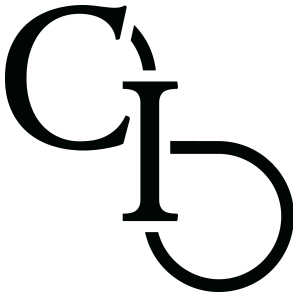
Civilization

Module 2

Clash of Civilizations

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Clash of Civilizations

Dynamic and Static Societies

In Module 1, we explained that the West is superior to all other civilizations because its institutions are capable of correcting errors better than the rest. In general, errors are corrected when an idea is *criticized* and then *replaced* by a better idea—that is, one without that error. So the West—the most dynamic society on Earth—is constantly churning through ideas through this process of criticizing incumbents and conjecturing alternatives.

But not all societies are characterized by institutions that *correct* errors. Some—so-called static societies—are characterized by *entrenched* ideas and their corresponding behaviors, traditions, and modes of thinking.

Although the West has escaped from its static origins, much of the world remains captured by institutions that suppress its inhabitants' creativity, enforce the status quo, and prevent progress from taking hold. Can the ever-improving West coexist alongside these ever-unchanging nations?

Fifth-century BC Sparta of Ancient Greece is a prime example of a static society. Sparta was a society frozen in time, a place where creativity and individual thought were mercilessly stamped out. The Spartan educational system inculcated children into an uncreative, repetitious way of life. They grew up to become extremely obedient citizen-soldiers with hardly a creative or disobedient bone in their bodies. As historian Donald Kagan says, "What are the qualities that are supposed to be produced by this system? … Every aspect of your life is governed by the laws and the customs of the community. You better conform; there is nothing else for you… Obedience to your superiors…uniformity. You are all just like one another, you go through exactly the same experiences; there's no distinction among you." Sparta was a place in which precious little ever changed or improved—and, what's more, its citizens hardly even considered that progress might be *possible* or *desirable* in the first place.

But how did Sparta—and other static societies—maintain this iron grip on her people? The answer lies in the power of *memes*—units of cultural transmission, such as ideas, behaviors, and traditions that spread from person to person.

How do cultures acquire their complex memes in general? What characterizes the particular class of memes that characterize a static society?

Like genes, memes compete with each other in a struggle for survival. What property distinguishes the successful variant of a meme from its many unsuccessful rivals? Memes are "selfish." What makes one variant of a meme spread while others die out isn't that it benefits its holders, or even society as a whole. It's simply that the successful variant changes the behavior of its holders in a way that makes it more likely to be passed on to others than its rivals, its competitors. For instance, it may well be that a significant fraction of Sparta's citizen-soldiers utterly hated the lifestyle that the city-state's militarism demanded of them, yet the memes that caused them to live out such a lifestyle evolved so as to compel them to continue to wake up at the same time every day, work out consistently, engage in senseless violence, and so on.

Moreover, imagine that a rival meme emerges—say, a child decides to live out his life as a philosopher, rather than as a warrior. He wishes to spend his days writing and thinking and talking about how the world works, what it means to live a good life, and the nature of man. Crucially, this child rejects the harsh discipline, physical training, and violence of Spartan culture. He seeks a life of quiet over the howls of war, contemplation over physical aggression, training the mind over training the body. In Sparta, individuals who "offered" such alternative memes to the community might well have been killed immediately. In that case, rivals of the predominant militaristic memes were literally killed off. Would-be philosophers, artists, and innovators were all sacrificed at the altar of maintaining Sparta's static society.

Not all city-states in Ancient Greece were as static as Sparta. In fact, at least one was largely the complete opposite. While Sparta *suppressed* the creativity of its citizens and resisted any change, any innovation, Athens *fostered* a culture of creativity, trying out new ways of living, generating technological improvements, and conjuring up new philosophical ideas. In other words, whereas Sparta was a *static* society, Athens was a *dynamic* one.

Under Pericles's leadership, Athens made progress along countless dimensions. Architecture blossomed, culminating in the famous Parthenon. Socrates established new modes of philosophical exploration, and Plato founded his Academy in the city. Historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides made their home in Athens, and their work is cited to this day. Artists and artisans alike created timeless works within the city's walls, and free trade brought wealth to entrepreneurs and workers all the same. Politically, Pericles pushed for more democracy than Ancient Greece had grown accustomed to, establishing one of the most egalitarian societies the world had yet seen.

Artists, philosophers, freedom of movement, trade, and open political participation. If told about these facets of Athens' Golden Age, the Spartans just several dozen miles away would have spat on the ground, dismissive or disgusted by such practices. But because of Sparta's perfectly honed, creativity-suppressing culture, these Spartans would hardly have conceived of these things in the first place. Sparta's rigid hierarchies would never bend to incorporate, say, an eccentric philosopher, or a new pottery method, or a fresh way of integrating previously ignored political participants.

We saw the kind of memes that drove Sparta to stasis—namely, those that disable and suppress the creativity of its citizens. But what kind of memes drove Athens' dynamism?

In Athens, Plato developed ideas we now call "Platonism" or "Idealism"—that our physical world is but an imperfect copy of an abstract, unchanging world of Forms. In his view, the chairs people created and engaged with in our everyday lives were merely approximations to the idealized chair that existed in the world of Forms. Because abstract objects were the "true" objects, Plato thought that we could understand how the world works by studying the world of Forms, rather than by getting our hands dirty and exploring the corporeal world of the here and now.

But Plato's greatest pupil, Aristotle, disagreed. Aristotle thought that we learned about our world not by sitting in our armchairs and thinking about abstractions but by going out into the world and studying and engaging with it directly. For instance, some call Aristotle the first biologist for all of his fieldwork and taxonomic categorization of living things.

Neither Plato nor any other Athenian seriously came down on Aristotle for dissenting from his teacher. On the contrary, Aristotle thrived, and he earned himself a swathe of students and founded his own school just outside of Athens called the Lyceum. Aristotle

disobeyed his teacher, but not only was he not punished for it—he made progress because of it, and he persuaded others to drop Plato's ideas in favor of his own.

The memes of Athenian society spread by surviving criticism—those ideas that survived the criticisms on offer were retained and copied, while rival variants that failed to satisfy people's criticisms fell by the wayside. These are the kinds of memes that define and dominate a dynamic society more generally—those that spread by enabling creativity and surviving open exposure to criticism, rather than by suppressing criticism and creativity as in the static Sparta. Athenian students copied Aristotle's theory not because they felt psychological pressure to obey, but because they thought about his idea in light of competing ones, like Plato's, and found them wanting.

Consider a Spartan boy who seeks to copy the memes of a seasoned wrestler (wrestling was a cornerstone of Sparta, one of the many ways by which the society turned boys into warriors). He does not filter the wrestler's sweep kick through his own criticisms. He wishes to copy the move only to the extent that it furthers his obedience to Sparta's broader culture. He wouldn't dare disobey by modifying the kick with his own personal flair. On the other hand, an Athenian boy watching the wrestler may criticize some faults in the sweep kick, think of improvements to it, and develop his own version of the move. He then may try it out, and other boys, noticing the superiority of this new version, may do the same. This is Athenian dynamism in action—a bubbling cauldron of creativity, disobedience, novelty, and the eventual adoption of new ways of being.

Sparta's static society was defined by a tradition of obedience; Athens' dynamic society, a tradition of criticism.

Now, our society is the first to embody *sustained* progress over many generations, starting with the Enlightenment around the late seventeenth century. But fifth-century Athens had the right institutions, memetic dynamics, and traditions to have had its own Enlightenment and never-ending stream of progress. Yet the Athenian Golden Age ended after less than a century. Why?

Even dynamism cannot guarantee sustained progress—indeed, nothing can. A few decades after Pericles's death, Sparta defeated Athens in what is known as the Peloponnesian War. Blood is not the only thing spilled in war, and Sparta snuffed out Athens' dynamism and optimism in her victory. Athens' Golden Age had ended, and with it, the chance for unbounded progress in all directions.

The death of Athens is a tragedy in its own right, but we should take it as a warning. For while our dynamism has lasted for over three hundred years already, we cannot—can never—rest on our laurels. As we'll see, there are modern Spartas around every corner, eager to snuff us out. From both without and within, memes that spread by suppressing creativity and criticism threaten memes that foster them. But while victory is not guaranteed, we will only lose if we make the wrong choices. Neither God nor man nor fluke accident determines our fate. We alone can decide whether our dynamic society progresses until the end of time or goes the way of Athens.

Three-Pronged Survival Strategy

A durable static society is dominated by finely adapted institutions that neuter the creativity of its children—by, say, coercive indoctrination—and punish any adults who exhibit any novel behaviors. If the society is static enough, then the children are raised such that all of their creativity is directed towards complete submission to the society's memes, and any thought of dissent is stamped out not by the authorities but by the child himself, before he ever has a chance to act on it. Tragically, many such societies exist today.

But even a maximally static society cannot suppress the creativity of people *outside* of its clutches. On the contrary, dynamic societies that make contact with static societies pose an existential threat to the latter's institutions and memes. "Making contact" does not even have to be a conscious effort on the part of dynamic citizens. For example, a static society with the Internet might be exposed to countless institutions and memes of its dynamic neighbors. This might give static citizens radical ideas, such as the fact that progress is possible, that there are alternative ways of living, that freedom is not a death sentence, that scientific explanations work better than those handed down to them by their own elders. And the Internet is merely the most salient example of how a dynamic society might "invade" a static one—other institutions like trade and television could have similarly corrosive effects.

But the memes that make up a static society need not go down lightly. Aside from clamping down on the Internet and other portals to the West, static institutions like the Iranian, Russian, and Chinese regimes may:

1. engage in “direct” memetic warfare by convincing their citizens that the United States and other Western beacons are, in fact, enemies of the good and the true.
2. try to subvert the West by spreading propaganda, sowing confusion, and in general weakening the West’s institutions “from the inside”.
3. resort to war—an exterminated West is one that no longer makes progress and tempts members of static societies from turning coat.

Thus, ironically, those who say that the non-West hates the West because of the West’s foreign interventions are correct, but not in the way that they typically mean it. Static societies were always fated to hate the West, whether or not the West intervened *militarily*—merely creating television shows and selling blue jeans would have been enough to put static institutions on the defensive. So, no, Hamas, Putin, Khamenei, and the rest do not hate us because we “slaughtered their families” or “interfered in their territory” or otherwise “aggressed against them”. George W. Bush was nearly correct when he said that “they hate us for our freedom”—they are hostile to us because our freedom and other progress-fostering institutions mark the extinction of their progress-suppressing way of life unless they do something about it. And they may succeed unless *we* counteract *them*.



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