

CIVILIZATIONAL PROSPECTS

The Four Intellectual Streams

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We can all agree that our world is facing major challenges relating to environmental sustainability, global inequalities, a crisis of meaning, and cross-cultural conflicts, to name perhaps the most glaring. To address these challenges in ways that maximize human flourishing we propose drawing on four distinct intellectual streams:

- Evolutionary Studies
- Global Studies
- Theological Studies
- Future Studies

Our project seeks to unpack each of these intellectual streams and how each can contribute to an understanding of (1) our current civilizational state, (2) how we have gotten to this state, and (3) where we are likely going in relation to where we need to go to realize our full potential as a species. But we need to take it a critical step further. Proponents of each of the intellectual streams need to engage each other, identifying claims/positions that are compatible, complementary, and divergent. It is critically important that the four intellectual streams seek productive, generative, and transformative dialogues that can produce the richest possible understanding of our civilizational trajectory, as well as suggest pathways for greater human well-being.

Evolutionary Studies

Those involved in “Evolutionary Studies” analyze civilizational development in terms of both our *biological* evolution and our *socio-cultural* evolution and how these two processes co-evolve. To focus on biological evolution is to examine how genetic and neurobiological traits are “selected” in terms of their fitness in adapting organisms successfully to habitats or environmental niches of one kind or another. One critically important line of inquiry has to do with the degree to which *Homo Sapiens* are “cooperative” or “egoistic.” To what extent, it can be asked, are we wired to be pro-social to the degree that groups with members who are pro-social are more likely to survive, with those members thus more likely to reproduce? Alternatively, to what extent do we have propensities to be selfish since those who defect from group norms may have an adaptive advantage over those who conform to group norms? To specialize in socio-cultural evolution is to investigate how our biological inheritance can help explain the emergence of social institutions such as the family, religion, economics, and politics. Scholars who study social evolution emphasize major civilizational transitions—from hunter-gatherer societies to agrarian societies to industrial societies to service-oriented societies to information-oriented societies to transhumanist societies. Some focus on the emergence of capitalist society and its evolution. The study of cultural evolution focuses on the capacity of *Homo Sapiens* to innovate, invent, and pass on technologies

and symbolic constructions to succeeding generations. Being wired for culture is regarded as conferring on our species a distinctive adaptive advantage.

Global Studies

“Global Studies” is concerned with civilizational clusters, focusing attention on the values and worldviews of each as well as their interrelationships. Civilizational clusters are analyzed, for example, in terms of their “tightness” and “looseness”, and the relative emphasis given to community, autonomy, or divinity. Cross-national analyses of well-being, happiness, and freedom are conducted by “Global Studies” scholars. In this intellectual stream, three topics are particularly salient. The first has to do with *colonialism* and its consequences. Here the civilizational clusters are analyzed in terms of power differentials and categorized in terms of their “core” or “periphery” status within the world order. The extent to which Western capitalist societies exert economic and cultural hegemony over other civilizational clusters is given considerable attention, as is the contemporary situation of *post-colonialism*, in which former colonized areas assert their cultural autonomy and challenge a neo-liberal economic order that has fostered dependence. The second theme involves the possibility and desirability of *cosmopolitanism* in the current world situation. Of primary concern here is the fostering of an attitude and sensibility in which we can become “citizens of the world.” The third area of scholarly interest revolves around the forging of a global community to address urgent (arguably existential) issues such as climate change, genocide, human trafficking, global poverty, nuclear proliferation, and armed conflicts. Conversations related to world governance and the constructive role that INGOs can play in fostering global cooperation have been ongoing.

Theological Studies

This intellectual stream should be construed broadly. The main emphasis in this project is on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and what it says about our civilizational trajectory. The story or narrative told by Catholics (shared in large part with all Christian traditions with not insignificant differences in emphasis and interpretation) follows an arc from Creation to the Fall to Redemption. This narrative or grammar is both hopeful and realistic in its diagnoses of civilizational progression. Humanity, from both an individual and collective point of view, is prone to sin, but is called to nurture and express its nobler (saintlier) potential—that is, to seek the common good and be in solidarity with all children of God and their collective manifestations. A Catholic interpretation of the civilizational trajectory presupposes a particular metaphysical understanding of the order of Being and its essential structure, as well as representing a specific eschatological vision of our destiny as material/social beings and as souls and spiritual beings. To push for a broad construal of theological studies is to support inquiry that compares the Catholic narrative (with its metaphysical and eschatological components) with other *theistic* religions (non-Catholic Christian, Judaic, Islamic) and with *nontheistic* faiths (Buddhist, Hindu). Finally, our project is very interested in exploring alternatives to a civilizational theology in the contemporary world. Worth exploring in this regard would be the philosophies of Stoicism and Secular Humanism. Do they have a clearly articulated civilizational narrative or grammar? Are their civilizational interpretations grounded in or supported by metaphysical assumptions? Is there any eschatological dimension to their civilizational narratives? One issue of special importance to theological studies (broadly construed) has to do with the meaning (or lack thereof) that can be

drawn from the ubiquitous presence of human suffering in human and civilizational history. In sum, theological studies (as we frame it in this project) encompass theistic, nontheistic, and atheistic interpretations of civilizational direction and its implications for human flourishing.

Future Studies

The fourth intellectual stream, future studies (also known as futurology), has attained the status of a respected scholarly field, with an identifiable analytical toolkit that defines it, arguably, as a discipline. Futurists focus their attention on *trendlines*, which are extrapolations from the past to present into a projected future state, with assumptions necessarily built into their models. A central part of the futurist toolkit is *scenario-building*, typically divided into worst-case, best-case, and intermediate cases, with probabilities and expected value outcomes assigned to each. Futurists also engage in *backcasting*, which involves identifying an ideal future state and then working backwards, as it were, to zero in on what changes need to be made in the present at the institutional level to eventually achieve that state. Futurologists incorporate major forces (demographic, ecological, governmental, economic, socio-cultural, and technological) into their diagnoses of how we have gotten to our present state and invoke them in connection with the levers that would need to be moved to alter our civilizational course. Futurology is attuned to possible “black swan” events (pandemics, major disruptions to power grids, nuclear war) that while low in probability can wreak havoc on civilizational functioning and human well-being. Future Studies frequently employs “systems thinking,” which possesses a distinctive analytical toolkit (e.g. stocks and flows, positive and negative feedback loops, complex systems, emergence). Futurology also intersects with cybernetics (the study of control), which concerns itself with bringing reality states more in line with ideal states through institutional interventions that are continually monitored for their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Our “Civilizational Prospects” project as an interdisciplinary effort seeks to elaborate and expand on what each of the four intellectual streams can contribute to civilizational understanding and progress. The next step necessarily involves the cross-fertilization of these research programs. One can discern cross-fertilization having occurred already in civilizational discourse. Such efforts need to be identified and systematized if a comprehensive “discipline” of Civilizational Studies is to be developed and bear significant intellectual (and additionally, moral and spiritual) fruit. Our project seeks to encourage research that brings to light “success stories” in integrating or synthesizing the intellectual streams and breaks new ground in such integration or synthesis.