

A DIFFUSIONIST VIEW ON THE GENESIS OF CIVILIZATIONS

by

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Summary

It is shown that, from the viewpoint of the history and philosophy of the sciences, the paradigm of isolationism seems rather suspect. The probably, in the majority of cases, multiple origins of advanced civilizations are discussed. Sophisticated ethno-linguistic superstrata arrive mostly by sea. An isolationist, autochthonous genesis of advanced civilizations is rejected as a rather improbable scenario. The evidence for a diffusionist origin even of the extraordinarily unique civilization of ancient Egypt is discussed. A diffusionist genesis of civilizations is proposed as a general pattern. The factors levels and comprehensiveness of knowledge, and the interdisciplinary factor, are discussed with respect to their possible relevance in the isolationism-diffusionism controversy. The multiple and very specific evidence for cultural diffusion between Southeast Asia and the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas is discussed. New epigraphic evidence is presented that ancient India may once have been worldwide active.

IT HAS BEEN STATED that, "when sail still ruled the sea, it was usual to assume that the ancient civilized peoples were capable of almost unlimited movement"(1). At least, it should be added, with respect to their ability to reach most coastal and riverine regions on our planet.

Then, it could rightly be asked, why has it been possible at all that isolationism, for the diehard adherents of which transoceanic contacts between the ancient civilizations have become, as it were, an ostracized anathema and taboo, has become the dominant "paradigm", in the sense this word has been introduced into scholarly debate by the great Thomas Kuhn(2)?

This has to do with the rise of positivism, and with the accusation of "racism". Of these two, the accusation of "racism" has been

emphasized, by the opponents of diffusionism, only during the second half of the 20th century. By "racism", most often used with respect to the development of advanced civilization in the Americas, is meant the allegation that diffusionists tend to think of the American Indian, or in other cases of the "Black races" of Africa, as unable to create a civilization of their own. It is my experience that such a "White superiority complex", though once in vogue, is today only observable with a tiny minority of diffusionists.

I think therefore that we can forget this accusation of "racism", directed against the diffusionists. After all, it has rightly been stated: "The controversy between diffusionists and isolationists, in retrospect, appears somehow artificially created, because

the thesis of transpacific contacts does not exclude the development of a distinctive or unique character or personality of the American Indian cultures”(3).

Positivism and isolationism

ONLY WITH THE rise, and in the wake, of the doctrine of positivism arose the new paradigm of the isolationism, at first with respect to the Americas, and later also with respect to possible contacts between all the other ancient civilizations.

During the second part of the 19th century, and for most of the 20th century, the majority opinion in the relevant fields of knowledge no longer considered it a realistic possibility (though there were always dissenting voices) that, say, the Megalithic culture of Western Europe, ancient Egypt, the Indus civilization, pre-Shang China, let alone Chavin or Olmec civilization, might have been in contact, or might have influenced each other. The scholars of the Age of the Baroque (“when sail still ruled the sea”) would have been rather baffled by such a volte-face of opinion, and even the great Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) would probably still have had certain doubts.

The doctrine of positivism had been invented, as it were, by the French mathematician Auguste Comte (1798-1857), and was originally mainly applied to the so-called “exact” natural sciences, for which it had primarily been formulated. In Comte’s concept of positivism, science had only to do with “hard”, “positive”, “factual”, “real”, or “actual” facts.

Positivism has, however, lately come into disrepute in the eyes of serious scholars and philosophers of science, because, when viewed from the standpoint of the history and philosophy of the sciences, the whole concept leaves much to be desired, and seems suspect(4). It is, indeed, rather irrelevant for

the isolationism-diffusionism controversy. And if, as has sometimes been the case in the past, isolationists occasionally denounce a specific diffusionist thesis as “pseudoscience”, they will have to be reminded that it is one of the greatest problems of scholarly debate, how to differentiate between allegedly “true science” and so-called “pseudoscience”(5). “Bad science” is possible among isolationists and diffusionists alike.

It seems an interesting observation that, parallel to the loss of credibility, during the last decades, of positivism, we see also a noticeable loss of credibility of isolationism, and a parallel rise in the general acceptability of diffusionism.

Multiple origins of advanced civilizations

LOOKING AT ANY advanced civilization from a diffusionist angle, it becomes natural to suspect – until proof of the contrary – that its genesis has been due to an amalgamation of an, in the majority of cases simpler, indigenous culture, and one or more, much more sophisticated superstratum, or superstrata.

There are, indeed, civilizations where general agreement exists that they exhibit clear evidence of their multiple origins. This evidence will be of the nature of clearly discernible characteristic traits of its double – or multiple - origin, and will thus show that it is a blend of local and imported ethno-linguistic and cultural elements, often arriving by sea from afar.

Typical examples of the latter would be the civilization of Indonesia(6), or the Phoenician-Carthaginian colonization of the Iberian Peninsula. In both cases we seem to have had, at the respective moments in time, simpler indigenous cultures, and much more sophisticated superstrata.

The development of Indonesia's civilization is an especially interesting example, since here we have multiple, overlapping ethno-linguistic and cultural superstrata which had, by geographical necessity, to arrive by sea from distant countries, or islands, vide e.g. the Hindu and Buddhist but also the Polynesian "transfusions". It is the thesis of this article that, in this respect, the genesis of Indonesian civilization might well constitute a prototypal, or archetypal, example of a pattern, after which many, if not most, civilizations on our planet may have developed.

Sophisticated superstrata mostly by sea

IT SHOULD BE NOTED, parenthetically as it were, that civilizations, where the most recently arriving last superstratum had been, culturally, on a less sophisticated level than the culture, or already amalgam of cultures, which preceded it, are quite automatically, no subject of discussion in this article. Because, the superstratum's culture being on a lower level it could not, in general contribute to any real advancement of the substratum's civilization. That is not to say that the existing civilization, after a period of cultural assimilation and amalgamation, would not develop a distinctly changed cultural identity.

Examples in this respect are the Persian, Aztec, and Ottoman empires. In these cases, where civilization continued, it was only thanks to the substratum's cultural heritage. In other cases, an invading superstratum, lacking culture and sophistication, and given to barbaric warfare, even totally annihilated all existing civilization, vide e.g. the ravages of the Turco-Mongols in Inner Asia.

It goes without saying that such an overwhelming of a civilized people by a far less sophisticated, invading ethno-linguistic superstratum can only occur on land. Shipbuilding, especially of ocean-going craft

with the capability to transport great numbers of men each to distant countries, is a prerogative of advanced civilizations. Barbarians in general cannot launch transoceanic conquests: neither do they have the ships, nor do they understand to navigate.

We should keep this in mind: When a simpler, indigenous culture comes under the colonizing tutelage, so to speak, of a much more sophisticated superstratum the latter will, in general, arrive by sea, often from afar. The only exceptions would be cases in the immediate neighborhood of expansionist empires. An example would be the Inca empire, which conquered not only other civilized, partly culturally more advanced nations like the Chimú, but added also territories of rather unsophisticated jungle and mountain tribes to their realm.

Autochthonous origin of advanced civilizations ?

ANOTHER IMPORTANT POINT to discuss with respect to the genesis of advanced civilizations, is the following problem: Can such civilizations really arise, so to speak, by and from themselves, autochthonously, without any impetus from abroad? Personally, I am rather inclined to doubt that this, as it were, isolationist scenario, which is still so much in vogue today, is a realistic proposal.

I feel it lacks convincing logic. Why should a people, having been content for centuries with a simpler, rather unsophisticated way of life, suddenly feel the urge to construct an advanced civilization? It seems a rather unrealistic scenario. Especially in view of the fact that they, in all probability, liked that way of life and, therefore, abhorred certain typical elements of advanced civilizations, like cities, god-kings, centralization of power, social stratification, or temples and

priesthoods. If on the other hand, these were imposed on them by a more powerful superstratum, they had to acquiesce.

It is true, our popularizers of current knowledge, in general, still tend to present a rather isolationist picture, in which the ancient civilizations like e.g. ancient Egypt, Sumerian civilization, the Indus civilization, the greatly neglected advanced and seafaring pre-Buddhist civilization of Sri Lanka(7), pre-Shang China, Chavin, Tiahuanaco, or the Olmec civilization, developed to their respective heights more or less by and from themselves with, by and large, negligible influences from outside, let alone from overseas.

But this picture seems to be slowly, but discernibly, changing. Isolationism, in this more general sense, seems to be losing adherents, whereas the number of scholars advocating a generally more diffusionist scenario is slowly but steadily increasing.

Indeed, it is often the really great scholars in their respective fields who provide, in their publications, evidence which points towards the possibility of an, at least partly, diffusionist origin and genesis of at least some of these ancient civilizations.

The diffusionist origin of Egyptian civilization

A GOOD EXAMPLE in this respect is the civilization of ancient Egypt. Contrary to what is often supposed, the natural connection of the very first civilization of ancient Egypt, that of Upper Egypt, to the sea is that to the Red Sea, not the Mediterranean. The distance from Thebes to the Mediterranean („as the crow flies“) is over 600 km, whereas to the Red Sea it is only 150 km. And in addition Upper Egypt has, by way of the Wadi Hammamat, an easy

connection to the Red Sea harbour of El-Kusêr.

When we consider these simple geographical facts, it comes as no surprise that the great Egyptologist Elise Baumgartel(8), states that the first impetus for the civilization of ancient Egypt, aiming at Upper Egypt, arrived by way of the Wadi Hammamat, i.e. from the Red Sea, which is part of the Indian Ocean.

But as a cautious scholar, Baumgartel did not go beyond the remark that the origins of the Nakada-II civilization of the pre-dynastic Upper Egypt lay in a country adjacent to the original home of the Sumerians.

A bit farther to the south from the Wadi Hammamat, Thor Heyerdahl(9) has discovered, in the Wadi Abu Subeira in the Nubian desert between Aswan and the Red Sea, petroglyphs of crocodiles, swamp antelopes and giraffes, together with pre-dynastic sailing vessels. Quite obviously, climate and topography have changed since then, and river navigation had been possible in these ancient times, by way of this canyon, between the Nile and the Red Sea. This additional ancient riverine connection to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean lends even more credence to Baumgartel's thesis.

It has been proposed that, contrary to current majority opinion, „Dilmun“, the original homeland of Sumero-Chaldaeian civilization, had been India(10). Also L.A. Waddell(11), a remarkably unorthodox scholar, had already in 1930 presented the thesis that Egyptian civilization had been founded as a colony of the Indus Civilization, which he saw as part of a great Sumerian „world empire“, the pre-dynastic pharaohs being none other than alter egos of Sumerian emperors. But all this is as yet far from proven.

Nevertheless there remains the fact that a well-known and trustworthy Egyptologist does, indeed, reckon with a maritime „infusion“ or „transfusion“, arriving by sea

from afar, and superimposing itself on a less sophisticated indigenous culture, thus giving birth to the advanced civilization of ancient Egypt. It seems that a maritime transfusion from some region belonging to what the ancients called "Ethiopian" civilization (Southern Arabia/ Ethiopia/ Southern India/ Maldives/Sri Lanka) to Upper Egypt as well as Mesopotamia cannot be totally excluded.

Diffusionist genesis of civilizations a general pattern?

PERHAPS, when even the extraordinarily unique civilization of ancient Egypt seems to have been, in the opinion of a well-known Egyptologist, of only partly autochthonous origin, we should ask ourselves if other, less unique civilizations on our planet might not also be of at least partly non-autochthonous origin. Which is only another expression for asking, if they might have had overseas, sometimes perhaps transoceanic interconnections with other civilizations.

It seems as if we will have to tackle this all-important problem for the history of mankind, and of civilization, in a much more comprehensive manner than we have done up to now. The problem will not go away. Quite to the contrary. The more, on the one hand, specialists in many fields of knowledge find out ever more facts and details about every aspect of each civilization, and the more, on the other hand, a growing segment of scholars raises their level of awareness above the usual segmentation of knowledge, the more this problem will demand our attention. It is a quasi-"automatic" development. There is no way to avoid it.

The problem, to say it in other words, is quite simply: Does the genesis of civilizations, in general, follow a more isolationist (autochthonous) or a more diffusionist pattern? I will shortly present two examples which, as far as I have been able to correctly

analyze the situation, seem to present evidence for a generally more diffusionist pattern.

Levels of knowledge, comprehensiveness, and the interdisciplinary factor

IF WE HAD an opinion poll today among all scholars in the relevant fields of knowledge, the majority would probably still vote for the isolationist scenario. But everybody knows that scholars, like people in any other profession, do not all have the same level of mastery of their respective sciences. Our problem is compounded by the fact that diffusionist studies are an interdisciplinary task par excellence. Here, we need the specialist as well as the generalist. I suspect that, should we weight the vote by means of a coefficient indicating the degree of command or understanding of those fields of learning, which are relevant for any respective subject at hand, we could get a weighted majority for the diffusionist scenario.

I have arrived at this conclusion by the observation that, in general, the authors of the really competent publications advocating a generally diffusionist pattern, most often show an extraordinary level of scholarship, and an often remarkable mastery of the relevant fields of learning, i.e. they have acquired a broad, interdisciplinary range of knowledge. A good example is Thor Heyerdahl's early voluminous work about interconnections between the Old World, the Pacific, especially Polynesia, and the Americas(12).

On the other hand I have observed that the level of scholarship of the most implacable foes of diffusionism, especially when viewed from the standpoint of the history, philosophy, and sociology of the sciences (i.e. from the standpoint of the "science of science") often leaves much to be desired. Though they may be competent specialists in

their field, they will often display an astonishing lack of interdisciplinary competence. And this in an arena where a broad interdisciplinary competence is an indispensable prerequisite, a *conditio sine qua non*, to be able to participate in the debate. I remember having read somewhere, most probably in one of the books by David Childress, of an archaeologist excavating in Yucatan and finding there, on a stela, the typically Chinese, Taoist Yin-Yang symbol, and when asked about it admitted that she did never learn of it at the university, and added that she did not need to know it, because she was not a Sinologist. I suspect that such examples abound among isolationists.

The Pacific problem

I HAVE OFTEN ASKED adherents of isolationism if they might be acquainted with the ESOP volumes(13), in which ex-Harvard professor Barry Fell, who had changed from marine biology to epigraphy, has amassed, over many years, an enormous amount of evidence from many fields of knowledge which, taken together, point in the direction of multiple interrelationships between the cultures and civilizations of the Americas, and those on other continents. The answer has always been in the negative. So they could e.g. never have learned that, as late as AD 1681, certain North American Indian personages still used signatures related to the Cypriot script of the Bronze Age(14). The ESOP evidence lends credence to diffusionist theses about alleged interrelationships of pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas with those of Western Europe, the Mediterranean and ancient Near East, and West African civilizations, but especially with those of southeast Asia (China, southern India, Cambodia, Indonesia).

Of course, there have been other great diffusionists before Fell, like Robert v. Heine-Geldern, Gordon Ekholm, or Ivan van Sertima. Especially the transpacific interconnections between southeast Asia and the Americas have been superabundantly described, in multiple detail. I am at a total loss to understand how anybody could deny this unbelievable mass of irrefutable evidence.

One of the most impressive presentation of these transpacific interrelationships has been published by Cornelia Giesing(15), in a volume edited by the Bavarian State Völkerkunde-Museum in Munich, on the occasion of the Columbus anniversary of 1992. Nobody who compares the excellent illustrations, from two continents, in Giesing's contribution, can have any doubt that her conclusion is correct: "There is little doubt that, already in the centuries B.C., ocean-going ships, far superior to those the Spaniards had in the 16th century A.D., from China and India had found the way from Asia to America"(16).

We may add that other southeast Asian civilizations are good candidates for having also achieved this feat, e.g. Cambodia and Indonesia, and especially the pre-Buddhist, advanced and seafaring civilization of Sri Lanka. There was scarcely anything in overseas, even transoceanic discovery, trade, colonization, or cultural interchange, which these civilizations were not able to achieve. Even as late as the time of the Buddha Gautama, India was a potent country of great cities and maritime trade. Bali, the great Indonesian outpost of India's culture, is about as far from India as Mozambique in southern Africa, or Egypt.

So it is absolutely useless to doubt, as some isolationists still do, if the civilizations of southeast Asia had the ships and the navigational skills to cross the Pacific. That

is not the question. They quite simply have to have had the ships and navigational skills, since they did not have airplanes, otherwise they could not have exchanged goods, ideas, and skills with the peoples of the Americas.

Has ancient India been a worldwide active “mother civilization”?

THE PROBLEM OF DIFFUSIONISM has a hidden aspect which has so far been overlooked. This hidden aspect is the, at least theoretical, possibility that there might have existed, at some point in protohistoric or late prehistoric times, an advanced civilization, which had worldwide activities, much in the same manner as the Western European civilization of the Age of the Baroque. We would then have to combine the concept of diffusionism, as it is conventionally understood, with the idea of a kind of forerunner of our own civilization, with worldwide activities.

A special variant would be such a combined scenario in which, however, an internationally active “nation” or class or caste of sea merchants, colonizers and culture bearers played a major role, a kind of Proto-Phoenicians, as it were. Morgan Kelley(17) has introduced them under the name “Pochteca”, but they could also be Heyerdahl’s “Redin”(18). Their ships might have been manned by people of mixed race and language.

To return to the possibility of a protohistoric, or late prehistoric, advanced civilization with worldwide maritime activities: Kurt Schildmann, an independent German linguist and epigrapher who, in 1994, had deciphered the Indus script as written in Sanskrit(19), has now proposed that the civilization of ancient India has, indeed, played such a role(20). At least with respect to the Americas, especially with respect to the pre-Columbian civilizations of Mexico, such a role of ancient India had already been proposed by Chaman Lal(21).

Schildmann’s decipherment work has had the unexpected, rather sensational result that also inscriptions on objects found in the controversial Burrows Cave (Illinois/USA), in the Crespi collection (Cuenca/Ecuador), but also in Glozel (southern France) and other western European sites, have been found to have been written in a variant of the Indus script, and can also be read as Sanskrit(22). These objects can, then, not possibly be falsifications. This can only mean that ancient India has had worldwide activities, and may even have had colonies in distant continents, roughly comparable perhaps with the much later British Empire.

So it seems that we will have to reckon, under the label “diffusionism”, with a whole range of diffusionist phenomena. And since the time range, of which we speak, is in the order of from four to six millennia, these different diffusionist phenomena, or types of diffusion, will certainly often have overlapped, geographically as well as in time. It is therefore highly probable that a genesis like that of Indonesia, with multiple overseas origins, could rather have been the norm than the exception.

With respect to the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas, in view of all the above, it seems we will have to consider very seriously the possibility, even probability, that perhaps the first European discoverers of the Renaissance arrived in the Americas in a very special “time slot”, without finding ships from India, China, Indonesia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Oman, Morocco, or West Africa moored on the American coasts.

IN THE END, we might conceivably even have to ask, as a legitimate question, if perhaps the first impetus for our own civilization, at the time of the Atlanto-European Megalithic culture, has also been due to any colonizing activity from some distant “mother civilization”.

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Zusammenfassung

Das Isolationismus-Paradigma erscheint, aus dem Blickwinkel der "Wissenschaft von der Wissenschaft" (Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Wissenschaftsphilosophie, Wissenschaftssoziologie) betrachtet, fragwürdig. Die wahrscheinlich überwiegend multiple Genese von Hochkulturen wird diskutiert. Es wird gezeigt, daß kulturell höherstehende ethno-linguistische Superstrate, von einzelnen Ausnahmen abgesehen, praktisch nur auf dem Seeweg anlangen können. Eine isolationistisch-autochthone Genese von Hochkulturen wird als sehr unwahrscheinlich verworfen. Die Argumente für eine diffusionistische Genese sogar der vergleichsweise recht singulären altägyptischen Hochkultur werden diskutiert. Als generelles Grundmuster für die Entstehung von Hochkulturen wird ein diffusionistisches Szenario vorgeschlagen. Verschiedene Faktoren wie tiefe und umfassende Wissenskompetenz, und insbesondere die unverzichtbare interdisziplinäre Kompetenz, werden hinsichtlich ihrer Rolle in der anhaltenden Kontroverse zwischen Isolationisten und Diffusionisten betrachtet. Die multiplen und sehr spezifischen Beweise für Kulturübertragungen von Südostasien nach Alt-Amerika werden diskutiert. Zusätzliche Argumente scheinen dafür zu sprechen, daß die altindische Hochkultur einst weltweit kolonisierend aktiv war, vergleichbar der westlichen Zivilisation im Barock-Zeitalter. In diese Richtung deuten u.a. die von Kurt Schildmann, der 1994 die Indus-Schrift als Sanskrit entziffert hatte, vorgelegten Entzifferungen von Inschriften auf Objekten aus der Burrows Cave (USA), aus der Crespi-Sammlung in Cuenca (Ecuador), und aus Glozel (Frankreich), die sich ebenfalls sinnvoll in dieser Schrift und Sprache lesen lassen.

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