

PEAK HUMAN



What We
Can Learn
from the
Rise and Fall of
Golden Ages

JOHAN
NORBERG



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Atlantic Books
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*To my father, who made me realize that the only thing new
in the world is history that we have yet to learn*

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INTRODUCTION

A society that has ceased to concern itself with the progress of the past will soon lose belief in its capacity to progress in the future.

JOEL MOKYR¹

To every nation a term; when their term comes they shall not put it back by a single hour nor put it forward.

THE QURAN, 7:34

The feeling will be familiar to many who have visited the great cities of history: I had come to Athens for the first time and made a pilgrimage to its democratic Assembly, Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. And it left me with a sense of profound sadness. Here were the scenes of some of the most extraordinary moments in human history, and all that was left was rubble, garbage and dog waste. Instead of bustling creativity, there was silence, interrupted only by the odd intoxicated passer-by.

To be sure, I also experienced spectacular beauty in Athens, like the grand monuments on the Acropolis. But even that was a museum to bygone glory. This used to be the place around which the world revolved, and now it's a collection of patched-together columns, stone blocks and shards with plaques telling us that it used to be impressive.

This must be what Shelley – a great admirer of ancient Greece – reflected upon when he wrote about the crumbled monument to Ozymandias, king of kings, 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair! / Nothing beside remains. ... / The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

This encounter with the transience of great civilizations set my mind racing. What made it possible for them to rise so spectacularly, and how could they decline so thoroughly that they left little trace? It forced me to consider whether travellers

will one day visit our proud landmarks and plazas and think about how our civilization lost its way and became so sluggish and stationary.

This is a precarious time to write about history's golden ages. Ours is an era of authoritarian and populist revival, with savage dictators trying to extinguish neighbouring democracies, when the fear of inevitable decline seems more prevalent than belief in progress. This may invite speculation that my motive resembles that of the American legal scholar Harold Berman when he wrote his great history of the rise of Western law: it is said that a drowning man may see his whole life flash before him, perhaps in an unconscious effort to find something within his own experiences to escape his impending doom.²

I wouldn't go that far. We are not yet drowning. But drawing on historical human experience can be a useful way to avoid ending up in a bad situation: it might even help us to keep our vessels seaworthy. It is said that we should study history to avoid repeating its mistakes, and that is all very well. But our ancestors were not just capable of mistakes.

Human history is a long list of depravations and horrors, but it is also the source of the knowledge, institutions and technologies that have set most of humanity free from such horrors for the first time. The historical record shows what mankind is capable of, in terms of exploration, imagination and innovation. This in itself is an important reason to study it, to broaden our mental horizon of what is possible.

This book is about seven of the world's great civilizations: ancient Athens, the Roman Republic and early empire, the Abbasid Caliphate, Song China, Renaissance Italy, the Dutch Republic and the Anglosphere. Why did I pick those? Because each of them exemplifies, in my understanding, what I think of as a golden age: a period with a large number of innovations that revolutionize many fields and sectors in a short period of time. A golden age is associated with a culture of optimism, which encourages people to explore new knowledge, experiment with new methods and technologies, and exchange the results with others. Its characteristics are cultural creativity, scientific discoveries, technological achievements and economic growth that stand out compared with what came before and after it, and compared with other contemporary cultures. Its result is a high average standard of living, which is usually the envy of others, often also of their heirs.

This could have been a much longer book, exploring many other cultures, because golden ages are not dependent on geography, ethnicity or religion, but on what we make of these circumstances. And these cultures just happen to excel in the

era in which they, for some reason or another, begin to interpret or emphasize a particular part of their beliefs and traditions to make it more open to surprises – unconventional ideas and methods imported by merchants and migrants, dreamed up by eccentrics at home or stumbled upon by someone fortunate.

There are certain important preconditions for this progress, and you will find them making cameos in every ensuing chapter. The basic raw materials are a wide variety of ideas and methods to learn from and to combine in new ways. Therefore it takes a certain population density to create progress, and urban conglomerations are often particularly creative. Being open to the contributions of other civilizations is the quickest way of making use of more brains, which is the reason why these golden ages often appear at the crossroads of other cultures, and in every instance benefited greatly from the inspiration brought about by international trade, travel and migration. They were often maritime cultures, always on the lookout for new discoveries. Distance is the ‘number one enemy of civilization’, as the French historian Fernand Braudel understood so well.

To make use of these raw materials, it takes a relatively inclusive society. Citizens have to be free to experiment and innovate, without being subjected to the whims of feudal lords, centralized governments or ravaging armies. This takes peace, rule of law and secure property rights.

And, most importantly, there has to be an absence of orthodoxies imposed from the top about what to believe, think and say, how to live and what to do. If we limit the realm of the acceptable to what we already know and are comfortable with, we will be stuck with it, and deserve the inevitable stagnation. If we want more knowledge, wealth and technological capacity, we have to cut misfits and troublemakers some slack.

This book will look at how institutions that were built for discovery, innovation and adaptation had profound effects on science, culture, economy and warfare.

It is not easy to sustain such institutions for a long time. The most depressing aspect of studying golden ages is that they don’t last. You don’t have to wait 2,300 years to go back to Athens. There are many stories about people visiting centres of progress just decades later and finding that it’s all over. It’s the same place, the same traditions and the same people, but that irreplaceable spark has gone.

The California historian Jack Goldstone calls these episodes of temporary growth ‘efflorescences’.³ It is really another word for an anti-crisis: just as a crisis is

a sudden and unexpected downturn in indicators of human wellbeing, an efflorescence is a sharp, unexpected upturn.

Goldstone argues that most societies have experienced such efflorescences, and that these usually set new patterns for thought, political organization and economic life for many generations. This is a corrective to the common notion that humankind has a long history of stagnation and then suddenly experiences progress. History is full of growth and progress; it is just that they were always periodic and efflorescent rather than self-sustaining and accelerating. In other words: they don't last. That is why the subsequent silver, bronze and iron ages so often think of themselves as golden ages.

It is as if history has a Great Status Quo Filter (similar to a hypothesis about the Fermi paradox on why we have not encountered alien life despite the likelihood that it exists). Civilizations in every era have tried to break away from the shackles of oppression and scarcity, but increasingly they faced opposite forces, and sooner or later these dragged them back to earth. Elites who have benefited enough from the innovation that elevated them want to kick away the ladder behind them, groups threatened by change try to fossilize culture into an orthodoxy, and aggressive neighbours are attracted to the wealth of the achievers and try to kill the goose to steal its golden eggs.

Why would intellectual, economic and political elites accept a system that keeps delivering surprises and innovations? Yes, it might provide their society with more resources, but at the risk of upending a status quo that made them powerful to begin with. Often such institutions came about by accident or as a result of revolutionary upheaval, or they emerged unintentionally because they happened to provide important solutions in difficult situations or had to be accepted to provide necessary resources and technologies at a time of fierce competition against rivals.

But, sooner or later, most elites regain their composure, begin to reimpose orthodoxies and stamp out the potential for unpredictability. The great economic historian Joel Mokyr calls this Cardwell's Law, after the technology historian D. S. L. Cardwell, who observed that most societies have remained technologically creative for only a short period.⁴

The perceived self-interest of incumbents who have much to lose from change goes a long way to explaining why episodes of creativity and growth are terminated. But such groups are always there, always eager to stop the future in its tracks. Why do their reactions prevail in some places and moments but not in others? Many

factors are at play, and they will all figure prominently in this book. But there is one psychological factor that reinforces all of them.

‘What is civilization’s worst enemy?’ asked the art historian Kenneth Clark, and he answered: ‘first of all fear – fear of war, fear of invasion, fear of plague and famine, that make it simply not worthwhile constructing things, or planting trees or even planting next year’s crop. And fear of the supernatural, which means that you daren’t question anything or change anything.’⁵

We humans have two basic settings: we are traders and we are tribalists. Early humans prospered (relatively) because they ventured out to explore, experiment and exchange, and to discover new places, partners and knowledge. But sometimes they only survived their adventures because they were also acutely sensitive to risks, and instantly reacted to a potential threat by fighting or fleeing back to the familiar, their cave and their tribe. We need both the adventurous and risk-sensitive aspects of our personality, but since *Homo sapiens* emerged over hundreds of thousands of years in a world more dangerous than today’s, our ‘spider sense’ had to be over-sensitive to threats. Therefore it often misfires and is easily manipulated by those who want to divide and conquer.

As I documented in my book *Open: The Story of Human Progress*, this anxious aspect has remained a central part of our nature, even after we left the savannah for a safer world. When we feel threatened as a community by, say, neighbouring armies, pandemics, recessions or conflicts, there is often a societal fight-or-flight instinct, causing us to hunt for scapegoats and flee behind physical and intellectual walls, even though complex threats might call for learning and creativity rather than simply avoidance or attack.

Again and again, we see civilizations prosper when they embrace trade and experiments, but decline when they lose cultural self-confidence. When under threat, we often seek stability and predictability, shutting out that which is different and unpredictable. Unfortunately, this often makes the fear of disaster self-fulfilling, since those barriers limit access to other possibilities and restrict the adaptation and innovation that could have helped us deal with the threat. The problem with paralysing fear is that it has a tendency to paralyse.

I wouldn’t go so far as to say that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. That sounds a bit like underestimating armed raiders and bubonic plague. But it is certainly true that an insular, suppressive angst deprives us of the tools we need to

take them on. Outsiders can kill and destroy, but they can't kill curiosity and creativity. Only we can do that to ourselves.

History often repeats because human nature does. All of the golden ages ended, except one – the one that we are in now. 'History', said the American journalist Norman Cousins, 'is a vast early warning system.' Where does that leave our civilization? Let me hold my thoughts about that back until we have looked at the other episodes. But I can reveal this much: we still know how to swim, but it doesn't happen automatically; it takes a conscious effort. For that reason, repeating history's swimming lessons once in a while is helpful.

If you want to situate my argument in the context of current culture wars, I object to both the relativist idea that all cultures are equal *and* to the idea that there is a hierarchy of two opposing and clashing cultures – civilization versus barbarians (often associated with European Judeo-Christian culture vs the rest).

Some cultures are better than others. Denying that is, as pointed out by the physicist David Deutsch, 'denying that the future state of one's own culture can be better than the present'.⁶ Then chattel slavery and human rights are equally good (or bad). Some cultures are better than others because they provide institutions for positive-sum games instead of zero-sum, and their eras create liberties and opportunities rather than oppression and destruction, as we shall see in this book.

But, no, we are not talking here about the inherent traits of two opposite and clashing civilizations. Among the seven golden ages featured here, we meet pagans, Muslims, Confucians, Catholics, Calvinists, Anglicans and secular civilizations. Those who were seen as barbarians in one era became world leaders in science and technology in the next, and then roles reversed again. They just happened to excel in an era in which the culture was most open to the contributions of other civilizations, and so gained access to more brains.

This is why both the nationalist right and woke left are hopelessly unhistorical in their crusades against cultural hotchpotch. Civilizations are not monoliths with inherent traits, but complex, growing things defined by how they engage with, adopt and adapt (appropriate, if you like) what they find elsewhere. It's the connections and combinations that make them what they are.

If you come away from this book with the impression that there were seven civilized civilizations and the rest were barbarians, I have not done my job. The battle between freedom and coercion, and between reason and superstition, is not a clash of civilizations. It is a clash *within* every civilization, and at some level within

each one of us. Every culture, country and government is capable of decency and creativity, and of ignorance and jaw-dropping barbarianism. That is why ‘golden’ should be understood as much in relationship to what you could otherwise have been, as a comparison with others. It is of course not just down to sheer will, but you and I have it within ourselves to make our particular place on earth decent and creative rather than the opposite.

By the way, I should emphasize that the question ‘golden ages for whom?’ is not just overly sensitive sloganeering. All of the civilizations I describe in this book practised slavery, all of them denied women basic rights and all took great delight in exterminating neighbouring populations, to the last man, woman and child.

Whenever I am tempted to look back at these ages and dream about how amazing it would have been to be alive then, to debate philosophy in the Athenian Lyceum or Baghdad’s House of Wisdom, to discuss political strategy with Cicero or the Song emperor, or to be present at the creation of the Pantheon, *The Last Supper* or the printing press, I remind myself that I wouldn’t have come near those places. I would have been a destitute peasant, struggling desperately to keep my family safe from hunger and raiders for another season.

If I was one of the lucky ones, that is. As the classicist Mary Beard has remarked, when people say they admire the Roman Empire, they always assume they would have been the emperor or a senator (a few hundred people), never the enslaved masses in mines, plantations and other people’s households (a few million).

Recorded history is the work of a tiny literate elite, and for most people, in most eras, life was nasty, brutish and short. In fact, that goes for the small elite too. No matter how powerful they were, everything could be lost in an instant if they had the misfortune to displease a capricious ruler, and even he had little chance against, say, a bacterial infection or a barbarian invasion. Remember, every time history books record that a city was ‘sacked’, it means that thousands of civilians were raped, mutilated and disembowelled. This also tells us something about what mankind is capable of.

That our ancestors got through this is testament to their greatness. Some ten thousand generations suffered horrors and hunger, and then suddenly, in the past ten generations, everything changed, to the extent that many of us today have started seeing peace, democratic liberties and a full stomach as a natural state. History is more than a crime scene. It is also the place where ideas were developed that helped

humanity to identify that something is a crime, and how to grow out of it. If we discard all the achievements of those who came before us because they weren't sufficiently enlightened and decent (they weren't), we will eventually lose the capacity to discern what is enlightened and decent. Because that very language and moral sense emerged out of their struggles.

So, if you discover something inspiring and useful there, in the overgrown ruins of the past, that can be salvaged to help ensure that our civilization does not just become one in the long list of Goldstone's temporary efflorescences, let's fight for it, shall we? As Goethe once told us, you cannot inherit a tradition from your parents; you have to earn it.

Johan Norberg