Rushton Coulborn
The Origin of Civilized Societies
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RUSHTON COULBORN

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To

Alfred Louis Kroeber
EVERY book which deals with major events in the career of man is a product of its age. It must discuss its subject from a point of view which contemporary events have formed. The subject itself may be dictated, whether or not the author is conscious of dictation, by the concern of his society with some great current issue.

The subject of this book is quite remote from world politics. There is not a word in it on such a matter. The subject nevertheless falls into place among those which current relations between the world’s peoples have brought into debate. When the Western Society, which is to say, the peoples of the European cultural descent, obviously led the world, civilization seemed to be a condition or a quality in which that society excelled. But the faltering of Western leadership and especially the breakdown of the Western imperialist dispensation have thrown doubt upon the quality of Western civilization, and brought into debate the substance and the concept of civilization itself.

No part of the debate has been more difficult than that concerning origins. I first set out to write about it in 1944, but after some struggle put the subject aside for lack of sufficient secure data. In the succeeding decade, however, a number of new discoveries and a few important new syntheses were made by specialist scholars, particularly about the civilized societies of the New World. Brought together, these have made possible a coherent treatment of the origin of civilized societies. It remains, inevitably, a treatment in which some quite important questions are merely raised and discussed, and are then left unresolved.

Two questions of the first importance are answered decisively. One is whether there is a distinction between civilized and primitive societies and the other whether civilized so-
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Societies were of single or multiple origin. The answer to the first question is that there is a distinction, but that it cannot be stated correctly in any short theoretical formula, and to the second that civilized societies were of multiple origin. Both questions are answered together with a historical account of the emergence of the seven “primary” civilized societies out of a foregoing regime of primitive societies, the novelties being shown comparatively among the seven.

These decisions and others in the book must in the course of time come to have a bearing upon the large practical issues of recent times which ultimately brought attention to the matters in question—that is to say, the decisions must do so if there proves to be any sound substance in them. Any attempt here to forecast the results of their influence would, however, be presumptuous and might well prove nugatory.

There is one more aspect of the book which deserves attention here, a technical aspect, but not, certainly, one which only concerns scholars. The book is written in the form of a comparison. As between civilized societies comparison is of paramount importance. There have been in history only fourteen fully distinct civilized societies (the number may vary a little according to what is taken to be full distinction). Among such small numbers there is little use for general classifications, such as readily arise among physical and biological phenomena and, less readily, among minor social phenomena. A few civilized societies, or indeed all civilized societies, may be classed together on the ground of their likenesses, but their inevitable unlikenesses may never, or scarcely ever, be ignored, as may the unlikenesses of phenomena which are usefully classified. Thus, comparison is the ultimate theoretical operation which is useful for understanding civilizations and civilized societies; which is to say that it is the best way of understanding history, for what is conventionally called history is
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the history of civilized societies from the time when they began to leave written evidence of themselves.

That does not mean, of course, that all historical study is, or should be, comparison. Fact-finding is the fundamental operation in historical study, and narrative description the most usual form for presenting its results. Comparison may indeed serve secondarily as a directive in fact-finding, for it may indicate where in narrative sequences new fact is most needed and should therefore be sought. Thus, comparison is the most obvious and effective complement to fact-finding and narrative; it is a wholly theoretical operation, whereas fact-finding is essentially practical and narrative is for the most part preliminary theory. In reality, this relationship always existed, but historians have tended to stop short with narrative and, until recently, to be extremely casual, not to say careless and unscientific, in the occasional use of comparison they made. I very much hope that this book, although it is confined to the beginning of history—to prehistory indeed if conventional distinctions are to be observed—will encourage historians to undertake serious comparative works and other interested persons to demand comparative works from historians.

I am very grateful to those friends who have been good enough to read and criticize the manuscript of the book. Professor A. L. Kroeber and Professor Crane Brinton both read a full draft of the book. These first readings are extremely important to me, for I suffer from a constitutional difficulty in reducing arguments to readable proportions. Mr. Kroeber and Mr. Brinton made almost identical criticisms of the draft, and I was persuaded and shown at once what I ought to do with it. Professor Charles Le Guin of the University of Idaho helped me to simplify Chapter 1. My colleague Professor Melvin Watson of Morehouse College
and Professor William Bradley of the Hartford Seminary Foundation read the manuscript and gave me their valuable opinions and suggestions upon what appears about religion in the book. I have discussed parts of the material with colleagues and students on ordinary academic occasions at Atlanta University, and have profited largely from doing so. Mr. Benjamin F. Houston, as editor for the Princeton University Press, gave valuable counsel about the whole manuscript and helped me in particular to improve its form.

Without the generous financial support of several foundations the book could not have been written, or it would still be in the early stages of composition. The Rockefeller Foundation gave me a fellowship during a sabbatical year, 1956-1957, in which I covered the largest special task included in the book, the treatment of religion. In other years I have had three grants-in-aid from the Penrose Fund of the American Philosophical Society, one each from the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, and grants from the Atlanta University Research Fund. I have thus been enabled to travel freely in order to collect material for the book.

I am also much indebted to Columbia University for free use of its broad library resources. Most of the collection of material and some of the writing of the book have been done at Columbia.

Finally, I want to thank the ladies who, with little or no material reward, have typed the manuscript, bearing heroically with the intrinsic difficulties of the subject matter and with the idiosyncrasies of my temperament, my mode of composition, and my penmanship.

R. C.

Atlanta University
October 1958
NOTE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION, 1969

Ten years ago Rushton Coulborn noted in his Preface that this book's theme was part of our changing view of the world as well as a contribution to it. The trend is accelerating: the more we become aware of the rest of the world, of other civilizations and other peoples, the more we need to review what we know about history as world history and the more we have to organize this review around comparisons of the largest units produced by man, civilized societies and their civilizations.

Coulborn started with the observation that civilized societies rise and fall and rise again, an observation which scholars of different civilizations have repeated for at least 2,500 years, which Vico put forward 200 years ago and to which Danilevski, Brooks Adams, Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin, and Kroeber returned in different ways. This view of history accommodates the observation that civilized societies move independently of each other, that there is not just one movement including all humanity. This view also points to the distinction between primitive and civilized societies: it is only the latter that rise and fall and rise again, it is they that have a history. But our understanding of these processes was blocked, in Coulborn's opinion, by lack of knowledge about the origins of civilized societies. Thus, before continuing his studies of cyclical movements, he applied himself to the problem of origins.

He used the same method he had used earlier for Feudalism in History—comparison—to bridge some of the gaps in knowledge and to guide interpretation of known facts. Debates about this method are still going on, but it would be
hard to deny its special usefulness for historical phenomena and processes of which there are only very limited and definite numbers—for example, seven primary civilized societies. There will be no more and in this book their origins are all studied comparatively.

It was necessary to use knowledge from many different disciplines to do this. Large-scale synthesis and especially interdisciplinary synthesis is as risky as it is rewarding, and Coulborn compounded the risks by making this a very short book, the better to bring out the conclusions derived from synthesis and comparison.

As expected, publication in 1959 brought critical reviews from specialists who felt that their subject had not received proper attention. There were also counterattacks from proponents of viewpoints attacked by the author. And there were cautions from scholars who felt that Coulborn had been too bold. Also as expected, some of the work done on various problems in the last ten years affects some of the arguments, sometimes strengthening, sometimes weakening them. One cannot, however, wait until all possible evidence is in to attempt a synthesis, because that day would never come. Furthermore, the attempt shows better than anything else what we need to know most urgently, where further knowledge will do most to help understanding. And no single piece of new knowledge will invalidate the synthesis. Only a new synthesis of all available knowledge that provides a better understanding of the whole process can do that.

These books will remain sketches because Coulborn died, aged 66, on April 17, 1968.

In the same article he took note of recent work which affects an hypothesis in *The Origin*. With a reference to Karl W. Butzer, *Environment and Archeology: An Introduction to Pleistocene Geography* (Chicago: Aldine, 1964), pp. 449-453, he considered the evidence for increased rain in part of North Africa just before settlement in Egypt and Mesopotamia began and wrote (p. 410): “For the time being at least, then, I must abandon the theory of desiccation driving settlers into the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates, and the Indus-Great Mihran valleys and do the same for Crete also since the source of settlers in Crete was the mainland of Asia Minor or Syria. It remains possible that future discoveries will raise the question again, and it is conceivable too that climatic conditions were different in the different regions. Indeed, it is not new to make this suggestion: the present state of the evidence for China still requires drying out of the Gobi and other steppe areas. . . .”

This did not, however, mean a change in the theory that only desperation could make the sites of the societies in the valleys seem relatively attractive. On the contrary, Coulborn cited Butzer (pp. 461-464) for evidence of “just how great and perplexing a task mastery of the valleys in Egypt and Mesopotamia was.” Should it become necessary to drop the factor of desiccation from the argument, two other compelling factors discussed in *The Origin* remain: “increase of population and exhaustion of the soil in the very regions where the agricultural complexes had become established.” Both, overcrowding and exhaustion of the soil, do not depend on prior desiccation and are in themselves sufficient “to drive the set-
tlers out of their earlier habitats.” (Cf. The Origin, pp. 67-69; and “Structure and Process,” 410-411 and n. 17.)

Apart from this unresolved matter, Coulborn had not, at the time of his death, seen any evidence that proved his hypothesis wrong though, of course, he never considered any scholarly argument as closed. “We need,” he wrote, “a body of interpretative theory which is not the particular property of one prophet, but something built up by trial and error against the empirical evidence from the contributions of many scholars.”

I.S.C.

Pfalz, Germany
November 1968