control primitive societies, in that they could do nothing but rely on the knowledge and customs handed down to them by world-of-mouth. Their creativity was limited by the technical knowledge available to them. Wright saw the invention of writing as a useful index for the emergence of civilization. It represented, he observed, the ‘passage of culture beyond a certain threshold of capacity for ideological construction, economic efficiency, political organization, and symbolic express of values.’ The embryo of ‘modern civilization’, meanwhile, emerged with the invention of the printing press during the Italian Renaissance. This technical leap triggered four main processes that came to define the perilous condition of the world in the interwar years:

1. The scale of human interaction increases
2. The number of potential conflicts increases
3. The rate of technical discovery increases
4. The capacity for rational self-control increases

(4) is mainly a result of the advance in communication and transport, scientific understanding, and institutional sophistication that comes with technological development. By the point of ‘modern’ civilization, the fact that integration has expanded across the entire reach of the earth also precludes the imposition of external forces on the ‘whole’. This makes global affairs more predictable, but precludes the development of a community in negative relation to some outside threat. But (1-3) bring about a sudden, increased need for global self-control in the modern era. The reason for the crises of the early twentieth century, Wright believes, is partly that the world has all of the pressures concomitant with modern technology – economic globalisation, world war, and increasingly frequent contacts – but none of the institutions and policies to adjust societies to one another on a global level. In other words, the world is languishing in an interregnum period: it has the technological basis

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81 Wright, Problems of Stability and Progress in International Relations, p.12-13
82 Wright, A Study of War, p.204-208
83 Ibid., p.106
of a global civilization, but none of the political tools to deal with. If that transition is not completed, then the
world might succumb to internal maladjustments like all previous civilizations. Wright asks:

‘Will the integration of the parts steadily increase, forming a more and more perfect community?…
History unquestionably suggests the oscillating movement [the rise and fall of civilizations]. There is,
however, no exact precedent for a family of nations that is entirely isolated on the planet. It may be
that, in the matter of world-organization, man has the means of controlling his future more than in
any other enterprise which he has undertaken… The present family of nations has the freedom to
make its population and its polity what it will, governing only by the inertia of its past and the
imagination of its own future.’

It is worth pausing at this point to reflect on the extent to which Wright feared that (1-3) had turned warfare
into something that was more global, intense and destructive than it had ever been. Wright is not anomalous
in recoiling at the cataclysmic military power unleashed by modern technology. The sophisticated and scale of
conflict in the First World War – that witnessed the first planes, chemical weapons, and mass trench warfare
– was a turning point in public attitudes towards war. But Wright is perhaps especially interesting in the way
in which he speaks of globalisation of war. He argued that the mechanization of war, the mobilisation of entire
populations, and the increase in the number of potential targets, had turned war into a ‘single and continuous
campaign’, that ‘spread rapidly until the entire map was blackened’. Wright observes that war has both
intensified in time, in that more battles are fought within a far shorter time, and extended in space, in that
more belligerents are dragged into conflicts. He is especially animated by the creation of a ‘third dimension
in warfare’ by air power, that he believes to be – alongside the gun – easily ‘the most important single change
in the circumstances of warfare in recorded history’. This new power had the effect of bringing almost every
state within range of bombing. In particular, it annihilated the heretofore geographical invulnerability of the
British Isles. Wright also held that the new range and mobility of military technology had given the offensive
the decisive advantage, fuelling the wanton aggression of the axis powers. Under these circumstances, it was
the totalitarian states that prospered. Wright admitted that the slow and cumbersome process of democracy
handicapped their ability to effectively wage wars. The only way to achieve stability under these conditions
short of ‘empire’, Wright concluded, was the establishment of an international police force:

84 Ibid., p.964-965
Cambridge.
86 Wright, A Study of War, p.310
87 Ibid., p.236-242
88 Ibid., p.293. This is a quote with which Wright of concurring, spoken by Rear Admiral Bradley A. Fiske.
89 Ibid., p.300-313
90 Ibid., p.300-303; p.842-843. Wright was influenced by Harold Lasswell’s account of the ‘garrison state’. See Harold D.
“Aviation has greatly increased the area over which government can exercise effective power to maintain order and justice... Detailed studies have suggested that by a suitable distribution of bases and the organization of a relatively small policing force of reconnaissance, combat and bombing planes, international government could today prevent aggression and maintain justice and order throughout the world.”

Like Toynbee, Wright believed that the underlying problem of interwar politics was the fragmentation of the world into competing national particularisms. On the one hand, progress in modern technical knowledge had increased the speed and scope of transport and communication such as to unleash a new wave of integration at the material level. This both enabled and demanded political globalism. For integration brought with it the compression of war: more conflicts, more destructive conflicts, and bigger conflicts. On the other hand, there was no corresponding leap at the political level. The world remained divided into sovereign states, guided by the symbols of nationalism. Wright argued that this ‘political lag’ was the leading cause of war. It generated what Toynbee had called a ‘social enormity’. The world was thus stuck half-way between historic and modern civilization, under threat of collapsing from its inability to adjust itself to its mounting national contradictions.

But this disparity between material integration and political division is only one instance of what Wright takes to be the generic problem of any social system: the failure to maintain a delicate equilibrium among political, economic, sociological, military and legal forces. Wright was fond of the metaphor of an ‘equilibrium’, in part thanks to his brother. Sewall Wright was one of the pioneers of population genetics. He viewed evolution as a constant adaption to ‘peaks’ and ‘troughs’ in a population. For Wright, each of his epochs had its own kind of dynamic equilibrium. Technological progress paved the way for integration that required greater and greater levels of self-control, but also increased the capacity for self-control. Wright believed that historic civilizations were characterised by ‘oscillating stability’. This political expression of this was the balance-of-power system, a fragile concert of independent powers entering into ad hoc agreements to preserve global equilibrium. The embryo of ‘global civilization’ however, raised the possibility of ‘adaptive equilibrium’. Here, states enter into a federal union to preserve a legal order of collective security. The most crucial point is that it transforms the entire global environment; states no longer have to rely on the decision of other states. This, for Wright, is the only way to bring about a lasting solution to war. It required indefinite, vigilant global self-control.

Wright was a pragmatic gradualist. He believed that a step-change was required in global politics, but he was alive to the barriers thrown up by the unfolding events of his time. Wright placed great hope in the League of Nations as a vehicle that embraced the nationalism of the moment while attempting to establish a reciprocal

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91 Ibid., p.303; Wright, Problems of Stability and Progress in International Relations, p.300. See also Wright’s brother’s 1945 Wilbur Wright Memorial Lecture, ‘Aviation’s Place in Civilization’.
92 Ibid., p.364; p.760-766
93 Ibid., p.387-402
legal system of ‘arbitration, conciliation and consultation’\textsuperscript{94}. But he also recognised that that the League was, in reality, dependent upon the backing of the great powers. The failure to include the America, Germany and the Soviet Union fated the project to an early death. Like Toynbee, Wright claimed that the \textit{nationalist} global space that emerged after the First World War was replaced by a \textit{regionalist} one after the Second World War. The Cold War was beginning\textsuperscript{95}:

“The world is moving toward two great centers of power, the United States and the Soviet Union, each bringing the lesser states in its neighbourhood under its protection and producing points of indissoluble disagreement where those great regions meet in China, Korea, Germany, the Balkans, and the Middle East.”

But he held out hope that slow and judicious diplomacy could build on the foundation of the United Nations. Although it ‘represents the limit to which present world opinion will go in the direction of world federation... it must not be sacrificed because it is not perfect’\textsuperscript{96}. The task was for statesman to use their judgement to try and navigate the diplomatic field, and to exploit any opportunities created by the evolution of global politics. Wright believed that the flexibility and ambiguity of the United Nations allowed for this evolutionism. He saw it as a combination of several diverse forms of organisation all at once: the security council resembled a world empire; its cosmopolitanism prefigured a future world government; the right of sovereign self-determination retained the vestige of the old balance-of-power system; the Charter expressed high moral principles; and its institutional set-up represented a form of international organisation\textsuperscript{97}. The aim was to constantly adapt this protean form of organisation to maintain the global equilibrium and forestall the outbreak of conflict, while slowly working to accentuate those elements of the institution which allowed for a just and peaceful world federation – that is, a self-regulating \textit{adaptive} equilibrium.

Wright believed that the world languished in an interregnum period. For him, the interwar period was simply witnessing the violent birth of a ‘global civilization’. The ‘historic civilizations’ that had once dominated global politics were dissolving into a single integrated system. Unlike Toynbee, then, he did not believe that distinct cultural entities – civilizations – continued to define the global topography. Rather, he viewed global political space as \textit{homogenous}. The values, culture and institutions of society converged; even if this convergence was thin, rather than thick. Yet this vision also belied a profound Eurocentrism. He defined ‘modern civilization’ in distinctly Western terms. The shared precepts around which the world would converge, according to Wright, were humanism, liberalism, pragmatism, and relativism\textsuperscript{98}. One of his first books, \textit{Mandates Under the League}
of Nations, narrated a familiar legal story: the birth of world civilization from the European family of nations. While he dispensed with a lot of this language in his later work, he never truly let go of the idea that modern civilization was a European creation. This represents a shift from a negative Eurocentrism in which the non-European world is defined by its absence of that which is European, to a positive form of Eurocentrism in which the non-European world is assimilated into the categories and developmental history of the European world.

Conclusion

The traditional idea of civilization was perhaps the highest representative of the cosmography and ethnology of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The ‘discovery’ of the New World and the South Seas led to both a homogenous view of geometrical space, and a temporal hierarchy of global development. The primary aim of this paper has been to reconstruct one of the main currents by which that traditional idea collapsed. Toynbee and Wright’s re-conception of ‘civilization’ as plural and fatalistic was the intellectual correlate of the relative decline of the European world. War, revolution and depression halted the hubristic idea that Europe was the undisputed centre of the world, and that it would progress indefinitely into the future. At the same time, the increasing speed and scope of transport and communication was bringing the world into ever-closer contact, while global political space began to fragment in a wave of national self-determination. Wright and Toynbee, in this context, believed that – unlike any civilization before – the West could save itself through the creation of a world government. Declinism went hand-in-hand with globalization. But while this tempered the traditional matrix of difference – a hierarchical timescale of progress – it did not lead to a straightforward answer to the problems of world order. On the one hand, the world of independent nation-states that Toynbee and Wright thought would come to define a new form of globalism was quickly overcome by the imposition of the United States and Soviet Union on the world. This era of regionalism precluded any short-term hope of true political globalism. On the other hand, Toynbee and Wright’s positive visions of world order belie equally unattractive assumptions. For Toynbee the world remained divided between deeply ingrained civilizations, each with own endogenous cultural dynamics. This kind of thick conception of difference often acted to simply divide global politics into so many reified cultural blocks handed down from the past. It also left little hope for cooperation beyond the level of a mere modus vivendi, even if Toynbee came to believe – in his later years – that a moral or spiritual Church could bring humankind together. For Wright, the emerging ‘global civilization’ was able to reach over these forms of inherited cultural differences by virtue of the global integration forged by technical progress. But however thin this conception of symbolic and institutional unity was, Wright derived its central content from the Western world. Indeed, this was not disguised. He saw ‘global civilization’ as an outgrowth of the legal order created by European family of nations. This re-inscribed Eurocentrism in a positive register,

100 Wright, A Study of War, p.169 & p.964
assimilating the non-West to the West. Thus, while Wright and Toynbee helped to vitiate the traditional idea of civilization, they struggled to find a new language with which to speak global unity and diversity.