

# Barbarity, Civilization and Decadence: Meeting the Challenge of Creating an Ecological Civilization

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In 1984 scientists in the former Soviet Union called for an ecological civilization. This idea was taken up in 1987 in China by Ye Qianji.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently the notion of ecological civilization was promoted by the deputy director of China's State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), Pan Yue, incorporated into the Central Commission Report to the Communist Party's 17<sup>th</sup> Convention in November, 2007, and embraced as one of the key elements in its political guidelines.<sup>3</sup> Characterized as the successor to agricultural and industrial civilization, it is now being promoted as a goal for the whole of humanity in order to avert a global ecological disaster. The success or failure of this project to create an ecological civilization could determine whether humanity survives. But what does it mean to create an ecological civilization? What does 'civilization' mean, and then what would it mean to create an 'ecological' civilization?

The first of these questions is the more problematic. As Alfred North Whitehead wrote:

The notion of civilization is very baffling. We all know what it means. It suggests a certain ideal for life on this earth, and this ideal concerns both the individual human being and also societies of men. [...] Yet civilization is one of those general notions that are very difficult to define. We pronounce upon particular instances. We can say *this* is civilized, or *that* is savage. Yet somehow the general notion is illusive. Thus we proceed by examples. [...] The Greeks and Romans at their best period have been taken as the standard of civilization. (AI 352)

Whitehead wrote this in the context of his effort to define civilization in a way that would go beyond measuring it against examples from the past. He then set about defining the essential qualities of civilization, which he argued are 'Truth, Beauty, Adventure, Art and Peace.' (AI 367) However, before examining Whitehead's proposals in this regard, it is first worth noting his observation that civilization has been defined by contrasting it with something else, by 'savagery', and then by examples, usually Ancient Greece and Rome. While Whitehead points out the problems with this, here I would like to defend definition by contrast with its opposite, although rather than 'savagery' I believe 'barbarity' is more appropriate, and also defend taking past civilizations as models. Combining these, I believe it is necessary to recognize two opposites to civilization, not only barbarism, but also

decadence, the first being the condition prior to being civilized, the latter, the condition after civilization has decayed. It is only by appreciating what was involved in the rise of civilization, and what was involved in sinking into decadence, that we can understand the crisis of the present which bears the marks of decadence at a time when only the virtues of civilization offer any hope of meeting the challenge before us. To understand this dynamic we need examples of some kind. While the history of China could serve to provide these, I will focus on the Greeks and Romans. Greece is most important as an example of the emergence of civilization from barbarity, Rome as an example of the decadence of civilization and subsequent collapse.

## 1. From Barbarity to Civilization

Of the many studies of the development of civilization in Ancient Greece, two works from the Twentieth Century remain the outstanding reference points: Bruno Snell's *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought* and Werner Jaeger's three volume study *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*. The later essays of Cornelius Castoriadis offer further illumination, focusing in particular on what it meant to be civilized. Each of these works reveal the dramatic transformation of Greek culture which led to its greatest achievements.

What is astonishing about this transformation is its breadth, involving the development of history, drama, music, philosophy, mathematics and science along with transformations in military, economic and political organization. There was a qualitative change in people. The dramatic nature of this change is captured in the title of Snell's book, *The Discovery of the Mind*. According to Snell, it was Heraclitus who first made a feature of mind (or *psyche*). While Homer regarded the *psyche* as merely another organ of the body, Heraclitus argued that the quality of the *psyche* differs radically from the body. As Heraclitus put it (fr. 45): 'You could not find the ends of the soul [*psyche*] though you travelled every way, so deep is its *logos*.'<sup>4</sup> What is the significance of this?

Essentially, this depth refers to the dimension opened up by self-reflection, and more importantly, the capacity for self-reflection. This is what was called for in the injunction to 'know thyself' inscribed in the *pronaos* (forecourt) of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. This seems to call for reflection on oneself as an individual, but such reflection is only one component of self-reflection. Reflection by Greeks on themselves as individuals developed with reflection on their institutions. Striving to know oneself as an individual both requires and leads to this broader self-reflection. How is such self-reflection even possible? Cornelius Castoriadis attempted to answer this question by arguing for a form of process philosophy. To begin with, he argued, self-reflection is

possible because nature is temporal and '[t]ime is creation and destruction.'<sup>5</sup> (Castoriadis, 1997: 399). The formation of social institutions is a specific form of this creativity, a form which creates a human world:

The self-institution of society is the creation of a human world: of "things," "reality," language, norms, values, ways of life and death, objects for which we live and objects for which we die—and of course, first and foremost, the creation of the human individual in which the institution of society is massively embedded.<sup>6</sup>

It is because the human world is a created world that it possible for people to reflect upon, question and choose their institutions. As Castoriadis put it: 'It is precisely because history is creation that the question of judging and choosing emerges as a radical, nontrivial question.'<sup>7</sup>

Almost every society in history has avoided this question, however, ascribing their particular institutions to something other than themselves: to their ancestors, to the gods or God or to the laws of history. In Ancient Greece, by contrast, people came to appreciate that they were the creators of their own institutions. The community of citizens proclaimed themselves as self-legislating, self-judging and self-governing and in Athens, established a democracy. With democracy, citizens not only had the right to speak and to vote, they were under an obligation to speak their minds. Equality of citizens meant their active involvement in public affairs. Democracy was above all public deliberation about the common good and collective goals, and a political space was created for this purpose. This political space entailed the creation of a public space that maintained the conditions for democracy. People freely discussed politics and everything they cared about in the *agora* (the place of assembly) before deliberating in the *ecclesia* (the assembly). There was free speech, free thinking, free examination and questioning without restraint. Participation in the public space required courage, responsibility and shame.

Self-reflection engendered history, drama and philosophy through which people interrogated their actions, their beliefs and their institutions, and finally interrogated the practice of interrogation. Public space created a public time, including writing publicly accessible histories of the people 'leading up to the present and clearly pointing toward new things to be done in the future.'<sup>8</sup> Democracy was the regime of self-limitation; the failure of self-limitation was hubris and Greek tragic drama was a warning against hubris and one-sided reasoning.<sup>9</sup> Greek politics and philosophy emerged together with democracy. Here we find people explicitly deliberating about the laws and changing those laws. This led to questions such as what is justice? and what are the ultimate ends to which humans should aspire? Here also we find people for the first time explicitly questioning the instituted collective

representation of the world and proposing alternatives. They quickly moved from questions about whether some representations of the world are true to what is truth. The conceptions of the world developed by these early Greek thinkers gave a place to their own creative activity. It was a self-organizing world in which order emerged from chaos. For Anaximander, the earliest Greek philosopher of whose ideas we have good knowledge and the point of departure for all subsequent Greek philosophy, the primary element of being is the indeterminate or the boundless. Form, the determinate existence of various beings, emerges through injustice, requiring such forms to render justice to one another and pay compensation for their injustice through their decay and disappearance. There is never complete order. Human society is a struggle for further order that can never be complete. Essentially, this is the view that Anaxagoras taught Pericles.<sup>10</sup>

To sustain their democracy it was necessary for citizens to pass on their abilities, their commitments, their questioning practices, their ideals and their knowledge from one generation to the next. Central to Greek civilization was *paideia* or 'education' (which can also be translated as 'culture' or 'civilization').<sup>11</sup> Castoriadis noted that for the Greeks education first and foremost 'involves becoming conscious that the *polis* is also oneself and that its fate also depends upon one's mind, behaviour, and decisions; in other words, it is participation in political life' (*ibid.*: 113). How *paideia* was practiced and how it evolved in Greek society was the central topic of Jaeger's study. He showed that there was more to *paideia* than mentioned by Castoriadis. Music, poetry and rhetoric played a central role, and architecture and sculpture were also important. As Donald Kegan showed in his study of Pericles: 'The entire artistic endeavor, then, must be seen as part of a broad educational program meant to instill in the Athenians the love of their city that Pericles required and to instruct them in the virtues they needed.'<sup>12</sup> It inspired people by firing their imaginations. It was *paideia* above all that the Greeks prized. Being educated was equated with being human.<sup>13</sup> It was by virtue of *paideia*, Pericles argued, that Greeks could take over any office and execute it properly and wisely. *Paideia* transformed children unthinkingly submissive to autocracy into adults able to guide their own destiny and that of their fellows. By contrast, people without *paideia* would accept tyranny, and if such people did rebel against this and take over the reins of government, they would become tyrants in turn.

If to have the virtues to sustain a civilization one needs to be educated by a civilized society, this still leaves the question how such a society could become civilized in the first place. Jaeger addressed this issue at the beginning of Volume 1 of *Paideia*. He pointed out that Greek civilization emerged out of the training, values and ideals of the nobility, the *agathoi*. What does nobility consist in? The original *agathoi* were warriors. They were cruel and arrogant, but they were also courageous, honorable and loyal, as opposed to the ignoble

*kakoi* who were *kakos*: cowardly, dishonest, devious and ungrateful, incapable of rising above calculating self-interest, impulse and petty passions. Being *agathos* was the condition of warriors being successful. Apart from strength and courage the nobility had to accept responsibility for their actions, and most importantly, appreciate the achievements and entitlements of others. They gave recognition and expected proper recognition of themselves and their actions. Along with physical training and military skills, these virtues had to be developed. As José Ortega Y Gasset wrote:

[N]obility is synonymous with a life of effort, ever set on excelling oneself, in passing beyond what one is to what one sets up as a duty and an obligation. In this way the noble life stands opposed to the common or inert life, which reclines statically upon itself, condemned to perpetual immobility, unless an external force compels it to come out of itself.<sup>14</sup>

As Ortega Y Gasset pointed out, the term 'nobility' meant originally those who achieved social standing for their achieved excellence as opposed to those whose social standing was hereditary. Nobility in this sense was the foundation on which Greek civilization was built. As Jaeger argued, 'All later culture, however high an intellectual level it may reach, and however greatly its content may change, still bears the imprint of its aristocratic origin. Culture is simply the aristocratic ideal of a nation, increasingly intellectualized.'<sup>15</sup> Greek civilization was founded on nobility without the barbarism; or rather, nobility harnessed to overcome the cruelty and brutality of barbarism.

It is necessary to appreciate this to fully understand the nature of *paideia*. If nobility is the foundation of civilization, it has to be reproduced with each generation as the condition of all the other virtues. Nobility expresses itself in appreciation of the value of and loyalty to their communities and the quest by people to develop their full potential to contribute to these communities. It involves a commitment to excellence. Being just to others, deliberating on how to achieve the common good and executing offices wisely defines this excellence and requires nobility. Nobility underlies the willingness to question received opinions and institutions, to reflect upon one-self, to search for the truth and to strive for a coherent cosmology. The development of democracy in Ancient Greece was only possible by creating a community of noble citizens. This was clearly understood by Pericles. Democracy is the highest stage of civilization because it is based on the cultivation of nobility in all its citizens, and it is for this reason that genuine democracies have been so creative. Greek civilization became increasingly concerned with the development of 'humanity'. This involved honoring human beings as such. To some extent this brought into question the military values associated with nobility, but humanity, characterized by generosity even to strangers,

barbarians and the conquered, was clearly understood by those who defined it and sought to foster it (such as Isocrates) as itself a feature of nobility.<sup>16</sup>

Athenian democracy associated with the rise of commerce challenged this nobility as the language of virtues and what defined the good became confused. The terms *arête* (virtue) and *agathos* were appropriated by the *kakoi* to characterize their own lives. It was this challenge that inspired the work of philosophers, particularly Socrates, to find true definitions, to recognize the threat to the commitment to the goods of excellence by the ignoble preoccupation with the goods of efficacy, particularly after Greek society had been transformed so that excellence no longer guaranteed material success.<sup>17</sup> These tensions also generated efforts to understand people and their motivations and to define what kinds of beings humans should strive to become. For Plato, the ideal is someone in whom the parts of the *psyche* are in proper relation, with the appetitive *psyche* driven by appetites and impulses controlled by spirit with its concern for honour, which in turn is controlled by intellective *psyche* upholding the virtue of wisdom. For Aristotle, the ideal person was characterized as 'great souled.'<sup>18</sup> Throughout the whole development of Greek civilization it was recognized that *paideia* must develop this nobility, and an appreciation of those with this nobility, the *agathoi*, and correspondingly, contempt for those who are *kakos*: ignoble, cowardly, devious, resentful, calculating individuals equally indifferent to the quest for excellence and the common good.

## 2. From Civilization to Decadence

The defeat of the Athenians by the Macedonians and then the Greeks by the Romans can be partly attributed to their growing decadence, and conversely, to the advance of Roman civilization. However, the Romans never achieved the high level of civilization attained by the Greeks. They are far more interesting for their decline into decadence from the late Republic and its overthrow until they were finally conquered by the barbarians. Plato in Book VIII of the *Republic* had sketched out the stages of such a decline that largely captured what happened in the evolution of Roman society. Subsequently, this decay was described and analysed by Roman historians, the Renaissance humanists, Vico, Montesquieu, Gibbon, Hegel, Spengler and Philip Toynbee, among others. Of these, Vico's analysis has proved to be one of the most insightful and has been defended by Charles Radding in *A World Made by Men*, using Piaget's psychology to interpret and clarify Vico's ideas.

Vico argued that humanity develops through stages, from the Age of Savages where people are dominated by their senses and can only think in images, through to the Age of Heroes where people think in similes and metaphors and create myths, to the Age of Men characterized by free

discussion, legal arguments, prose, rationalism and science. The trajectory to decadence begins, Vico argued, when the liberties fought for by the nobility for their own ends provide a framework within which plebians can fight to have these liberties extended to themselves. The rise of the plebians leads to unrestricted questioning of received values, generating a skepticism that, in the end, undermines the accepted structure of society. This, he believed, is associated with a growing individualism that eventually dissolves the ties that had united the mass of the people, leading to the destruction of unifying faith and the disintegration of the state. Wealth becomes the basis of power. Describing the last stage of the Republic, Vico wrote: [T]he citizens were no longer content with making wealth the basis of rank, they strove to make it an instrument of power.' With this, civic virtue melted away to be replaced with lawlessness and arbitrary violence. Society began its descent into a barbarity.

This barbarism was different from the original barbarism, however. This was the condition which Vico characterized as a second barbarism, a barbarism of senility rather than of youth, of reflection rather than of the senses. Speaking of the Romans, Vico wrote that 'philosophies [...] descended to skepticism. Learned fools fell to calumniating the truth.' Rotting in that ultimate of civil disease, Vico proclaimed:

peoples, like so many beasts, have fallen into the custom of each man thinking only of his own private interests and have reached the extreme of delicacy, or better of pride, in which like wild animals they bristle and lash out at the slightest displeasure. Thus no matter how great the throng and press of their bodies, they live like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each follows his own pleasure and caprice.<sup>19</sup>

This state was associated with a new form of savagery, not the gentle savagery of the first barbarism against which one could take flight, but a base savagery of premeditated malice in which, 'under soft words, people plot against the life and fortune of friends and intimates.'<sup>20</sup>

Defending Vico's analysis, Radding showed that towards the end of the Roman empire Romans had difficulty appreciating the difference between intentional and unintentional behavior, and had lost the ability to appreciate the independent reality of institutions. They could not see that holding office entailed obligations and instead came to treat their power as purely personal.<sup>21</sup> Intellectual life decayed dramatically. As Radding observed:

Philosophy and history were little valued except as sources for rhetorical allusions, and erudition in these subjects, where it existed at all, tended to take the form of collecting facts and opinions. [...] Instead of classical learning being used to understand the world, and writing used to communicate

understanding, both had become kinds of conspicuous consumption, ornaments and emblems of the leisured life.<sup>22</sup>

Words of masters were reproduced uncritically, torn out of context with crucial conclusions and steps of logic omitted. Romans also lost the ability to take responsibility for their actions. The notion of justice lost its meaning, and people in court cases were judged by how they presented themselves rather than by their arguments. Once people's comprehension of causality had decayed, trial by ordeal could replace trial by evidence and argument. Radding showed how this manifest the incapacity to comprehend the nature of causation.<sup>23</sup> In many ways, decadence involved a return to the state of barbarity from which civilization rose, but lacked the good qualities of barbarism. All in all, the warriors who conquered Rome numbered only 20,000, far less than the number of Roman soldiers who had become bound by routine and had lost the ability to take any initiative.<sup>24</sup> Decadence is the ultimate triumph of the decadent *kakoi*.

Vico saw the rise and decay of civilizations as inexorable. Unless a decaying society is conquered by another that might then rejuvenate it, it will continue on its path of decline, Vico claimed. What is the difference between people in advancing and people in decaying civilizations when they are at the same level of civilization? The most common answer to this is that those in a decaying civilization have become accustomed to luxuries. More importantly, as Vico himself noted, is the role of wealthy elites in deliberately corrupting the plebeians as a means to gain and maintain power. Before the overthrow of the Republic the wealthy entertained the plebeians with games. After the overthrow the Emperors built the Colosseum to distract the disempowered plebeians with grand spectacles.

There was more involved, however. Original barbarians are relatively guileless. Those advancing civilization transform the drive for honour in new directions which transform nobility, overcoming its association with cruelty and egocentric arrogance and making it more creative. They do this by upholding new ideals. The *kakoi* are more complex. Imperfectly formed by *paideia*, they take over the institutions and the language of civilization without being properly civilized. Michel de Montaigne observed, people voluntarily accept servitude if it allows them to become petty tyrants in turn, enjoying their power to dominate and mistaking this for liberty.<sup>25</sup> Institutions set up by the *agathoi* are transformed by the *kakoi* from serving the common good into hierarchies of tyranny in which office holders ingratiate themselves to their superiors, work to undermine potential rivals and tyrannize those lower down the hierarchy. Words are made to mean the exact opposite of what they had originally meant, or are used in a way that destroys the capacity of language to mean anything. While the *agathoi* mould their characters by harnessing their emotions to serve higher ends, the *kakoi*, incapable of achieving relationships based on mutual recognition, are driven by envy, jealousy,

resentment and resentment. They deny recognition to others and their achievements while craving the symbols of status that their superiors will recognize, a craving that is insatiable because they never are recognized. These *kakoi* are the decadents. The tendency to decadence is usually combated, as it was in Ancient Greece by Socrates who attempted to find and uphold true definitions, in Rome where historians pilloried those responsible for Rome's decline, or in China where Confucius asserted that the first principle of government is to use the right names. However, decadents are able to neutralize such efforts by simply taking over the mantle of those who are struggling to uphold civilization, and they often do this without being aware of what they are doing since they are unreflective and have no understanding of nobility. Decadence is the colonization and corruption of the institutions and language of the *agathoi* by the *kakoi* who have resisted *paideia* and who have learnt to use the institutions and language of the *agathoi* against them.

### 3. Modernity, Civilization and Decadence

Modern civilization has been more complex than these ancient civilizations. It has been associated with tendencies towards greater civilization and tendencies towards decadence in continual tension, resulting the advance of both. Since civilization involves continual interrogation by the *agathoi* of both the present and the past, it involves constant historical work to define and redefine the achievements and failures of humanity throughout its history. This involves interrogation and commemoration of past achievements and failures as part of *paideia*, which at the same time is a condition for advancing to new levels of civilization. Through the struggle of the *agathoi* against barbarism and decadence, civilization as such has had an inherent tendency to progress in humanity. Interrogation of the past, respect for others, including members of other societies and other civilizations and their beliefs and institutions, and interrogation of their beliefs and institutions, has led to efforts to encompass and appropriate the greatest achievements of all of humanity while avoiding the tendencies to decadence as the starting point for overcoming the problems of the present. The possibility of doing this has been greatly facilitated by the development of new media, particularly the printing press, through which records of the past have become increasingly accessible. The Romans of the Republic learnt from the Greeks. Subsequently, European civilization has been characterized by periodic renaissances as people have struggled to recover from decadence or the tendencies towards it by re-examining the past for new inspiration.

Renaissances are never simply the rebirth of old ideas, however; they are periods of great creativity. As Whitehead noted, 'Only the adventurous can

understand the greatness of the past.' (AI 360). There was a renaissance in the Ninth Century, another in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries which inspired the cultural achievements of the high Middle Ages, then the renaissance in Italy in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries which then spread to the rest of Europe. The explosion of creativity in late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries in Germany was another renaissance which helped inspire another renaissance in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. Chinese civilization was also characterized by a series of renaissances, with a major synthesis of ideas occurring in the Song dynasty with the development of neo-Confucianism by Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi) which integrated ideas from Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism and Buddhism. At the same time the struggle for civilization has engendered an extension of influence. The Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century not only drew inspiration from Ancient Greece and Rome, but also from Byzantium. The Eighteenth Century European Enlightenment was enriched by efforts to assimilate various aspects of Chinese civilization, beginning with Leibniz's effort to assimilate the work of Zhu Xi. In the Twentieth Century the work of Joseph Needham on Science and Civilization in China was a major effort towards creating a global civilization, building on and transcending the limitations of European and Chinese civilizations. Twentieth Century China was characterized by the heroic effort to incorporate the best of European civilization into a new synthesis, an effort which is continuing.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence of such efforts, modern civilization has become a global civilization with a number of centres, each with its own unique history, challenging each other while learning from each other.

The advance of modern civilization, however, has been accompanied by the advance of decadence. To begin with, there has been the normal tendency to decadence associated with the consumption of luxuries generated by the exploitation of Europe's empires, then of oppressed factory workers in conjunction with exploitation of fossil fuels. Far more significant, however, has been the defence of decadence from within the most advanced discourses of civilization: philosophy and the sciences. Combating the influence of the humanism of the Italian Renaissance, philosophers in the Seventeenth Century elaborated the mechanistic world-view and denied any value to history, literature or nature. They claimed that knowledge, useful for controlling the world, could now be gained through the simple application of a method without any need to consider ideas from the past, let alone from other societies. Spelling out the implications of this, Thomas Hobbes identified science with knowledge of how to control and argued that humans, as mechanisms moved by appetites and aversions, cannot be anything other than *kakos*. The only conceivable end in life is avoiding death, injury and pain and satiating one's appetites. *Paideia*, apart from knowledge of how to control things, is a waste of time. People cannot be educated to rule themselves; they

are best ruled by enlightened tyrants. Hobbes' epigones defended rule by oligarchy. Hobbes' philosophy was taken up and further elaborated by economists and successfully promulgated throughout society.

To begin with, such ideas could be, and were combated. The humanities were defended by Vico, Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, and through their influence, became a central component of university education. The advance of the humanities, upholding the notion of education understood as *paideia*, was central to the struggle for democracy against oligarchy up until the third quarter of the Twentieth Century. Philosophers also questioned the metaphysical assumptions of mechanistic science (beginning with Leibniz), generating alternative research programs within the natural sciences which supported the humanities against the mechanistic world-view. However, while these alternative research programs have been dramatically successful, their potential has been neutralized by the advance of 'technicism,' a byproduct of the union of capitalism and experimental science. Hobbes' conception of science as the accumulation of knowledge of how to control nature and people was inculcated through the organization of science. The ordinary scientist is nothing like the great scientists who effect revolutions in thought. The ordinary scientist has become, as Ortega Y Gasset argued, 'the prototype of the mass-man', uninterested in the quest to understand the cosmos and the place of humanity within it. What happened? Ortega Y Gasset summed up the history of science: '[I]n each generation the scientist, through having to reduce the sphere of his labour, was progressively losing contact with other branches of science, with that integral interpretation of the universe which is the only thing deserving the names of science, culture, European civilization.' Science has produced decadence among its practitioners. 'Science itself —the root of our civilization —automatically converts him into mass-man, makes him a primitive, a modern barbarian.' What is astonishing about this is that it works. As Ortega Y Gasset continued, 'it is necessary to insist upon this extraordinary but undeniable fact: experimental science has progressed thanks in large part to the work of men astoundingly mediocre, and even less than mediocre.' These specialists are 'ignorant of the inner philosophy of the science they cultivate'<sup>27</sup> and ignore the implications of post-mechanistic science, even if occasionally they utilize its ideas and mathematical formulae as instruments for their work. These dreary denizens of the laboratories are driven by resentment and refuse recognition to those who make their work possible.

Analytic philosophers, economists, psychologists, sociologists and even scholars in the humanities have since joined the natural sciences in such specialization, piling up fragments of knowledge that are now utilized by the Schools of Management that are displacing Arts Faculties as the core of universities. These schools inculcate their students and future managers in Frederick Taylor's dictum: 'In the past man has been first; in the future the

system must be first.<sup>28</sup> They are taught that employees should be reduced to exchangeable cogs with all organizational knowledge and decision-making concentrated in the hands of managers. This has been disguised, along with eliminating job security, by the new managerialism which developed in the last quarter of the Twentieth Century promoting 'meaningful' work.<sup>29</sup> With the rise of technicism and managerialism people have been disempowered. The advance towards increasing democracy, which despite local reverses, continued until the 1970s, has been checked and reversed in the advanced Western countries. Here we have decadence in its most advanced form. Universities themselves have been transformed into transnational business corporations run on Taylorist principles with the ultimate end redefined as maximizing profits, with the humanities transformed into training for the entertainment industry.<sup>30</sup> Like other public institutions, universities have been infested by *kakoi*. Not only has the point of their existence been subverted, but the meanings of words through which this subversion could have been opposed have been corrupted.

The most important of these words are 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'education'. Democracy implies the empowerment of people to participate in the governance of their communities. It requires education understood as *paideia* for this to be possible. Both the condition and goal of democracy is liberty, or freedom, understood by the Romans of the Republic as not being enslaved, that is, not being a position where one is perpetually subject to harm and reliant on the good will of another.<sup>31</sup> This was redefined by neo-classical economists such as Milton Friedman in their ideological assault on democracy as freedom to choose, which was equated with freedom to spend. As James K. Galbraith pointed out, what this really meant was 'the freedom to shop.' Galbraith elaborated on the significance of this.

One tends to look past this idea on the grounds that it is palpably absurd, a perversion of language, to treat shopping as freedom. [...] But to scoff is a mistake. What's surprising is *how many people think so*, how instinctively correct the conservative notion of economic freedom seems, and how deeply this concept has penetrated modern life. A great many Americans actually do define themselves by the shopping they do, as they fill their homes with the shopping they have done. [...] The concept of a freedom to shop has been extended from its origins in the realm of goods. It has reached, for instance, the realm of careers, where it plays even greater havoc with the normal use of words. In a "free" capitalist society, with private schools and universities able to admit whom they please and charge what the market will bear, the freedom to choose one's profession becomes in the freedom to become what one can afford to become. [...] Money is, in this respect and from this perspective,

a leveler —not a source of class distinctions but a way of breaking them down. The college dropout can become the country's richest person, and any charlatan a banker, business leader, or President of the United States. These are therefore the democratic professions, while those like mathematics or physical science that continue to govern themselves, to impose reasonably strict professional standards, are elitest.<sup>32</sup>

The freedom to shop has been extended to the freedom to shop for pornography, to shop for goods produced by sweated labour in the Third World, to shop for the means to control what people think (through advertising, public relations and ownership of mass media), to shop for football teams, politicians and political parties and for governments, and to use what one has bought to free public assets and natural resources (such as oil) for further shopping. This 'freedom' is destroying communities, destroying democracy and putting people in a permanent state of insecurity. It is enslaving them to a global predator class of managers and financiers who, as Galbraith pointed out, have created 'an economic system wherein entire sectors have been built up to feed on public systems built originally for public purposes'.<sup>33</sup>

Few people have reacted to this, however, for several reasons. To begin with, as de Montaigne noted, people voluntarily accept servitude if it allows them to become petty tyrants in turn. Organizations, including public institutions, have become hierarchies of tyrants within which the *kakoi* flourish. The mindset, or lack of mind of such *kakoi* was revealed at the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi chiefly responsible for selecting and transporting Jews to the concentration camps. Hannah Arendt, who attended his trial, found 'not a twisted and psychotic monster but rather a severely stunted or vestigial sensibility marked by "sheer thoughtlessness."' He 'was strangely lacking in purpose: "except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. [...] He merely [...] never realized what he was doing."' <sup>34</sup> In other words, Eichmann was a typical careerist. As Murray Code noted, Eichmann's 'inability or refusal to think betrayed a kind of mindlessness shared by millions whose imaginations [are] chiefly engaged in shielding themselves "against reality and factuality by exactly the same means [...] that had become ingrained in Eichmann's mentality."' <sup>35</sup> Secondly, as the Roman plebians were distracted by the spectacles of the Colosseum, people now are distracted by the grand spectacles produced by the entertainment industry which is now a major part of the economy. Associated with this, literacy has declined, with almost a third of US citizens now illiterate or semi-literate, down from 3% at the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>36</sup> In Britain, eleven and twelve year olds have the cognitive development of nine and half year olds of only fifteen years ago.<sup>37</sup> As in Ancient Rome, with this decay of cognitive development

most people can no longer appreciate the common good of their communities, the reality of public institutions as such and the responsibilities of holding office, or the importance of protecting these institutions from predatory managers. Addressing this problem has been made more difficult by the colonization of schools and universities by *kakoi* who, accepting voluntary servitude and embracing the role of petty tyrants, have redefined education as investments by customers to improve the marketability of their labour. At the same time these *kakoi* attack academic standards in the humanities and curiosity driven science, along with the goal of inspiring excellence, as elitist, while defending mass culture as 'democratic.' Such lower order *kakoi*, incapable of self-reflection and incapable of even understanding the motives and ways of thinking of the *agathoi*, assume that everyone operates as they do. As in the late Roman Empire, interest in history and philosophy has all but disappeared.

#### 4. Creating an Ecological Civilization

Both the point of defining civilization and the problem of creating an ecological civilization can now be clarified. Civilization not only needs to be defined in opposition to barbarity and decadence. Its very existence is a struggle of the *agathoi* to overcome the brutality of barbarians, to inspire nobility of character in the population through education, and to avoid the capture and subversion of their institutions and language by the *kakoi*. The dynamic generated by this struggle has resulted in the emergence of a multi-centred global civilization with an inherent, if irregular, tendency to progress. We appear to be on the verge of a new renaissance, reviving and advancing beyond the greatest achievements of humanity through its whole history in an effort to confront the global ecological crisis. This involves a re-examination of the greatest achievements, and the failures, of all civilizations, past and present, to orient humanity to create the future. This in essence heralds the birth of the ecological civilization called for by Ye Qianji and Pan Yue. As an ecological civilization this will involve a major transformation in the way humanity understands itself in relation to the rest of nature. People must appreciate that they are part of a global ecosystem with its own dynamics, then organize in a way that conforms to this new way of understanding humanity's place in the world. This should not be too difficult, given the alliance between the humanities and post-reductionist science that finds its fullest expression in the development of human ecology.

We have seen, however, that there is a major obstacle to be overcome. Creating this civilization will require first and foremost a struggle to overcome decadence, particularly in the affluent West. It will be a struggle against the *kakoi* who have taken over and subverted the institutions of civilization,

including the institutions of science and education, and even more importantly, the language of civilization. It will be a struggle against mediocre scientists who have trivialized science and reduced it to nothing but technoscience and against philosophers who have trivialized philosophy and reduced it to academic parlour games. It will be a struggle against the careerists who have taken over public institutions and treated them as bases for personal power. It will be a struggle against the predatory *kakoi* who have used their wealth and power to subvert culture and education. It also will be a struggle against the great mass of *kakoi* who under the influence of these predatory *kakoi* have turned their backs on ideas and reality to indulge themselves in the entertainment provided by the predatory *kakoi*. 'Civilization' needs to be defined in order to provide a clear vision to aspire to beyond shopping. Can Whitehead's characterization of civilization provide this vision?

To begin with, it should be noted that Whitehead's work, as the culmination of the late Nineteenth to early Twentieth Century cultural renaissance associated with revolutions in science, mathematics, logic, the arts and the emergence of process philosophy, offers the most fully developed process metaphysics ever elaborated. Exposing the fallacies of mechanistic materialism and aligning the sciences with the humanities, this philosophy reveals the creativity of nature, the openness of the future and thereby the responsibility of humans for themselves, for their institutions and for creating the future. Conceiving nature and humanity as creation implies that, as Castoriadis pointed out, questions of judging and choosing are radical, nontrivial questions. By itself this would be enough to justify taking Whitehead's pronouncements on civilization very seriously. Whitehead saw the current age as in a crisis engendered by the exhaustion of industrial civilization, which he characterized as the Victorian Epoch. (AI 358) He prophesied a period of confusion and decadence unless, through the 'adventure of imagination' in which 'thought has run ahead of realization' there might be a quick transition to a new type of civilization.' (AI 359) Whitehead's work has stimulated some of the most important advances in post-mechanistic science and has had a major influence on the development of ecology.<sup>38</sup> Influenced by Leibniz and the tradition that emerged from Leibniz's work, Whitehead's philosophy also bears the influence of the neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi. His work provided the perspective through which Joseph Needham was able to comprehend the achievements of both European civilization and Chinese civilization in his monumental *Science and Civilization* in China, advancing the development of a multi-centred, global civilization.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Whitehead has inspired some of the world's most influential environmentalists, including Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly and John Cobb Jr. His work is already a major factor in the creation of a global ecological civilization.

At the same time, Whitehead's work is providing the philosophy needed to combat decadence, most importantly, by upholding the values of nobility. As Ortega Y Gasset wrote, 'The excellent man is urged, by interior necessity, to appeal from himself to some standard beyond himself, superior to himself, whose service he freely accepts.'<sup>40</sup> Whitehead's philosophy, along with that of Hegel, Charles Sanders Peirce and in USA, John Dewey, is the starting point in efforts to revive philosophy in countries afflicted by the disastrous dead-end of analytic philosophy and the destructive skepticism of deconstructive postmodernism. That is, it provides the starting point for reviving the quest that began with the Ancient Greeks for a global perspective that can anchor people in their efforts overcome the parochialism, illusions and fragmentation of barbarian and decadent cultures and to find standards superior to themselves. Each of the qualities Whitehead has identified as characterizing civilization, relating both to individuals and to society, provide reference points in this regard. To begin, the last quality considered, the quality of 'Peace' as 'a Harmony of Harmonies' and as 'a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, un verbalized and yet momentous in its coördination of values' (AI 367) is essentially the quality of Plato's ideal person or of Aristotle's 'great souled' one, reconceptualized through Whitehead's metaphysics which thereby integrates the advances of civilizations of the subsequent almost two and a half millennia. 'Peace', as a quality of mind characterizing both individuals and society, integrates and goes beyond the other qualities of civilization.

In redefining these qualities of civilization Whitehead completely rejects any static ideal. There can be 'no real halt of civilization in the indefinite repetition of a perfected ideal' he argued. (AI, 368). Consequently, 'Adventure' was given a central place. This also is a defining characteristic of nobility and will be essential for the struggle for a new civilization, and this civilization must give a central place to adventure to attract people to struggle for it and to preserve it. What is meant here is real adventure, whether this be associated with developing new ideas, new forms of art, or new ways of living and organizing, not the surrogate adventure of shopping or being entertained in new ways. As Whitehead put it, a people 'preserves its vigour so long as it harbours a real contrast between what has been and what may be; and so long as it is nerved by the vigour to adventure beyond the safeties of the past.' (AI 360)

Differentiation of the real from the surrogate requires a commitment to Truth. Truth captures the quality of mind and ideal that must be upheld against both the trivialization of science and philosophy and the extreme skepticism of the decadent *kakoi*. Truth, defined by Whitehead as 'the conformation of Appearance to Reality' (AI, 309) drives the quest to overcome the illusions of the mechanistic world-view, including the illusions generated by mainstream economists and psychologists and the illusion that liberty is

the freedom to shop, illusions disguised by replacing the notion of Truth by efficacy or by deconstructive skepticism or relativism. While 'understanding' or 'wisdom' might seem more adequate to define civilization, it is the commitment to Truth that has exposed the illusion that piecemeal inquiry can accumulate bits of knowledge without giving a place to the quest for understanding and the guidance of wisdom. Truth is a guide in the struggle to develop ideas, to understand the world and to live on the basis of a more truthful understanding of reality, which is wisdom.

Whitehead also grants a central place to Beauty and Art. The importance of these for creating an ecological civilization should not be a surprise to anyone familiar with the ideas of the ecologist Aldo Leopold and his 'land ethic', or with the work of the architectural theorist Christopher Alexander. Pointing out that 'All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts', Leopold proclaimed: 'The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.' From this premise he concluded: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'<sup>41</sup> Alexander's point of departure was the built up environment. He argues that more beautiful buildings are seen as more alive, and beautiful built-up environments are both the product of and are conducive to the vitality of communities. The feeling for the whole, and the sense of wholeness involved in making the world more beautiful, is the feeling for life. 'Feeling' should not be regarded as merely subjective or equated with emotion: 'It is a feeling in the singular, which comes from the whole' Alexander explained. 'It arises in us, but it originates in the wholeness which is actually there. The process of respecting and extending and creating the whole, and the process of using feeling, are one and the same. Real feeling, true feeling, is the *experience* of the whole.'<sup>42</sup> Appreciation of beauty then is appreciation of life, and specifically, of the way component centers of what is alive contribute to each other and to the life of the whole. Artistic production is associated with care for existing centers of life, producing so that what is produced augments what is already alive. While these ideas were developed in relation to architecture and town planning, Alexander argues that the insights gained in these fields can be generalized to all the arts and to understanding what is life generally, and he has aligned himself with Leopold's land ethic.

Despite the central place given to beauty in great civilizations of the past, particularly those that achieved democracy such as Ancient Greece, renaissance Florence and the Dutch Republic, 'beauty', or those who invoke it, are seldom taken seriously in modern society, except in relation to decoration. As a topic it has been totally marginalized within philosophy. This reflects the domination and tacit acceptance of the mechanistic world-view where it is treated as merely a 'secondary quality'. Whitehead's metaphysics

is important because it is able to give a central place to beauty. 'Beauty is a wider, and more fundamental, notion than Truth' Whitehead proclaimed. (AI 341). 'Beauty is the internal conformation of the various items of experience with each other, for the production of maximum effectiveness. Beauty thus concerns the inter-relations of the various components of Reality, and also the inter-relations of the various components of Appearance, and also the relations of Appearance to Reality.' (AI 341) Appreciation of beauty is required to constrain people's actions and to inspire them to augment the life of their communities. This was clearly understood by Pericles and leading figures in later civilizations, although their concern was with the life of their cities or countries. The extension of this concern to an appreciation of ecological communities of which people are members, and to live accordingly, will be central to the creation of an ecological civilization. Whitehead characterized Art as 'purposeful adaptation of Appearance to Reality' with Truth and Beauty being the end. (AI 344) Perfection he characterized as 'Truthful Beauty'. Explicating this, he wrote that 'art is the education of nature. Thus, in its broadest sense, art is civilization. For civilization is nothing other than the unremitting aim at the major perfections of harmony.' (AI 349) While this characterization of art can be used to characterize what are now called 'the Arts', art should not be considered a marginal domain of culture. It should be seen as central to eco-poiesis, the making by people of their built-up environments, their homes, within their ecosystems. Where-ever possible, work should be Art.

In the Preface to *Adventures of Ideas* Whitehead informed his readers that the lectures published in this book 'were concerned with the [...] ideas which are required for successful civilization [...] to guide the adventure toward novelty, and to secure the immediate realization of the worth of such ideal aim.' (AI ix) The civilization he was seeking to promote is now coming into focus as the ecological civilization called for by Ye Qianji and Pan Yue. Creating this civilization is the greatest challenge humanity has ever had to confront. Failure will lead not merely to mass suffering but to a severely damaged global ecosystem which might not support any civilization. The greatest obstacle to creating this new civilization is the decadence of the West and those who aspire to emulate this decadence. Most threatening are the hordes of decadent *kakoi* who have infested and are taking over the institutions of civilization. As the global ecological crisis intensifies, these careerist *kakoi* will take up the cause and attempt to occupy the offices and dominate the institutions needed to effect the creation of this new civilization, without the imagination or sense of responsibility to understand the damage they are doing. Identifying such people as not only the enemies of civilization, but the enemies of humanity and the enemies of life, and correspondingly, correctly identifying and supporting the *agathoi*, is essential to creating an ecological civilization. The ideas offered by Whitehead should not only guide

the adventure towards novelty, but could and should guide people in the struggle against decadence.

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## Notes

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