

44th SYMPOSIUM ON THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE (SETI) – The  
Next Steps (A4)  
SETI 2: SETI and Society (2)

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HUMAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE RISE AND FALL OF CIVILIZATIONS

**Abstract**

SETI, our hopes or fears of a future contact with ETI, is a modern expression of an unending human obsession with the rise and fall of civilizations. People across the globe from our earliest sources to our contemporary culture have tried to understand the beginning and end of history, the creation and the doom. Factor L of the Drake Equation could in other words be understood in a longer historical context of human conceptions about history, time, and civilization. In order to formulate L in its modern version, a number of philosophical, scientific, and technical discoveries and inventions were needed before it became possible to discuss the longevity of extraterrestrial technical civilizations. Of special significance was the “discovery of time,” the emergence of a set of ideas for understanding human temporality: first, linear time, time that has a beginning and an end, and in which nothing is forever; second, long time lines, in which there was a time before humans and human civilization, and that the history of our civilization is only a fraction of the history of universe; and third, that time has a direction, that humans are historical beings – that is, knowledge, culture, and society are not something preexisting but something man-made, evolving, that rests on the experiences and actions of previous generations in a cumulative process leading to the development of knowledge, behavior, and life conditions, or what is sometimes called the “idea of progress.” L is a measure of the civilizing or socialization process, and the variables that underlie it: biocultural coevolution and the interaction between the evolution of cognition and socialization. I think that the societal impact of SETI, and human hopes and fears of extraterrestrial encounters, must be understood in this historical context of human conceptions of the rise and fall of civilizations.