

Cyclical History and the Politics of Mysticism

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Summary statement

History is a production of culture, and this submission for ACS 10 will articulate a “traditional” political history of the English-speaking West, as opposed to a “modern” political history.¹ Whereas the “modern” political history presents a narrative of progress over time, a “traditional” political history is cyclical. As Mircea Eliade described the difference between profane and sacred, and modern and traditional, it can be said that popular political history has been the domain of the profane and modern². Eliade’s *Eternal Return*, alongside other authors to be introduced, can guide an alternative political history where the sacred and traditional describe a political history of human action that “acquires reality and identity only to the extent of participation in a transcendent reality”.³ This traditional and cyclic description of human history is opposed to the modern, linear, and profane description of political history.

¹ The focus will remain upon America after the revolution of 1776, for a uniquely British historical cycle could be articulated, as the English-speaking West is seen to bifurcate at this point.

² The interest of 20th century mass society in politics, is contrasted with attitudes from the 16th century, where the majority of society played a limited role in politics.

³ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, 5.

Topic

Before introducing the cycles of history, it is important to establish that specific periods of time can only be established for relatively recent histories. Because of inadequate information and incomplete historical sources, it is very difficult to discern cyclic patterns for the pre-modern era. William Strauss and Neil Howe describe this difficulty in their popular book *The Fourth Turning*, where past traditional societies held cyclic histories in high esteem, yet it is the modern era which holds the most evidence for historical patterns. Nonetheless, Strauss and Howe use the Latin term *saeculum* to describe a complete cycle, which means “a long human life”, and “a natural century”, and describe how Ninth Century B.C. Etruscans participated in a ritual that codified historical dates within a cyclic re-telling, while simultaneously serving as a mnemonic whereby the living could re-actualize the past.⁴ While historians like Strauss and Howe are certain of the importance of cyclic history in traditional society, it is only for the modern period that we can describe numerous complete *saeculums*.⁵

It follows that the modern period is unlike the traditional period which preceded it, and Louis Dupré in his essay, *Passage to Modernity*, describes exactly how traditional culture differs from modern culture. According to Dupré, “Western philosophers shared a common 'ontotheological' (3) vision: that meaning and value inhere, (*exist essentially or permanently in*), the cosmos, because a transcendent principle is directly present in the world. For the Greeks, this principle was form, and in it consisted 'both the essence of the real and our knowledge of it' (18). In early medieval thought, this principle mutated into the divine ideas transferred to the world through God's creative act. But by the late fourteenth century, Western philosophy no longer had the conceptual resources to support this ontotheological vision. Nominalist theology had banished universal forms from creation and given priority to the individual. Italian humanism, with its emphasis on earthly creativity, rushed in to fill the void. Together, these two movements led the West to see meaning and value as imposed on the cosmos by humanity, not features of the real itself. The result was the modern view of the subject.”⁶

This onto-theological synthesis can be seen in Greek, Medieval, and Renaissance literature. For instance Marcus Aurelius (Roman Emperor from 161-180 A.D.) in his *Meditations* describes the order which permeates existence as: “The power that rules within us, which it is according to nature, is responsive to events, so that it always easily adapts itself to that which

⁴ Strauss & Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 14-15.

⁵ One causal mechanism for explaining the cyclic pattern observed is the human lifespan, where the previous generation which established the political order is no longer alive, and a new political order must be forged.

⁶ Piercey, *The uses of the past from Heidegger to Rorty: doing philosophy historically*, 68.

is present, and that which is presented to it. For it requires no preferred material to work on, but it takes the given conditions to move towards its purpose, and it makes a material for itself out of that which opposes it, as fire lays hold of what falls into it, by which a small light would have been extinguished, when the fire is strong, it soon appropriates to itself the matter which is heaped on it, and consumes it and rises higher by the very means of this very material. Let no act be done without a purpose, nor otherwise than according to the perfect principles of art.”⁷ The medieval example used here comes from Gregory the Great (Western Pope from 590 A.D. to 604) where he describes discretion (*discretio*), in mystical terms: “Although *discretio* is sharpened by contemplation, Gregory understands it to be sublimely rational — the keenest and most incisive rationality and perception. It is not just the ability to “see” something; it is the ability to weigh and consider its importance. It is the ability to appreciate how distant something is from the target of *perfect action*.”⁸ Lastly the example from Renaissance thought presented here is from Petrarch (1304 A.D. to 1374): “Being first and foremost a rhetorical movement, early humanism attached a religious meaning to the poetic word that partakes in the Eternal Word. While Dante and Mussato initiated a religious interpretation of poetry, Petrarch and Salutati developed rhetoric into a *theologia rhetorica*. Scripture, Petrarch claims, consists essentially of poetry, that is, metaphorical speech about God. ‘I might almost say that theology is the poetry of God, what else is it if not poetry when Christ is called a lion or a lamb or a worm. In Sacred Scripture you will find thousands of such examples too numerous to pursue here. Indeed what else do the parables of the Saviour in the Gospels echo if not a discourse different from ordinary meaning or, to express it briefly, figurative speech, which we call allegory in ordinary language? Yet poetry is woven from this kind of discourse, but with another subject. Who denies it?’ Indeed, theology began as poetry. Metric language was the ancient complement to ritual ceremony. All later reflection on the divine originated in that early hymnic language.”⁹

To conclude our brief sketch of “traditional” knowledge, something must be said of theology, and the importance the English-speaking West placed upon theology. Before the Modern era, the study of God held an esteemed position and was regarded as important for revealing something fundamental and necessary for humanity and society. Bernard McGinn (b. 1937 A.D) has explored the period of transformation between “traditional” and “modern” in Christian theology during the Protestant Reformation, where monastic mysticism was factionally rejected in favour of a simplified liturgy and emphasis upon preaching.¹⁰ The presence of mysticism is important because historically speaking, religion wasn’t true religion if it wasn’t mystical. McGinn tries to untangle this question of mysticism, and he does so by recounting

⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, Chapter 11, Book 4.

⁸ Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great ascetic, pastor, and first man of Rome*, 75.

⁹ Dupré, *Passage to modernity: essay in the hermeneutics of nature and culture*, 192. Here Dupré is quoting Petrarch (*Rerum familiarium* X 4 (3-5)).

¹⁰ McGinn, *Mysticism in the Reformation (1500-1650)*, 217.

how a case could be made for past theologians being “mystical”, or not, by claiming, “The ultimate objective of the spiritual life being union with God, it could be said that the theology of Lancelot Andrews, [the Protestant in question], is a mystical theology. He continues, ‘It is not a matter...of any exceptional experience, reserved for a few, in some way outside the traditional ways of theology. It is on the contrary a matter of the interiorization of the revealed Christian mystery...This theology is mystical in the sense that it is not an abstract reflection, but a matter of living the mystery concretely through a deepening of the faith in prayer and by renunciation of one’s own will.’ Whatever Lossky may have in mind by his reference to ‘mystical theology...as abstract reflection’ (he names no names), he seems to mean that Andrews is a mystical theologian *in the sense of the mysticism of the early church*, where sound incarnational theology was, by definition, always mystical.”¹¹ The themes touched upon by McGinn in this quote reveal a transition during the Reformation, where what was understood as sound incarnational theology, was no longer considered as such. For the 16th century, the importance of religion *per se*, can be understood as a characteristic of the historical cycle. As will be described, the position within history the Reformation occupies, as after the Late Medieval, and before the Puritan Awakening, will establish the religious and political sentiments of society.

¹¹ Ibid., 217.

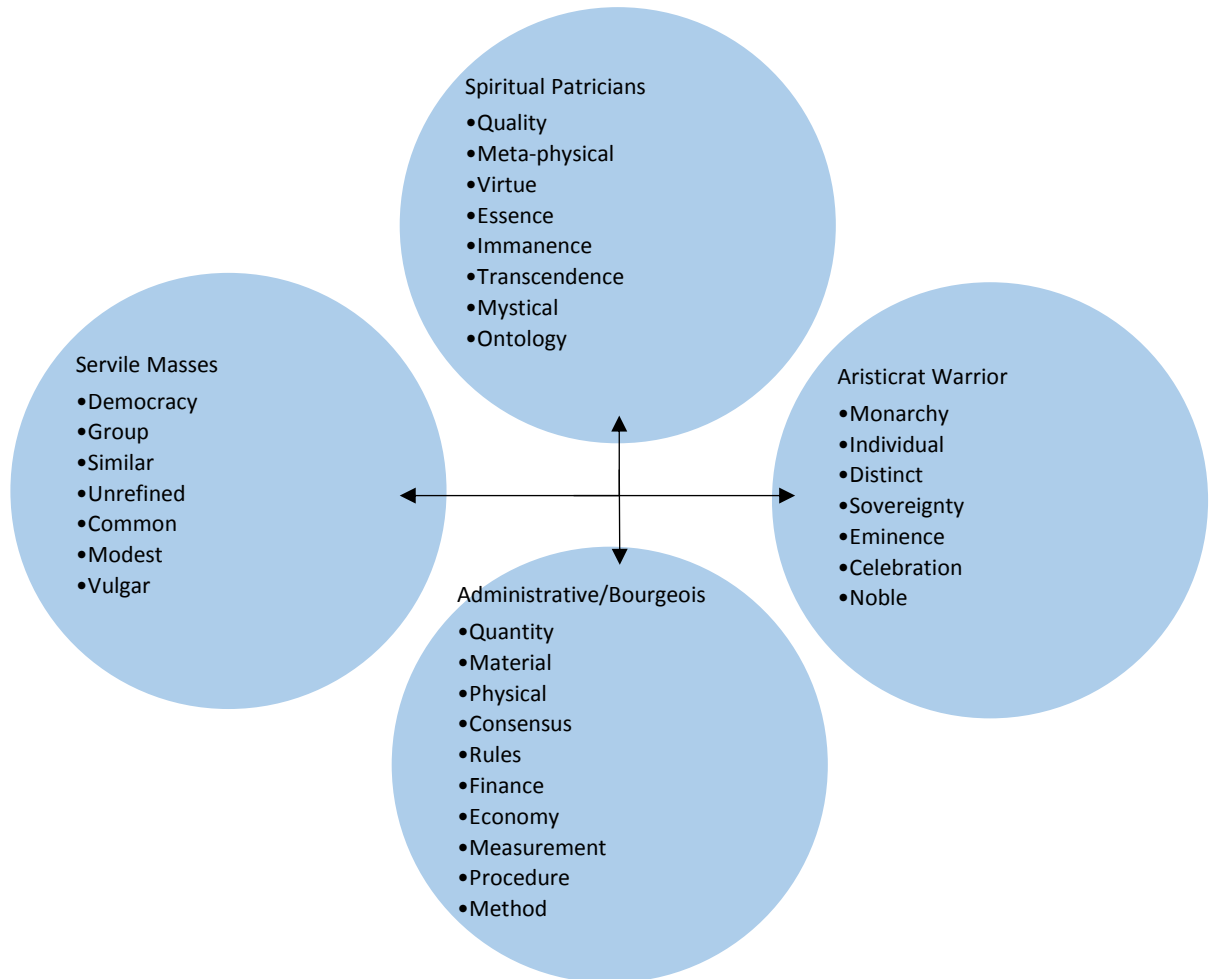
Scope



Social class as used here is simply the discrimination between groups of people within the same society. Unlike the proletarian thinker Karl Marx (1818-1883), class is not being used to designate how close someone is to the means of production, but instead how capable someone is of participating in a “transcendent principle”. The social classes are understood as occupying and holding cultural attention for a period of time, and rendering a common ideology which is different from preceding and subsequent periods. The four classes, (each of which determined the character and ideas of society for approximately 180 years), are understood to reveal themselves at each instance of civil war. The end of the Wars of the Roses concludes with an English monarchy that has power and control previously unknown. In each instance we can discern the culture and architecture of specific historical cycles. That is, the architecture of the Aristocratic class is different from the Administrative/Bourgeois class, which is different from the Servile class, and which is different from the Spiritual class. We can describe a mnemonic for architectural history, and we can begin to describe how architecture participates in culture to solidify the aims and objectives of each social class at the beginning of a cycle, and how architecture pushes the cycles along and undermines each social class at the end of a cycle. Architecture is one part of culture, which then creates politics, which then creates war, for “war is the continuation of politics by other means.”¹²

¹² Howard, Michael, and Peter Paret, *Carl Von Clausewitz On war*, 87.

Values of the Social Classes



Case Study

With establishing the difference between traditional and modern, and also social class, we can introduce the modern historical cycle. (Here Modernity is taken to begin at the conclusion of the Wars of the Roses.) Approximately every 90 years, or the length of a long human life, the English speaking West has redefined the political order.¹³ The first political revolution was the Wars of the Roses, (1455 A.D. to 1487), followed by the Armada Crisis 114 years later (1569-1694), followed by the Glorious Revolution 106 years later (1675-1704), followed by the American Revolution 99 years later (1773-1794), followed by the American Civil War 86 years later (1860-1865), followed by the Great Depression and World War Two, 69 years later (1929-1946), and the coming Millennial Crisis 79 years later (2008-2029). We can also see a pattern of internal civil conflict alternating with external widespread conflict. The Wars of the Roses was an internal conflict between aristocratic leaders, and the Armada Crisis was an external conflict between proto-nations. Furthermore, we can discern a certain degeneration across the cycles whereby traditional society ceased to function as before, and the Aristocratic class fought for political control at the dawn of modernity. The metaphysical / traditional synthesis begins to break down at the dawn of modernity, until the rule of secular atheism in the twentieth century becomes the norm. This presupposes 4 classes of society, where the Spiritual Elite pastored over traditional society, the Warrior Aristocrats reigned over society for 180 years, the Administrative Merchants measured society for 180 years, and the Servile Masses in-discriminating society for 180 years, until perhaps the cycle repeats itself with the Servile Masses once again forming popular religion through neo-monastic revival as the Spiritual Elite once again begin to pastor society, (for traditional medieval religion was based upon *service*).¹⁴

But what does the use of *discretio*, that is the ability to see how distant historical periods are from the target of *perfect action*, have to do with architecture? Architecture, as a cultural product, will share in the dominant ideology of any one cyclic period. For instance, the 180-year period from the Wars of the Roses, to the victory of William of Orange in the 1688 Glorious Revolution, marks the era characterized by rule of the monarch, whereby the king, as fatherly head of the church and the peoples, would reign. The monarch would embody something of divinity here on earth, in a manner similar to Christ's embodiment of divinity in the New Testament Gospels. The *discretio* and the target of *perfect action* as taken up by the monarch, (and mitigating between interest groups with judgment informed by a religiously understood *common good*), was therefore how the aristocratic warrior class defined the

¹³ Strauss & Howe have also successfully identified generational cycles in societies outside the English-speaking West.

¹⁴ Each of the 180 years in question bears the character of the social class in control of society, with each class sometimes demonizing the previous social class, and lamenting the loss of control at the end of the 180 years.

political order of society. It is in this way that each of the 4 social classes takes the political order as defined in the era before it, and gives the political order to the era succeeding it. If we continue to look at the 180-year reign of the aristocratic class, we can discern 2 cultural redefinitions. After each political redefinition, comes a cultural redefinition, and for most of modern Western history, this cultural redefinition has had a religious character, even if later forms of Christianity rejected incarnational theology. The cultural revolution which followed the Wars of the Roses is known as the Protestant Reformation (1517-1542), and the cultural revolution which followed the Armada Crisis is known as the Puritan Awakening (1621-1649). The Protestant Reformation is of course a redefinition of Christianity in a way that made sense within a political order that established the monarch as unchallenged, not even by Papal authority in Rome, and the Puritan Awakening is a further refinement of Protestant ideas of liturgical simplicity, where the liturgy is eventually discarded altogether, and faith as individual devotion is reinforced by reading and studying religious scripture written in English. These cultural ideas would also contribute to the subsequent political revolution and violence, where the displacement of monarchy as the head of the Church was seen as treasonous, yet eventually the monarch too was displaced by the administrative/merchant class and the consensus politics of Parliament.

It follows that during the period of political monarchy, the number of new church buildings undertaken fell dramatically, and instead new buildings are constructed in celebration of the monarch. As the Western Roman Church was conspicuously absent as a belligerent during the Wars of the Roses, so too is the Western Roman Church absent from the cultural rebuilding of the subsequent Protestant Reformation cyclic period. In fact, it is during this cycle that medieval church buildings and stained glass were destroyed or altered. For instance, rood screens that separated the chancel from the nave in medieval church buildings were sometimes destroyed, or made into other items like chairs, and the rare new church building, like Burntisland Parish Church (1592) built for the Church of Scotland, is square in plan with the pulpit at the almost-center of the congregation. It follows that with notable exceptions, like Henry the VII's chapel at Westminster and King's College Chapel in Cambridge, the monarchical period is filled with country houses and palaces, and other fitting places for monarchs to dwell. Another notable figure that is understood as existing within the monarchical cycle is Inigo Jones (1573-1652), who did not work his way through apprenticeship within the building trades, but instead in an aristocratic fashion, embodied noble ideas borrowed from antiquity, (non-medieval), and fashioned these ideas into a classical revivalism alongside the creation of the proto-architect.

Conclusion

To conclude, (as the entirety of Western Modern History and the cyclic changes between the classes of society is beyond the scope of this introduction), it is enough to say that the narrative form which is being presented allows for a coherent storyline. Given our current place within the cycles of history, this narrative is needed.

Wars of the Roses	1459-1497	Monarchy	Civil War
Protestant Reform	1517-1542	Monarchy	Culture Redefined
Armada Crisis	1569-1594	Monarchy	External War
Puritan Awakening	1618-1647	Monarchy	Culture Redefined
Glorious Revolution	1675-1704	Admin/Bourgeoisie	Civil War
Great Awakening	1727-1746	Admin/Bourgeoisie	Culture Redefined
American Revolution	1773-1794	Admin/Bourgeoisie	External War
Transcendental Awakening	1822-1844	Admin/Bourgeoisie	Culture Redefined
American Civil War	1860-1865	Servile Masses	Civil War
Missionary Awakening	1886-1908	Servile Masses	Culture Redefined
Great Depression/WW2	1929-1946	Servile Masses	External War
Consciousness Awakening	1964-1984	Servile Masses	Culture Redefined
Millennial Crisis	2008-2029	Spiritual Patricians	Civil War

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