CIVILIZATIONS IN DISPUTE: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions

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BRILL

CIVILIZATIONS IN DISPUTE

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BY

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Without metaphysical presupposition there can be no civilization.

A.N. Whitehead

In memoriam Cornelius Castoriadis
1922–1997

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PREFACE

This book was written between 1997 and 2002. The four main chapters deal with central problems of civilizational theory, in different contexts and from various angles; they are perhaps best read as thematically interconnected essays with relatively self-contained arguments. Even if a more systematic treatment were to be envisaged (such projects are not equally compatible with all versions of civilizational theory), extensive preparatory work would still be needed.

The first chapter traces the re-emergence of civilizational themes and perspectives in contemporary social theory. Although the most explicit and controversial claims of that kind have to do with changing patterns of international relations (the 'clash of civilizations'), more instructive connections can be established in other fields—especially in relation to the ongoing transformations of modernization theory, but also on the level of basic concepts and efforts to redefine them. The second chapter surveys the classical sources which remain essential to further theorizing of the civilizational dimension. Within the sociological tradition, two main lines of inquiry and reflection must be distinguished. On the French side, the brief but exceptionally suggestive programmatic statements by Durkheim and Mauss were not accompanied by any corresponding substantive studies; but some aspects of the problematic were explored by later French writers. On the German side, Max Weber's pioneering exercises in the comparative analysis of civilizations tower above all other work of that kind, but their conceptual foundations leave much to be desired. Neither the Durkheimian nor the Weberian approaches were, however, integrated into the mainstream of sociological inquiry. The questions neglected by sociologists—in the course of what Norbert Elias described as their 'retreat into the present'—were taken up, in another context and with very different aims, by metahistorians such as Oswald Spengler and Toynbee. A short and inevitably selective discussion of their work is followed—in a separate chapter—by a critical analysis of later attempts to revive civilizational approaches on a more solid sociological basis. The most systematic arguments in that vein can be found in the writings of S.N. Eisenstadt, but those of Benjamin Nelson and Jaroslav Krejčí also stand out as major contributions to the field.

The fourth chapter should be seen as the most central part of the book: it outlines a conceptual framework for civilizational analysis, based on more general theoretical premises and linked to more concrete historical perspectives. The model presented here draws on a variety of classical and contemporary sources, but synthesizes them in a distinctive way, with particular emphasis on the interrelations of cultural premises—operative on a civilizational scale—and political as well as economic institutions. In addition to these constitutive core structures of civilizations, comparative analyses must deal with the more outwardly visible patterns which have often served to identify the specific objects of civilizational analysis: the multi-societal complexes as well as the traditional and regional configurations that we usually have in mind when we speak of civilizations in the plural.

Finally, the fifth chapter is a postscript to the main argument, intended to situate the proposed version of civilizational theory with regard to some other contemporary trend. If a multi-civilizational frame of reference is by definition opposed to Eurocentric visions of history, it must be confronted with and distinguished from other ways of criticizing Eurocentrism. The most prominent case in point is now the postcolonialist current that has been gaining in strength during the last two decades. As I try to show, postcolonialist projects are—from the civilizational point of view—of very unequal value and significance. Some of them deserve nothing but rapid dismissal, while others seem open to mutually instructive dialogue.

The broader context of contemporary theoretical debates is beyond the scope of this book, but a few remarks may help to clarify the status and the prospects of civilizational analysis. Its revival towards the end of the twentieth century is closely related to a more general 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, but should not be subsumed under that label: although the civilizational approach places a strong emphasis on cultural patterns, it also relates them to specific contexts and does not entail any a priori concessions to cultural determinism. It is obviously part and parcel of the 'rise of historical sociology' often noted as one of the most salient trends of the last quarter-century, but its claims within that field are far from undisputed, and more work will be required to test its ability to integrate other perspectives. Last but not least, it is inseparable from the emerging paradigm of 'multiple modernities'. Those who insist on the variety of modern constellations are not necessarily in agreement on the

tasks of civilizational theory, but civilizational contexts are among
the most frequently mentioned differentiating factors.

On the other hand, there is no denying that the civilizational turn
runs counter to some more influential ways of thinking. Most impor-
tantly, the dominance of globalization discourse—often too diffuse
to be called theory—reflects a widespread belief in cultural and/or
structural unity across the erstwhile (and perhaps always in part imag-
inary) civilizational boundaries. On this view, civilizational analysis
would at best be applicable to a past phase in the history of human
societies, and irrelevant to the task of theorizing modernity. But it
can be argued that civilizational perspectives have a more positive
bearing on the question of globalization. Some accounts of global-
izing processes are adaptable to a civilizational framework; as for
the more far-reaching interpretations, they may at least need the civi-
lizational counter-model to make sense of themselves. If the glob-
alizing dynamic is equated with a long-term growth of interdependence
and traced back to early beginnings, it is easy to show that both
coexisting and successive civilizations relate to it in different ways.
Even if a more precisely and literally defined concept of globaliza-
tion is (as the present writer would prefer) reserved for the period
which began with the European conquest of the Americas, the new
constellation can still be analyzed in terms of intercivilizational dynam-
ics and encounters.

The most radical globalizers will reject such compromises and
insist on the unprecedented character of recent breakthroughs to a
world society, world economy or world culture. As recent contro-
versies have shown, such views are open to various objections; and
even when taken at face value, they leave more scope for the civi-
lizational line of argument than their supporters may want to admit.
Civilizational background and legacies would have to be included
among the particularizing factors recognized by most theorists of the
global condition. At the same time, the most emphatic ideas of global
unity have latent civilizational connotations. If a new global civi-
lization has emerged or is in the making, comparison with the diverse
civilizations of the recent as well as the more remote past would be
essential to proper understanding of this unprecedented phenome-
non. The same applies to visions of a more radical discontinuity and
a post-civilizational condition: this version of the 'exodus from civi-
lizations' (a term coined for very different purposes by E. Voegelin)

would have to be backed up by detailed analysis of the contrasts with civilizational forms of social life and historical change.

   Further variations on this theme have been suggested. The most extravagantly optimistic speculations about the long-term impact of globalization—seen as a culminating phase of the modernizing process—can be found in the work of Jean Baechler; he expects global modernity to become a new matrix for civilizational plural-ism comparable to the innovations which marked the rise of civi-lization in the singular and paved the way for the flowering of civilizations in the plural. Apart from empirical problems (Baechler admits that it would take a very long time indeed to verify his hypoth-esis), the analytical implications are obvious. If the prospect of a new round of unification and diversification is to be formulated in clearer conceptual terms, the only available framework is a civilizational theory which tries to do justice to the singular as well as the plural meanings of its core idea. On the other hand, a pessimistic view of global modernity and its consequences can bring civilizations back in for other reasons. The intertwining of ecological and geopolitical problems might provoke a disintegrative backlash, a resurgence of particularisms and a search for broad but not global identities to contain and rationalize them; in this context, civilizational legacies could be reactivated and reinterpreted in a more militant way. G.H. von Wright has drawn attention to such possibilities. Although the scenario might seem reminiscent of Huntington's 'clash of civiliza-tions', it refers to a plausible future rather than an observable after-math of the cold war, and it is fundamentally at odds with Huntington in that its main emphasis is on likely dysfunctional consequences of the global ascendancy of capitalism.

   In the last instance, open questions about globalization link up with more general problems of modernity. This book does not pro-pose to settle the question whether modernity is best understood as a distinct civilization, a civilizational formation of a new kind (per-haps both more and less than a civilization in the traditional sense), or a post-civilizational condition. Some reasons to prefer the second of these three views may be indicated at various junctures of the argument. But the main aim is to develop a conceptual framework that would make it possible to discuss the issue in more adequate ways.

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THE REDISCOVERY OF CIVILIZATIONS

The problems of civilizational theory begin with the ambiguities of its most basic concept. It is a commonplace that there are two obviously different ideas of civilization: the one we use when we speak of the origins, achievements or prospects of civilization in the singular, and the other that is invoked when we discuss the criteria for distinguishing and comparing civilizations, the ways of drawing boundaries between them, or the various inventories and typologies which have been proposed by analysts of the field. We may refer to these two notions as the unitary and the pluralistic concept of civilization. But to note that they differ—and can be opposed to each other—is not to claim that they are mutually exclusive. Theories based on the unitary concept can, as we shall see, be constructed in such a way that they allow for a subaltern or marginal version of plurality, rather than an outright negation of it. Conversely, the pluralistic models must—as I will argue—confront the question whether they can integrate a suitably modified version of the unitary one, or at least account for the phenomena which seem to justify it. In short, the conceptual distinction in question is a necessary starting-point, but it leaves some key questions open, and a pluralistic approach (such as the one defended below) should be capable of learning from alternative schools of thought.

Further issues emerge when we link the problematic of civilization—in the singular and in the plural—to that of culture. The two concepts have developed in close connection with each other; historical research has shown that they drew on common sources of meaning and followed parallel paths of elaboration (Fisch, 1992). There is, however, no doubt that the concept of culture plays a more dominant role in this shared development. The specific contents and functions that have been more or less consistently associated with the concept of civilization reflect the problems posed by changing ways of defining and applying the concept of culture. To cut a very long story short, interpretations of culture can focus on comprehensive forms of social life as well as on the constitutive patterns of

meaning which make such forms durable and distinctive; the need to clarify the relationship between these two levels of analysis leads to various redefinitions of the concept of civilization. The main variants of the latter should, in other words, be seen as approaches to the task of theorizing culture in social and historical context. From this point of view, we can distinguish three ways of defining the domain and role of the concept of civilization. Each of them can be adapted to the unitary as well as the pluralistic version, but the distinctions are not always drawn with equal precision; on the whole, a pluralistic framework seems more conducive to a clear statement of alternative options. The simplest solution is to construct a concept of civilization on the basis—and within the limits—of a more comprehensive concept of culture. This approach is not strongly represented in recent theorizing of the unitary type (interpretations in that vein now tend to turn against cultural determinism), but a culturalist stance was often implicit in the pioneering eighteenth-century theories of civilization in the singular, especially when the progress of civilization was closely associated with that of the human mind (Condorcet). The growth of knowledge was the most obvious link between the foundations of culture and the dynamics of civilization. Attempts to locate a plurality of civilizations within a culturalist framework are of more recent origin, and they can take different directions. An interesting but not very influential attempt to apply the anthropological concept of culture to the comparative study of civilization (Bagby, 1963) should at least be noted. Here cultures are defined as configurations of behavioural patterns in the broadest sense; civilizations can be set apart from primitive cultures inasmuch as they are 'cultures of cities' and therefore marked by the more complex social structures which accompany urbanization, but this common denomination is also a new source of variation. A very different and much more widely known pluralistic model was put forward by Oswald Spengler (1926–28). He saw civilizations (exemplified by the Roman Empire as well as the imperialistic West) as declining phases of cultures; the expanding material power structures that constitute their most visible common trait are only an expression of inner cultural changes. The shared destiny of cultures in decline explains the basic similarity of all civilizational trajectories, although each of them reflects the specific problematic of its cultural source.

In contrast to these notions of civilization as internal to culture, others have used the concept to emphasize the role of extra- or infra-cultural dynamics and their more or less formative impact on social development. One version of the well-known German distinction between culture and civilization involves a unitary model of this kind. It was perhaps outlined most clearly by Alfred Weber (1958): the domain of civilization comprises the techniques and institutions which serve the twin purposes of more effective control over the natural environment and more rational organization of social life. We can therefore analyze it in terms of general trends and cumulative development in contrast to the irreducible pluralistic and essentially non-cumulative realm of culture. Weber's understanding of the latter thus limits the scope of the unitary concept of civilization. That is no longer the case with the more ambitious civilizational theory which took shape—on several levels of analysis and through successive stages—in the work of Norbert Elias. As we shall see, Elias's analyses are too complex and insightful to be subsumed under simplified models, and his most concrete accounts of civilizing processes are open to readings which would enhance the role of cultural factors as well as the scope of comparative perspectives, but if we take our cue from the most general theoretical statements, there is no denying the drift towards an uncompromisingly power-centred theory of civilization in the singular. The interconnected, adaptable and mutually dynamizing mechanisms of control—over the natural environment, the social world and the motive forces of human behaviour—add up to a universal evolutionary pattern, un-alterable and uncontainable by any cultural models.

For a non-culturalist approach to civilization in the plural, we may turn to Fernand Braudel's prolegomena to world history. His sketch of an interdisciplinary framework for comparative civilizational analysis begins with material infrastructures: civilizations are 'geographical areas', and to discuss them is 'to discuss space, land and its contours, climate, vegetation, animal species and natural or other advantages,' as well as 'what humanity has made of these basic conditions' (Braudel, 1993: 9). After a brief survey of the social and economic dimensions, Braudel finishes with some comments on 'civilizations as ways of thought', but he obviously sees this most distinctively cultural component as the least well known and the least easily understandable across civilizational boundaries. A comparative

study of civilizations should culminate in an interpretation of col-
lective mentalities, but it cannot begin with claims to master this
difficult terrain.

A third way of anchoring the concept of civilization in a broader
theoretical context centres on the relationship between culture and
other aspects of social life. It may be suggested that such an attempt
to avoid the complementary reductionisms based on culture and
power—and to allow for autonomous processes on both sides—is to
some extent reflected in contemporary uses of the unitary concept.
When evolutionary theorists speak of the origins of civilization and
locate the early state within that framework (Service, 1975), the
emphasis is usually on the combination of cultural innovations (such
as writing and the new ways of thinking which accompany its diffusion)
with new power structures and a more complex social organization.
But the more or less explicit evolutionistic presuppositions tend to
restrict the creative or inventive potential that can be attributed to
these factors.

A relational and pluralistic concept of civilization, i.e. one that
emphasizes the interconnections of culture and other aspects of the
social world as well as the different overall constellations which take
shape on that basis, is more sensitive to the diversity of historical
experience. This line of interpretation will be central to the present
project of civilizational theory; the focus will, in other words, be on
the interplay of cultural patterns with structures of political and eco-
nomic power, and with corresponding forms of social integration and
differentiation. The civilizational complexes analyzed in these terms
have more or less clearly defined boundaries in space and time, but
they are also capable of more or less extensive interaction across the
dividing lines. This multi-dimensional version of the pluralistic model
can draw on the work of some recent or contemporary theorists,
most obviously on the writings of S.N. Eisenstadt; his conceptual
guidelines and concrete analyses will be discussed in various con-
texts, with particular reference to the constitutive role of culture and
the problem of reconciling it with the autonomy of other factors.

It may be useful to contrast this version of the pluralistic model
with traditional trends in civilizational theory. An identitarian bias
has been evident in the most influential approaches. This applies not
only to theories based on an emphatic unitary concept of civiliza-
tion, but also to those which direct the analysis of civilizing processes
primarily towards their homogenizing effects (in that regard, the dis-

cussion of Elias's work has drawn attention to ambiguities in his work); and even if the argument begins with a plurality of civilizations, the identitarian view tends to prevail when it comes to the analysis of their developmental patterns (it can lead to the construction of uniform cycles rather than general trends). At the most elementary level, the focus on identity within a pluralistic framework entails an over-integrated conception of civilizational unity: the comparative study of civilizations has often narrowed its own horizons—and laid itself open to criticism—by more or less consistent use of models which exaggerate internal unity and closure. This should not be mistaken for an inevitable corollary of the pluralistic concept, but it has undeniably been a recurrent trend.

By contrast, the ideas to be developed below should add up to a reorientation of civilizational analysis towards a stronger emphasis on and a better understanding of difference and differentiation. To begin with, this stance is implicit in the very notion of irreducibly different cultural constellations and their role in the formation of civilizational complexes. It is further reinforced by the distinction between culture and power as analytically separate but structurally interrelated components of social life; civilizational frameworks can differ in their ways of articulating and organizing the relationship between patterns of culture and structures of power, as well as in the scope and direction they give to autonomous developments on each side. More specifically, the connection with power enhances the cultural potential for interpretive conflicts. In this regard the question of cultural or civilizational specificity has to do with the different patterns of dissent, protest and interaction between orthodox and heterodox traditions (Eisenstadt's work on these themes has opened up new comparative perspectives). A civilizational context can set limits to cultural diversity or ideological pluralism, even if it falls far short of civilizational consensus. Finally, a comparative analysis of civilizational frameworks must deal with the processes of social and cultural differentiation internal to each of them, as well as with the distinctive overall patterns of differentiation that set them apart from each other. From the latter point of view, civilizational analysis is an essential corrective to uniform and over-generalized models of mainstream differentiation theory.

The approach which I have outlined is one of many versions of civilizational theory, but it seems particularly relevant to contemporary debates and experiences. As I will try to show, several recent

developments—historical and theoretical—have brought the plural-
istic concept of civilization to the fore and made it more compati-
ble with the interpretation sketched above. Civilizational claims and
references now play a more important role in the global ideological
context than they did when the rival universalisms of the Cold War
era dominated the scene. At the same time, divergent paths and
uneven results of development have raised questions about the struc-
tural effects of civilizational legacies, as distinct from their discursive
functions; the failure of universal models has, in other words, high-
lighted the issue of civilizational backgrounds to modernizing processes.
This problematic cannot be tackled without a more systematic treat-
ment of modernity from a civilizational angle, both in respect of
possible civilizational diversity within a modern context and with a
view to fundamental civilizational features of the modern constella-
tion as such. Our field of inquiry is thus linked to the broader frame-
work of perspectives and debates on modernity. Finally, a theoretical
account of civilization and modernity calls for some reflection on
underlying conceptual problems; the strengths and limits of civiliza-
tional paradigms must be tested through confrontation with other
ways of theorizing the social-historical world. In that regard, civi-
lizational analysis can—in its own right and in conjunction with other
lines of argument—serve to problematize established models of inter-
pretation and to suggest new strategies.

    These considerations point to a whole range of problems which
will be examined from various viewpoints in the following chapters.
At this stage, we can limit our discussion to the most obvious rea-
sons for assuming that the concept of civilization can still function
as a "great inductor of theories" (Starobinski, 1983: 48).

1.1   *Civilizational claims and counter-claims*

The most overtly ideological uses of civilizational discourse have to
do with the critique and defence of the West. A pluralistic notion
of civilization is, in particular, invoked by those who want to com-
pete with the West on its own ground and at the same time claim
the right to criticize it from an external vantage point. The rhetoric
of 'Asian values' is perhaps the prime recent example. Critical
observers have denounced its incoherence (the values in question
often seem to be a culture-neutral mixture of instrumental reason

and authoritarian prejudice) and inauthenticity (some of the most vocal claims come from elites and regimes of inextricably mixed Asian and Western provenance). But as the more careful analyses have shown, the notion of Asian identity or commonality cannot be reduced to a strategic fiction (Hay, 1970; Kahn, 1997; Camroux and Domenach, 1997). It represents an alternative version of a unifying idea first invented and imposed by the ascendant West; the details and directions of reinterpretation vary from one Asian region to another, not only because of the different forces brought into play, but also as a result of the legacies which they activate; and the reference to Asian values or traditions is—at least in some cases—flexible enough to allow rival interpretations to develop.

The changing global constellation which gave rise to the new Asianism of the 1990s has also reinforced civilizational claims of a more specific kind. Islamist ideologies (often misdescribed as fundamentalist) are an obvious case in point: here the ostensible return to an indigenous civilizational legacy is a response to the failure of imported models, both those borrowed from the West and those dependent on its erstwhile global adversary. In official Chinese discourse, the civilizational turn—most clearly evident in the rehabilitation of Confucianism—takes place in a different context. It helps to fill the cultural vacuum left by a crumbling Soviet model, to formulate the bid for nationalist legitimacy in more universalistic terms, and to limit the impact of a controlled and partial modernization along Western lines. In Japan, the growing popularity of civilizational theories—some of them more overtly ideological than others—reflects a new phase of the reconstruction of Japanese nationalism, obviously not unrelated to the post-Cold War configuration of world politics.

Further examples could be added. For present purposes, however, it is more important to note some theoretical implications. The current vogue of cultural wars against the West has renewed interest in the pluralistic concept of civilization, but also prompted attempts to collapse the whole accompanying complex of questions into a geopolitical framework. It is from this point of view that Immanuel Wallerstein has tried to integrate the problematic of civilizations into his world system theory. His thesis is, briefly, that 'the concept of civilizations (plural) arose as a defense against the ravages of civilization (singular)' (Wallerstein, 1991: 224). Civilization in the singular was an ideological projection of the capitalist world system and

its expansionist dynamic; the plural version of the concept is there-
fore best understood as an empowering device designed to boost
peripheral resistance to the systemic centre by contesting the cul-
tural hegemony of the latter. If civilization (singular) can be equated
with progress, enlightenment and universalism, civilizations (plural)
are linked to the counter-values of identity, autonomy and diversity.
But this does not mean that intact civilizations exist on the margins
or in the interstices of the world system. As Wallerstein sees it, the
empirical content of civilizational claims is always borrowed from
the past, i.e. from the empires which preceded the rise of global
capitalism. The pluralistic concept of civilization is thus ideological
in that it transfigures past forms of political and economic organi-
zation into present cultural totalities. That does not necessarily detract
from its mobilizing effects; Wallerstein is clearly inclined to think
that multiple constructs of civilizations (plural) will help to decon-
struct the dominant system.

    This argument has considerable force. The appeal to civilizational
identities is an important and recurrent aspect of non-Western responses
to Western expansion and its transformative impact on the world;
recent developments—the demise of the Communist counter-model
and the progress of modernization without wholesale Westernization—
have brought it to the fore in a particularly striking fashion, but this
new turn may also serve as a reminder of neglected earlier episodes
(the Indian experience is a particularly significant case, all the more
so since it illustrates the variety of possible uses of a civilizational
legacy). But Wallerstein's account of the problem is one-sided and
marked by the reductionistic thrust of his general theory. There are
at least three major critical points to be made in relation to the the-
sis summarized above.

    First, it seems clear that the pluralistic concept of civilization is
less directly and exclusively linked to anti-Western perspectives than
Wallerstein assumes. He quotes French sources which date the first
clear definition of civilizations (plural) to the early nineteenth cen-
tury, and goes on to argue that the turn towards civilization as a
particularity, rather than civilization as universality, reflects nation-
alist resistance to Napoleon's empire. The later proliferation of the
concept might thus be explained as a global diffusion of themes first
developed within the central region of the system. That is already
a significant twist to Wallerstein's main line of argument. But in the
light of Starobinski's analysis, we can go further: the possibility of a

'bifurcation towards a pluralistic ethnological relativist meaning' (Starobinski, 1983: 19) is built into the notion of civilization from the very beginning. The first author to use the term in the unitary sense (Mirabeau the older) also referred to civilizations in the plural, although that usage is less emphatic and less precise. The pluralistic concept of civilization is, in brief, part and parcel of the critical self-reflection that accompanied the emergence of Western modernity and reached an epoch-making point in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Within this context, the reference to an existing or historical plurality of civilization opens up new interpretive horizons and perspectives of self-relativization. These hermeneutical resources can be appropriated by non-Western intellectuals or movements in search of new strategies for the defence of identity and the construction of historical continuity, and Wallerstein's analysis has certainly thrown some light on that part of the story; but the second wave of civilizational discourse must be understood as a selective and therefore diverse response to developments with the Western tradition.

Second, the relationship between civilizational claims and imperial legacies is more complicated than Wallerstein would have us believe. In this regard a comparison of China and India is particularly instructive. China embodies the most continuous of all imperial traditions, and in its most ascendant phase, the Chinese centre combined imperial power with economic dynamism and cultural prestige; its infrastructures were in many ways more advanced than those of the West at the beginning of the latter's rise to global power, and China should therefore be a prime case of the correlation postulated by Wallerstein. In fact, the defence and perpetuation of a civilizational legacy was central to the first Chinese reactions to superior Western power, and the same themes have again come to the fore during the last two decades, but the crucial phase in between was dominated (albeit less thoroughly than it seemed at the time) by anti-traditionalist currents which drew on Western models of radical universalism. By contrast, the lack of any comparable imperial tradition in Indian history did not prevent the mainstream of Indian anti-colonial thought from developing the civilizational theme in a more continuous fashion than Chinese ideologists did; recent developments in Indian politics raise new questions about the possibility of translating a streamlined version of the civilizational legacy into a more exclusivist form of nationalism. Some of the rival constructs

are obviously more contrived than others, but there is no justification for dismissing the very idea of Indian civilizational unity as an ex post invention. And if we generalize the question beyond those two prominent cases, it seems clear that the widely varying role of imperial formations in pre-capitalist history depends—among other things—on the civilizational context as defined above, i.e. in the sense of configurations of culture and power that can be more or less conducive to empire-building. The relationship between civilizational frameworks and imperial structures is, in other words, a problem for the comparative history of past epochs, not simply for the critique of present-day ideologies.

Third, the equation of civilizational claims with peripheral strategies of resistance is misleading in that it obscures other aspects of the picture. A comparative study of ideological responses—and imagined alternatives—to Western domination should begin with a brief survey of the main trends. The search for effective counterweights to Western power may lead to unconditional acceptance of Western cultural and institutional models (given the variety of existing Western patterns, choices and combinations can be selective), seen as universal standards of modernity. But the rejection of global Western rule (often combined with protest against Westernizing indigenous Westernizing elites) can also result in the adoption of revolutionary ideologies and projects from within the Western tradition. The images and discourses singled out by Wallerstein have to do with a third response: the attempt to ground strategies for autonomous change and re-empowerment in inherited traditions. When the latter are interpreted in explicit and comprehensive opposition to the West, we can speak of fully-fledged civilizational claims. Finally, these three options are to some extent conditioned and counterbalanced by a fourth one: the construction of national identities and nationalist narratives, by definition directed against Western supremacy but always to some degree dependent on Western models. This last line of response cannot develop without incorporating elements of the others, but since no complete synthesis can be achieved, it also appears as a separate type alongside them.

In practice, the predominant pattern of response to Western domination has been a changing mixture of these trends. The official ideological positions and elaborations are, however, usually marked by a particular emphasis on one of the themes discussed above, and in that regard, Wallerstein's analysis has at least the merit of draw-

ing attention to ideas which are—as a result of several intercon-
nected changes—moving from a subaltern or implicit role to a more
hegemonic one. It may be useful to contrast it with another very
different reaction to the same developments. Samuel Huntington's
well-known theory of a 'clash of civilizations', in his view likely to
dominate world politics in the foreseeable future, is best understood
as an attempt to turn the tables on civilizationist critics of the West:
the irreducible plurality of civilizations is accepted, but only in order
to liberate the self-understanding and self-defence of the West from
the constraints of ideological universalism. Although Huntington's
ideas have been widely criticized (not always for the most compelling
reasons), they seem representative of a broader trend that will in all
probability resurface in more or less varying terms and should there-
fore be included in our discussion. In the present context, we can
disregard the description of geopolitical conditions after the Cold
War and the prediction of imminent developments; suffice it to note
in passing that the reference to a 'clash of civilizations' is mislead-
ing inasmuch as the argument is not about civilizations as collective
actors (even if Huntington's first formulations may have suggested
such readings). Rather, the main claim is that although 'states are
and will remain the dominant entities in world affairs', we are now
living in a world where 'cultural identity is the central factor shap-
ing a country's associations and antagonisms' (Huntington, 1996: 34,
125). Civilizations, defined in a fundamentally culturalist sense, are
reasserting themselves as strategic frames of reference, not as direct
protagonists of international politics. Here our main concern is with
the conceptual implications of this empirical thesis; in particular,
three crucial aspects of Huntington's argument align it with a very
simplistic and sweeping version of civilizational theory.

First, Huntington refers to the tradition of civilizational analysis
in a markedly loose and indiscriminate fashion, without distinguish-
ing between alternative models or directions, and this enables him
to opt for specific approaches without identifying them with partic-
ular sources or entering into ongoing controversies. To call civiliza-
tions 'the ultimate human tribes' (ibid.: 207) is to show a strong
preference for interpretations which stress civilizational closure, and
to leave out of consideration a whole body of work which has prob-
lematized that notion from various angles. The focus on language
and religion as 'central elements' of civilizational patterns (ibid.: 59)
reflects this position: neither linguistic nor religious factors are a

priori or exclusively conducive to closure, but they do lend themselves to strong constructions of self-contained identity, and Huntington's account of them is in that vein. And the background conception of civilizations as complete cultural entities allows Huntington to give a corresponding twist to other themes which in themselves are not necessarily linked to over-integrated models. This is important for another key part of the argument: the claim that 'the West was the West long before it was modern' (ibid.: 69). In other words, a whole complex of cultural traits—from the classical legacy to a tradition of individual rights and liberties and from the Catholic Church to representative bodies—set the Western civilizational area apart from others before it underwent a change which gave it a decisive advantage over them. In this way, the problem of the relationship between Western civilization and Western modernity is defused by definition. The West in its premodern shape is an integral and durable civilizational pattern; the transition to modernity can therefore neither be seen as a mutation of a particular civilization nor as the emergence of a fundamentally new one, but only as a change within a given civilizational context, significant enough to incite imitation by others but too limited to bring about a 'cultural coming together of humanity' (ibid.: 56).

These implications bring us to a third critical point: Huntington's account of the relationship between modernization, Westernization and civilizational continuity in the non-Western world. If modernization is defined in terms of the technological and organizational application of scientific knowledge (ibid.: 68), it is clearly capable of spreading across civilizational boundaries, but also likely to be accompanied by further borrowing from the civilizational model associated with the first breakthrough. Huntington distinguishes three possible responses to the mixture of constraints and possibilities inherent in the dynamic of Western expansion. Non-Western societies may reject both modernization and Westernization, embrace both, or embrace the first and reject the second (ibid.: 72). The first two options are extreme cases, and it is only under exceptional circumstances that they become practicable in some measure; the third allows for varying combinations of innovation and preservation, and is therefore the predominant pattern of development. But when Huntington goes on to describe the 'reformist response' as 'an attempt to combine modernization with the preservation of the central values, practices and institutions of the society's indigenous culture' (ibid.: 74), he is

building a strong thesis into his basic concepts. The enduring presence of civilizational elements within strategies and processes of modernization is equated with the preservation of a whole civilizational core; the indisputable fact that civilizational legacies remain important is taken to mean that civilizations can survive the modernizing turn intact and adapt its results to their pre-existing patterns. Given these assumptions, the 'second-generation indigenization phenomenon', i.e. the return to ancestral cultures after a first wave of Westernizing change (noted by earlier analysts and emphasized by Huntington), is only an explicit acceptance of underlying realities. It is then easy to take the final step and argue that changing global conditions can enhance the civilizational aspect of geopolitics.

Here we need not discuss the empirical contents of Huntington's work. The objections raised above have to do with fundamental theoretical shortcomings which prevent him from engaging with central problems of civilizational analysis. In particular, the whole issue of civilization and modernity is neutralized at the level of basic premises: both sides of the problem are theorized in such a way that no further account of their interrelations is needed. The juxtaposition of different but equally self-perpetuating cultural totalities and identical but only partial modernizing processes excludes the very questions which are central to the present project: to what extent are the paths to and patterns of modernity dependent on civilizational legacies, how significant are—in this regard—the differences between major civilizational complexes, and what kinds of connection can we make between the internal pluralism of modernity and the civilizational pluralism of its prehistory?

1.2 *Legacies and trajectories*

The issues obscured by ideological reductions or unacknowledged ideological uses of the concept of civilization have come to the fore in other contexts. As I will argue, the attempts to move beyond mainstream modernization theory and thematize specific links between traditions and modernities point in this direction; they have drawn attention to the enduring importance of civilizational legacies for the formation, development and self-understanding of modernity. This applies in different ways to the most obviously representative examples. The following discussion will not be based on specific interpretive

or explanatory claims (moves to that end can only be made after a
more extensive treatment). Rather, the aim is to show that ongoing
debates can be summarized in terms of civilizational perspectives. In
all cases to be considered, conventional or prima facie plausible ref-
erences to civilizational backgrounds have been subjected to effective
criticism, but the more critical approaches are still guided by ideas
which we can locate within the framework of civilizational theory.
Some questions arising from our survey will be discussed at greater
length in later chapters; at this point, we only need to locate them
within a common framework.

The East Asian region (in the narrow sense defined by Chinese
cultural traditions and therefore not applicable to Southeast Asia) is
perhaps the most familiar case of a civilizational background to mod-
ernization and development. The clear-cut cultural and historical
contours of this area, its distinctive long-term trajectory, and the
spectacular results of its modern transformation set it apart from
other non-Western worlds; and as the exceptional scale and char-
acter of East Asian economic growth became more visible, it seemed
increasingly evident that this was at least in part due to a legacy
which could only be defined in civilizational terms. Given the cru-
cial role of Confucian thought in the construction and diffusion of
Chinese culture, it was tempting to define the whole civilizational
framework as Confucian. This did not necessarily entail strong assump-
tions about Confucian unity and orthodoxy. Rather, the main empha-
sis was on a mode of thought which combined key themes in an
enduring but flexible fashion. The Confucian core was identified
with a vision of essential interconnections between cosmic and social
order, a focus on political authority as the prime link between those
two levels, and the principles of familial piety and solidarity as
models of societal organization. As for the corresponding images of
agency and power, the Confucian project centred on an elite equipped
with a cultural model and entitled to supervise its application to
social life.

Those who spoke of Confucian civilization did not ignore the fact
that other traditions were involved and sometimes played a promi-
nent role. They could, however, argue that Confucian hegemony
was a matter of strategic position rather than doctrinal monopoly:
it was based on canonical texts, together with a discursive frame-
work built around them, and key institutions (from the bureaucracy
and the examination system to the organization of families and

lineages). These foundations were obviously not transferred en bloc
from traditional to modern societies, but the way they functioned
within traditional settings can to some extent be seen as indicative
of modern transformations. If East Asian societies were—well before
entering the modern age—exceptionally capable of 'moulding human
relations to maximise collective action' (Rozman, 1991: 32), that
must have something to do with the Confucian combination of hier-
archy and mobility, as well as the mutually formative and reinforc-
ing connection between familial and political authority. The most
prominent traditional outlet for this cultural logic was statecraft (the
history of the region is marked by unusually sustained processes of
state formation), but the same sources could—as a result of strate-
gic reorientation in response to external menaces and models—serve
to boost economic development, while reserving an important role
for state intervention and guidance.

   The objections raised against Confucian interpretations of the East
Asian region are varied and often irrelevant to our purposes; here
we can only briefly consider those that have to do with the ques-
tion of civilizational components of modernity. Historical research
has highlighted the different trajectories of Confucian traditions in
the core countries of the region (China, Korea and Japan), due in
large part to the varying patterns of interaction with other forces,
and reflected in different reactions to the encounter with advanced
modernity; in particular, strong arguments have been levelled against
the view that the early modern period (from the seventeenth to the
mid-nineteenth century) was marked by a regional shift towards a
more uniform and orthodox Confucian culture (on the crucial Japanese
case, cf. Ooms, 1985). Claims about Confucian continuity are not
easy to reconcile with the fact that the recent history of the region
has been characterized by particularly profound transformations and
explosive upheavals, all the more so since the dynamics and direc-
tions of these changes were more indigenous than in other areas
affected by global Western domination. Furthermore, the most dis-
tinctive results of modern developments in East Asia can be seen as
original variants of models borrowed from elsewhere. There are
weighty and well-known reasons to speak of a Japanese reinvention
of capitalism; in a more spectacular but in the end acutely self-
destructive fashion, Chinese revolutionaries reinvented Communism.
It is, to say the least, not self-evident that a shared Confucian legacy
can help to explain these two widely diverging innovations.

These criticisms have not disposed of the Confucian problematic. Counter-arguments can be summarized in a way which allows us to contextualize Confucian traditions without denying their formative role, and to retain a civilizational perspective without reducing it to one privileged and self-contained interpretive framework. A better understanding of the interaction between Confucian currents, other cultural traditions and structural trends in premodern East Asia paves the way for a more balanced analysis of Confucian elements in the more complex modern constellation. The new social and cultural forces which took shape under the impact of Western modernity cannot be subsumed under pre-existing civilizational paradigms. There is, in that sense, no consistently and comprehensively Confucian pattern of modernity, but there may be important Confucian aspects of the defensive, constructive and critical responses to the intrusion of modernity. If we want to analyze the role of the Confucian legacy in recent transformations we must consider not only the sustained modernizing processes, but also the conflicts and countercurrents that have accompanied them.

In more concrete terms, these revised perspectives can be linked to new lines of interpretation which have made it easier to distinguish Confucian thought from its imaginary substrata and institutional embodiments. Two arguments in this vein seem particularly significant. On the one hand, analysts of Chinese development and modernization have argued that the collapse of Confucianism as an established mode of thought did not preclude the survival of more or less formalized practices which it had helped to entrench and immunize against ideological change. Some observers describe these routinized patterns as 'meta-Confucian' (Weggel, 1990) and explain Chinese modernization in terms of their triumph over official Confucianism and resistance to revolutionary projects. The enduring commitment to education as a social value is often mentioned in this context. But when the argument takes a more specific sociological turn, the emphasis is mostly on network-building as a distinctive strategy of institution-building and organization (King, 1991 speaks of 'the construction of particularistic ties'). The main modernizing effects ascribed to this civilizational legacy have to do with the network-based structure of East Asian economies (Hamilton, 1994); the latter model has been applied—albeit in different ways—to mainland China as well as to the more dynamic fully capitalist economies of the region. It should be noted that a network-based

economy or society is by no means synonymous with a communi-
tarian one (although that label has occasionally been used): the more
perceptive analysts of East Asian structures insist on the active role
and strategic orientation of individuals engaged in network-building,
but try to show that individual action is contextualized in a way that
differs significantly from Western models. To quote Gary Hamilton's
summary of a more detailed analysis, the 'conception of roles and
of the obligation to fulfil roles . . . permeate every sphere of Chinese
society, in the same way that individuation and law permeate every
sphere of Western society' (Hamilton, 1990: 98).

   On the other hand, the most interesting accounts of the origins
of Confucianism—especially the work of Leon Vandermeersch (1977,
1980) and J.F. Billeter's interpretation of it (1993)—suggest that the
Confucian moment might be best understood as a rationalizing,
humanizing and moralizing twist to archaic cultural patterns which
had to be restructured in response to a changing social environment.
The imaginary significations of order, rulership and hierarchy are,
on this view, central to a primary civilizational layer which proved
exceptionally capable of adapting to later transformations. The two
approaches are obviously not incompatible: if Confucianism was
essentially a transformer of older traditions, its effects may at least
in part have been conducive to readjustments which could outlast
its official presence. If we want to single out the aspects most cap-
able of transfer to modern practices and institutions, they are more
likely to be found on the level of very general modes of thought,
rather than in the distinctive contents from which the Chinese tra-
dition derived its cultural frameworks of power. Vandermeersch argues
that an analysis in this vein could start with ritualism, always regarded
as a defining characteristic of Confucian traditions and rightly seen
by authoritative Confucian thinkers as the key element of an older
legacy. Needless to say, the traditional system of ritual control and
legitimation disintegrated together with the old order which it had
helped to maintain; the question is, however, whether the logic behind
it was of some importance to the new structures built in the course
of the modernizing process. If ritualism was, by definition, based on
'the primacy of formality over finality' (Vandermeersch, 1980: 267),
its guiding logic can be described as morphology in contradistinc-
tion to teleology, and the corresponding image of human action
(including, in particular, the exercise of power) centres on adjust-
ment to 'the moving forms and structures of general and particular

situations' (Billeter, 1993: 898). Not that this orientation could remain uncontested within the traditional universe: the alternative tradition of legalism, accommodated and contained by the imperial version of Confucianism, represents a far-reaching elaboration of teleological reason in pursuit of power. It is nevertheless true that the modern breakthrough to sustained economic growth and the concomitant rise of the developmental state marked a massive shift in favour of teleological rationality. Modern offshoots of the morphological legacy can only function within the limits set by this fundamental change.

Vandermeersch suggests two significant connections between modernizing strategies and morphological modes of thought (1985: 152–203); they have to do with the social embedding of economic organization, more systematic and effective in the East Asian version of modern capitalism than in the Western original, and the "functionalist" model of the state as an integral part of the unfolding developmental project, and therefore more strongly identified with bureaucratic coordination than with representative government (in that capacity, it could draw on the pioneering regional experience of self-regulating bureaucracy). These considerations can obviously be linked to the argument about network-building. But over and above that, the claims made on behalf of the morphological legacy have theoretical implications of the most basic kind (although Vandermeersch does not spell them out): they might link up with analyses of the relationship between system and lifeworld in East Asian societies, where the formative role of the latter seems more marked than in the West (e.g. Deutschmann, 1987), as well as with debates on the systemic rationality of East Asian models, in contrast to more one-sidedly goal-oriented strategies (some analysts of the developmental state have more or less explicitly taken that line). On the other hand, the same source may have something to do with the most visibly aberrant vagaries of East Asian modernity; Billeter (1993: 929) suggests that a ritualist mentality is still evident in the Maoist stress on 'correct line' as more important than any pragmatic strategies.[1]

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[1] Another aspect of the East Asian background to modern transformations, increasingly evident in recent work on Chinese history, concerns the interaction with Inner Asian neighbours and conquerors. In this regard, intercivilizational contacts of a very specific kind were often crucial to the course of events in China, but in different

Given the strong emphasis on economic development in mainstream modernization theory, the exceptional East Asian record of growth raised particularly urgent questions, and it was tempting to explain the modern achievement in terms of an exclusive civilizational background. No such obvious reasons apply to the other non-Western cases in question, but it seems possible to outline the civilizational perspectives that would lead to better understanding of modern trajectories. In the case of India, the crucial fact is—as Eisenstadt has repeatedly emphasized—the persistence of constitutional democracy in a context strikingly different from those of more familiar democratic regimes. The choice of the term 'constitutional' reflects well-founded reservations about the liberal character of Indian democracy; but even so, there is something to be said for viewing India as the third major example of modern democracy, alongside the American and French ones (Khilnani, 1997). If we accept that the emergence of Indian democracy cannot be explained on the basis of a simple implantation of Western models (the British colonial state in India was not a democratic regime), and that neither the success of democratic ideology within the Indian nationalist movement nor the adoption of democratic government after independence was a foregone conclusion, the question of the pre-colonial civilizational legacy and its impact on modern history becomes more pertinent. There is no denying that India had a more prolonged experience of direct Western domination than any other comparably complex civilization (for this reason, the notion of a post-colonial condition

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ways at different historical junctures. Under the Song dynasty (i.e. during the period most frequently singled out as the turning-point towards 'early modern' developments), the very long-term trend of imperial withdrawal from direct involvement in the economy was for some time counterbalanced by policies which Paul J. Smith (1993) describes as 'economic activism' and 'bureaucratic entrepreneurship.' Together with other strategies of different kinds, they reflect the interests and ideas of an assertive scholar-official elite whose institutional basis was compatible with strikingly diverse projects, but the activistic current would not have gained such prominence without the constraints of a situation which some scholars describe as a permanent war economy, developed in response to the changing power balance on the northern frontiers. At a much later stage, the most lasting imperial unification of China and Inner Asia—under the Qing dynasty—was carried out by as state which had first emerged on the margin of both regions but gone on to conquer them. The enlargement of the imperial domain, together with the incomplete indigenization of the imperial centre, was of some importance to the nineteenth-century crisis and the search for solutions within the framework of the ancien regime.

makes more sense in India than elsewhere), but aspects of the pre-colonial heritage may have favoured the forces striving for a demo-cratic path to modernity—or at least lent themselves to accommodation with them.

It seems appropriate to pose this question with particular refer-ence to the phenomenon which has most frequently been singled out as *the* defining feature of Indian civilization: the caste system. This background is all the more interesting because of the obvious conflict between the caste principles of organization and even the most minimalist definition of democracy. If a democratic regime pre-vailed in post-colonial India without destroying the caste system, a closer look at the two sides and their interrelations is in order, and it may begin with the explanation proposed by the most influential civilizational analyst of the caste system. Louis Dumont interpreted the caste system as the most extreme and elaborate form of a hierarchical order, in contrast to the egalitarian image of man and society from which he derived the key characteristics of modernity. Although his main concern was with the structure of traditional Indian society (and with India as the most revealing example of a traditional society), the concluding comments on recent changes are more relevant to our purposes: they deal with the mutual adapta-tion of caste institutions and democratic procedures. According to Dumont, it is the pursuit of interests through competition for polit-ical power and influence that provides an opening for caste strate-gies within the democratic order. In this context, castes begin to function as 'collective individuals'; as a result, they strive for a higher level of formal organization on a more supra-local basis than could be envisaged in their traditional setting, but at the same time, 'caste values circumscribe and encompass modern ferments' (Dumont, 1980: 283). But this combination does not represent a successful fusion of tradition and modernity, let alone an effective containment of the latter by the former. Dumont concludes that the adaptation of the older order to a new milieu leads to the 'substantialisation of caste', at the expense of its relational character, and therefore entails a shift towards segregation and competition, in contrast to the traditional principles of hierarchy and interdependence. In his view, the tem-porary mutual accommodation of caste and democracy is marked enough for us to speak of a prolonged intermediary phase, but not likely to halt the long-term undermining of the traditional order.

Dumont's diagnosis has been called into question by various crit-
ics; in the present context, the main point to be noted is that the
issues thus raised can be debated within a civilizational framework
and with continuing—albeit critical—reference to Dumont's model.
Henri Stern's revised account of caste and democracy is a conve-
nient starting-point. Given that collective caste identity had turned
out to be much less decisive for political choices than Dumont sug-
gested, Stern shifted the focus of analysis towards the question of
individual abilities and orientations shaped by the caste system. As
he sees it, the latter functioned on the basis of a network of claims
and obligations which had to be mastered and maintained by caste
members; the 'ideas and practices of mastery and responsibility',
embedded in the tradition, were strong enough to ensure a 'coinci-
dence . . . between the Hindu world of caste and the political regime
of democracy' (Stern, 1985: 9). The unequal but—within limits—
genuine pluralism of interrelated castes could be grafted onto the
more egalitarian model of interacting interest groups.

There is, however, another side to this argument. The reference
to political capacities involved in the maintenance of caste institu-
tions (and transferable to a modern setting) presupposes a broader
view of the political dimension as defined and circumscribed by the
Indian tradition. Dumont's analysis of the caste system was closely
linked to a specific and controversial thesis on the relationship between
religion and politics. A partial secularization of kingship appears as
an integral part of the hierarchical order. The political centre loses
its claim to sacred authority, but remains firmly attached to a sys-
tem centred on the sacred authority of a priestly caste. This asym-
metric separation of authority and power not only limits the autonomy
and dynamism of the secular side, but also obstructs the monopo-
lization of political power, which is to a considerable extent diffused
throughout the multiple centres and layers of the caste system. Stern's
analysis of the indigenous background to Indian democracy seems
to follow Dumont in that it assumes a far-reaching dilution and frag-
mentation of the political.

But Dumont's views on this subject have not gone unchallenged.
As various authors have argued (e.g. Dirks, 1987; Heesterman, 1985),
the boundary between priestly and kingly power was less clearly
drawn, less reducible to a division of sacred and secular authority,
and more open to contestation and redefinition from various angles

than Dumont's over-systematized model would lead us to believe. This revised account of the relationship between the religious and the political can be combined with a stronger emphasis on the process of state formation (Kulke, 1995) and on significant regional variations of state structures (Stein, 1998). The overall upshot of such reconsiderations is—or could be—an approach which does more justice to history without discarding the civilizational perspective. The Indian way of articulating the differentiation and interdependence of sacred and secular authority can still be seen as a distinctive and durable pattern, but it is characterized by inbuilt ambiguity on both sides (the religious sphere combined a radically other-worldly vision of ultimate goals with a claim to centrality within the social order, whereas the political focus on kingship was counterbalanced by obstacles to the formation of a strong centre); this framework prefigured a range of possibilities, rather than a set of systemic principles, and the concrete results depended on historical forces. It may be noted in passing that the idea of a changing balance between Brahmin and royal authority, reflected in more or less extensive modifications of the caste context is by no means incompatible with the general thrust of Weber's analysis of India, however questionable the Weberian model might be on the level of details. But more importantly, a post-Weberian version of civilizational analysis can cope with the critique of culturalist views and allow for a more autonomous dynamic of politics and history. Eisenstadt's analysis of India takes note of fundamental objections to Dumont's thesis, but argues that we can nevertheless speak of significant civilizational restrictions on state formation and barriers to state absolutism. Indian civilization did not give rise to a lasting imperial structure (although imperial fictions and aspirations played a more important role in the rise and fall of rival states than historians have often wanted to admit); the notion of the state as a distinct entity—in contrast to the symbolism and ideology of kingship—remained underdeveloped; and the political centre did not have the cultural status that would have enabled it to claim equality or identity with the religious one and conduct wars of religion (Eisenstadt, 1996: 409). These characteristics add up to what Eisenstadt calls an 'accommodative centre', and it can be argued that its legacy helped—admittedly in a passive rather than an active way—to consolidate democratic institutions in the post-colonial phase. It may, moreover, have predisposed the Indian constitutional-democratic state to follow a specific path: when the initial developmen-

talist project lost its momentum and its legitimizing force, the historical background favoured a shift towards strategies of adaptation to social interests and pressures.

These conclusions—suggested in the first instance by analyses of specific relationships between culture and politics—are also locked up by accounts of long-term trends within the political sphere. Ravinder Kumar (1989: 233) notes 'a striking decentralisation of power and an equally striking tenuousness of linkage between different political levels'; this pattern prevailed throughout otherwise different phases of pre-colonial history and provided a flexible framework although colonial rule transformed both state and society in far-reaching ways, the new social forces in search of political outlets could build on the traditions of local authority and autonomy. Seen from this angle, the successive constellations of state and community are central to Indian history (Stein, 1998). In other words: the whole process of state formation is—to a particularly high degree—marked by counterbalancing patterns of distributed power. Following Kumar, this background can be seen as an important part of the historical roots of democracy in India—without making any concessions to the myth of a pre-existing liberal democracy.[2]

The third case to be considered differs from both East Asia and India. In the Islamic world, more specifically its Middle Eastern heartland, it is not the success or persistence of a distinctive modernity that has revived interest in the civilizational approach. Rather, the manifest failure to meet widely accepted standards of modernity and enduring disagreement about the ideological responses to that problem have prompted reflection on the specific heritage of the region. It is a commonplace that liberal democracy has not made much headway in Islamic countries; the contingent economic advantages

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[2] To sum up, it may be noted that the exploration of civilizational perspectives on the Indian past has also led to growing emphasis on intercivilizational dynamics, and that this aspect is most clearly exemplified by composite patterns of state formation. Although historians continue to diagree on many issues, a stong case has been made for seeing the last and most succdessful Islamic imperial formation in India as a combination of imported and indigenous patterns (see especially Streusand 1989); and although the same author observes—and most scholars would agree—that the 'Mughal polity resembled those of earlier principalities in the subcontinent more than it did the British" (ibid., 4), it can still be argued that the forms and long-term consequences of British rule in India owed much to its interaction with an already multi-civilizational legacy of institutional patterns. Some implications of this view will be discussed in the last chapter.

enjoyed by some of the countries in question have not translated into effective projects of capitalist development; and the socialist alternative to Western modernity proved particularly inadequate in this context. As for the Islamic radicalism which emerged as the most representative reaction to this multiple failure, some observers have taken its traditionalist self-image at face value, whereas others have tried to show that it has a modern content, albeit one not easily explained in terms of mainstream modernization theory. But whether we read the evidence as indicative of undamaged tradition or anomalous modernity, the case for closer examination of the historical legacy is obvious.

Those who stress the inbuilt limits to the modernizing potential of the Islamic tradition have often invoked a supposedly fundamental and enduring fusion of religion and politics. On this view, Islam is—or aspires to be—a total way of life, incompatible with any principled division of sacred and secular spheres; it seems appropriate to refer to this all-encompassing project as a civilization, rather than to subsume it under a misleadingly narrow Western concept of religion. The apparent absence of differentiation between the religious and the political is then taken to entail a series of direct and indirect consequences. It is, most obviously, an obstacle to the rationalization of statecraft: the cultural premises of the Islamic tradition seem to preclude a systematic elucidation of the political domain as a 'world order' in the Weberian sense, i.e. an autonomous realm of action and discourse, with its own inbuilt rules of organization and interpretation. If a *de facto* separation or independent development of state structures took place, their inability to claim autonomy is still reflected in a fundamental lack of legitimacy. The uncompromising and all-encompassing character of divine authority set strict limits to all pretensions of worldly authority, and the Islamic tradition remained strong enough to maintain the blockage of legitimation when new strategies of state-building had to be devised in response to Western ascendancy (for a strong and influential formulation of this thesis, cf. Badie, 1986). Finally, the de-differentiating logic attributed to Islamic belief can be linked to the question of capitalist development and its specific difficulties in the Islamic world. The failure to achieve a primary demarcation of the political from the religious then appears as a decisive check on further differentiation, especially inasmuch as it accounts for the absence of a social environment within which a more autonomous development of economic

institutions might have taken place; this underlying structural short-coming seems more important than any specific contents of Islamic doctrine. It should be added that a more nuanced version of this argument is acceptable to those who insist on the novel character-istics of post-colonial Islamic states: the background and profile of the new power elites—especially in the Arab Middle East—differ very markedly from the traditional ones, but as a result of their inability to bring about a socio-cultural transformation to match the redistribution of power, they are condemned to a 'perpetual but never fulfilled quest for legitimacy' (Humphreys, 1999: 124).

Although the idea of a distinctively Islamic fusion of religion and politics is still defended by some scholars in the field, others have subjected it to telling criticism, and in the light of historical evidence, it must be regarded as fundamentally misleading. Ira M. Lapidus has convincingly shown that the historical transformations of Islamic societies involved 'a notable differentiation of state and religious insti-tutions' (Lapidus, 1996: 4), and that the various patterns which emerged in the course of this process reflect the interaction with older traditions as well as changing geopolitical circumstances. The first wave of Islamic expansion led to the conquest of older civi-lizations which had developed different ways of regulating the co-existence of religious and political institutions; the unavoidable adaptation to their multiple legacies led to tensions and conflicts within the new Islamic elite, and thus to a new—albeit limited—polarization of the religious and the political. Another phase of differentiation began when Central Asian converts to Islam seized power in its original heartland. Their innovations in the level of state structures, as well as the reactions of Islamic societies to their rule, set the pattern for imperial formations which came to dominate much of the Islamic world. It should be noted that the second wave of expansion—from the eleventh century onwards—and the emergence of multiple imperial centres raise questions about the character of Islamic unity. A recent analysis concludes that the diversity of Islamicized cultures and societies had by this time become too great for us to be able to speak of one Islamic civilization. On this view, 'the Islamic entity was an intercivilizational entity' (Voll, 1994: 217) and it can be analyzed as a world system *sui generis*, based on a com-munity of discourse rather than on imperial control or economic integration (the latter two alternatives are the only ones hitherto con-sidered by world system theory).

But Lapidus' account of Islamic history is also useful in that it
suggests an alternative approach to the trends and traditions which
have been cited in support of the conventional view. If the original
conquest of the Middle East entailed the adaptation of the Islamic
project to pre-existing ways of separating and coordinating religious
and political institutions, the same experience could—on a more ide-
ological level—be interpreted as the triumph of a new religious vision
over worldly power, and thus as a paradigm to be reaffirmed against
later shifts towards more secular statehood. Another author (Roy
1994) argues in the same vein: the Islamic political imagination trans-
lated memories of conquest into a utopia which negates the dis-
tinction between religion and politics, and we can acknowledge the
role of this factor in successive historical constellations without mis-
taking it for the whole of Islamic political culture. But its practical
effects were not necessarily in line with proclaimed intentions. In
particular, recent work on revivalist movements of the last three cen-
turies (i.e. including those of the pre-colonial phase) suggests that
they were closely linked to turning points and innovative projects of
state formation (Keddie, 1994). Their very success, was in other
words, bound to reactivate the problem of reconciling religious aspi-
rations with political imperatives.

These reappraisals of the historical background throw new light
on the contemporary phenomenon of Islamic 'fundamentalism' (the
label is obviously inadequate, but not easy to replace). To describe
it as a wholly modern simulacrum of tradition seems no less mis-
leading than to dismiss it as a last-ditch traditionalist revolt against
modernity. The discourses and movements in question draw on a
specific aspect of the Islamic legacy, linked to but not always at one
with core structures of Islam as a geocultural and geopolitical entity,
and adapt this inheritance to a modern social, organizational and
ideological context. The traditional sources are reinterpreted in terms
of modern conditions, but the choices made within a modern frame
of reference are co-determined by distinctive traditional inputs.
Agreement on this ambiguous nature of Islamist politics does not
exclude controversy about its prospects. Ernest Gellner's various
analyses of Islam and modernity stressed the possibility of positive
connections; as he saw it, 'the elective affinity of scripturalist rigorism
with the social and political needs of the period of industrialisa-
tion or development' (Gellner, 1981: 61) could become the starting-
point for a long-term adaptation of Islam to industrial society,

perhaps more effective than anything achieved by Christian tradi-
tions, and the more conjunctural affinity with social radicalism did
not rule out a return to the mainstream of modernization. By con-
trast, Roy (1994) speaks of a 'failure of political Islam': its claim to
represent a socio-economic alternative has lost all credibility, and the
'neo-fundamentalist' movements are reduced to defending a rigid
pseudo-traditionalist phantasm of identity without political content.[3]

Finally, we should consider the reappearance of civilizational per-
spectives in analyses of the pioneering European path to modernity.
Here it seems appropriate to begin with Talcott Parsons' summary
of modernization theory within a more general evolutionary frame-
work. A tacit rapprochement with civilizational analysis is already
evident in the treatment of 'advanced intermediate societies': Parsons
discusses them in terms of categories with clear civilizational con-
notations, such as Chinese, Indian and Islamic societies. But a much
more significant conceptual shift occurs when it comes to analyzing
the two major sources of the Western tradition, Ancient Israel and
Ancient Greece. Given the exceptional innovative potential and global
impact of these cultural centres, they have been obvious themes for
civilizational analysis, and Parsons' indebtedness to that line of thought
is reflected in striking deviations from his overall functionalist evo-
lutionist model. The Greek and Jewish agents of cultural innovation
are described as 'seedbed societies'. This term is unrelated to the
evolutionary typology of primitive, archaic, intermediate and mod-
ern societies; the reason for adding it to an otherwise comprehen-
sive inventory is that the two societies in question are characterized
by a unique capacity for cultural transcendence of social frameworks

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[3] The debates on Islamic civilizational dynamics and their positive or negative
effects on transitions to modernity are not unrelated to the recently re-opened con-
troversy on the origins of Islam. The discussion ignited by Crone and Cook's (1977)
ultra-heterodox analysis of early Islam, and then revived on a more solid basis by
Crone (1987), is still in progress. But it seems clear that early Islam was—much
more closely than traditional views would have it—linked to the dynamics and prob-
lems of state formation in the Arabian peninsula (in the context of inter-imperial
rivalry), and that the impact of the emerging religion on this process was both spec-
tacular and ambiguous. The proto-Islamic religious project (it did not take a more
definitive shape until a few decades after the first conquests) facilitated a swift tran-
sition to empire-building but left the new polity with particularly intractable prob-
lems of finding a modus vivendi between religious and political authority. This
legacy left its mark on the whole historical record discussed above. On the back-
ground to the rise of Islam, see also Retsö 2002.

and boundaries. It is true that they represent a new type of society, but the most important aspect of this novelty was an exceptional imbalance between culture and society destabilizing in the short run but transformative in the long run and on a global scale.

Although Parsons notes important differences between the two cases, his account of their decisive features shows that he is much more interested in convergent developments. The main Jewish contribution was 'the conception of a moral order governing human affairs that, being controlled by a transcendental God, was independent of *any* particular societal or political organization', whereas Greek philosophy—the most far-reaching elaboration of the Greek cultural pattern—is credited with an idea of justice 'grounded in a universalistic conception of general order' (Parsons, 1966: 102, 106). The affinity is obvious, but it is also clear that Parsons wants to present Jewish monotheism as superadded to a common or converging legacy. This paves the way for the next step of his argument: the interpretation of Christianity as a definitive synthesis of Greek and Jewish sources (there is no discussion of their continuing presence as foci for alternative reconstructions and transformations). In order to ensure the privileged connection which Parsons wants to establish between Christianity and modernity, other factors are then confined to marginal or negative roles. The positive legacy of the Roman Empire is reduced to institutional elements (such as law territoriality and municipal organization) which survived its collapse and were put to effective use at a much later stage; but the imperial structure as a whole had to disintegrate for an adequate realization of Christianity's evolutionary potential to be possible, and the whole following phase appears as a 'societal regression' which had to run its course before a new beginning on the basis of earlier achievements could succeed. Here the limitations of Parsons' concessions to civilizational analysis become starkly visible: his frame of reference excludes any perception of medieval Europe as an original civilization in its own right (this is, as we shall see, a crucial issue for the debate on civilizational sources of modernity). Parsons accepts the idea of 'feudal society' as a distinctive and complete type, describes it as a regressive step, and argues that it received only 'secondary legitimation' (i.e. through the fragments of older institutions that survived inside it).

To sum up, Parsons' limited and implicit use of civilizational theory has to do with the distinctive pluralism of European traditions.

But pluralism is only recognized up to a point: by giving Christianity the status of an unchallenged cultural synthesis and linking its value-orientations directly to the foundations of a modern system whose dynamic can then be analyzed in orthodox functionalist terms, Parsons manages to restore the unitary framework of evolutionary theory. We are thus left with the impression that an atypical but transitory historical constellation made European societies more responsive to a universal developmental logic.

Eisenstadt's reflections on European (especially West European) civilization represent a decisive step beyond Parsons and a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between civilizational analysis and modernization theory. Although the chronological boundaries are not always clearly drawn, the starting-point is clearly a reinterpretation of the medieval world, with a new emphasis on its internal pluralism (Eisenstadt, 1987: 47–64; 1996: 396–403). The transition to modernity is seen as the emergence of a new civilization, and therefore as a mutation of the European legacy into a more global and dynamic pattern. This account of the connection between European origins and modern developments raises questions which will be discussed below; they have to do with the uniformity and variability of the modern world as well as the enduring capacity of the original source to set its own regional version apart from others. But whatever view we take of these issues, our understanding of the medieval background and its potential inevitably reflect the historical experience of its posterity.

The pluralism which Eisenstadt singles out as the most salient feature begins with the interplay and the more or less overt tension between different cultural orientations. In spite of obstacles and interruptions, the two major horizons of meaning—the Greek and Judaic traditions—remained in the long run open to new interpretive projects; their privileged roles did not exclude inputs from more peripheral or subaltern current sources; and the unifying framework imposed on the diverse components was much more amenable to further differentiation than the rival Islamic model which drew on the same main sources. The pluralist potential of cultural patterns was enhanced by political and social trends. One of the most striking characteristics of the medieval West was the coexistence and long-drawn-out rivalry of multiple centres with competing claims to legitimacy and hegemony. Imperial, papal and territorial monarchies as well as urban communities and feudal domains interacted and created a permanently

unstable network of power structures. In the long run, the tensions between alternative centres and orientations were conducive to 'a high level of activism and commitment of broader groups and strata' and to 'a high degree of relatively autonomous access of different groups and strata' (Eisenstadt, 1987: 78). Taken together, all these factors led to intensive ideologization of social change and conflict. As a result, dissent and protest—present and more or less prominent in all major civilizational complexes—came to play a more central and permanent role than elsewhere: they entered more openly into the ongoing formation of centres, and—in Eisenstadt's terms—their impact gave a new twist to the interaction of centre and periphery. The multiplicity and mobility of centres were reflected in a heightened dynamism of the periphery.

   These key features of European civilization have further implications which cannot be discussed here. We should, however, note a new approach to the question of civilizational preconditions for the modernizing breakthrough. Eisenstadt's account of European antecedents to the original modernizing process goes beyond earlier views in its sustained emphasis on internal pluralism; this focus allows a more adequate grasp of the medieval world and its legacy; in contrast to Parsons, there is no suggestion that the complex interplay of specific transformative factors can be reduced to an acceleration of general trends. In brief, the historical trajectory of the premodern West appears as an innovative pattern in its own right, and the rediscovery of its civilizational dimensions calls for a reappraisal of its modernizing sequel. If Eisenstadt's analyses of European civilization are mainly centred on cultural orientations and their relationship to power structures, the criteria of modernity as a new civilization must be defined on the same level; the mutation which marks its breakthrough consists in a maximizing combination of the transformative cultural trends mentioned above, reinforced by new and all-embracing cultural visions, and channelled into more radical political dynamics. The main new element in the cultural constitution of modernity is the idea of progress, accompanied by the closely related image of the whole social field as an area of active construction by human beings, and therefore as a possible object of political intervention (Eisenstadt, 2001). The strong emphasis on interrelated cultural and political premises does not lead to any a priori minimization of economic forces involved in long-term modernizing processes, but it does entail some critical reservations about theories and explana-

tory models which centre everything on capitalist development, even if they acknowledge inputs from other sources. Eisenstadt's reflections on Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (not to be mistaken for the whole of Weber's project, but important also because of the following it has attracted in isolation from other parts of that project) exemplify this point. As he sees it, the most momentous impact of Protestantism has to do with fundamental premises of modernity (especially in regard to changes in the relationship between religion and politics), rather than with any particular effects on capitalist development, and the modernizing potential of the Reformation could only be realized in conjunction with other factors which affected the overall direction of change.

As for the more specific aspects of modernization, with particular reference to its pioneering European version, Eisenstadt's approach leads to some significant shifts of emphasis. First, the crystallization of the cultural and political premises of modernity is associated with the Enlightenment and the Great Revolutions (i.e. the English, American and French ones). The eighteenth century thus appears as a decisive turning-point, but it concludes a more prolonged transition which began with the Renaissance and the Reformation. To focus on major revolutions is not to imply that they represent normal or typical patterns of modernizing change; rather, they can be seen as exceptionally concentrated expressions of the modern relationship between cultural visions and political strategies. Second, the revolutionary aspect of modernity is both reinforced and counterbalanced by an exceptional capacity to reappropriate and synthesize traditions. Within the core domain of political culture, Eisenstadt distinguishes five major legacies which have been reactivated, combined or counterposed in various ways at various stages on the road to modernity; the tradition of the *polis* (together with the bridging constructs of Renaissance republicanism), ideas of the accountability of rulers before a higher law, religious and secular sources of individual autonomy, the distinctively European heritage of representative institutions and a tradition of heterodox eschatologies which lent themselves to translation into secular utopias (Eisenstadt, 1999). Third, the differences and potential clashes between these multiple traditions fused with internal tensions and antinomies of modernity and exacerbated the conflicts which mark its trajectory.

To conclude this discussion, a brief mention should be made of some recent trends in historical research; they confirm the civilizational

perspective outlined above, although the results have yet to be assim-
ilated by theorists in the field. As noted in a recent contribution to
the debate, 'specialists in the history of north-western Europe in the
eleventh and twelfth centuries CE are increasingly treating it as that
of the emergence of a new civilization in what had previously been
a peripheral region of the Mediterranean-based civilization of the
classical west, rather than as a continuation or revival of that civi-
lization itself' (Moore, 1997: 583). From our point of view, this
means above all that the period in question saw the consolidation
of contrasts and divisions which shaped the subsequent course of
European history and in due course gave rise to another civiliza-
tional shift. The very distinctive division of power and authority that
took shape during this crucial phase cannot be adequately described
as a separation of the sacred from the secular; as historians have
pointed out, the church was a papal monarchy (Morris, 1989), and
the other side (the imperial centre as well as the more successful ter-
ritorial monarchies which replaced it) claimed a share of sacred
authority. It is, in other words, more appropriate to speak of two
different combinations of sacred and secular principles, and on the
more secular side, a unifying project gave way to a multi-central
constellation. The church played a key role in establishing and main-
taining another constitutive distinction: a cultural *ecumene*, self-defined
as Christendom and strengthened but never fully controlled by the
papal monarchy, coexisted with a plurality of political centres (whether
the concept of feudalism does justice to one aspect of this political
fragmentation is a separate issue). Both cultural unity and political
pluralism were crucial to the rise of autonomous urban communi-
ties as a new civilizational force. At the same time, the ascendancy
of the church and the enforcement of doctrinal control led to a
polarization of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, pronounced enough to
have been described as the origin of European dissent (Moore, 1977).

New historical perspectives have thus highlighted the civilizational
features of the medieval West and their importance for the transi-
tion to modernity. It remains to consider the broader civilizational
context within which the re-centred Western region emerged. If the
Western and Central European world of the High Middle Ages is
increasingly seen as a specific civilization, its relations with both the
Byzantine and the Islamic world have also attracted new attention.
Although this is a more disputed area, the emerging picture suggests
a unique pattern of cross-connections between three civilizational

complexes, each of which followed a distinctive trajectory while inter-
acting with the others. Contrary to the traditional and still only half-
revised notion of a 'decline and fall of the Roman Empire', the three
civilizational paths should be analyzed as different ways of tran-
scending the crisis and transforming the legacy of late antiquity
(Herrin, 1987). For the course of later history, it was of major impor-
tance that the Western world, although at first less advanced and
less powerful than the two others, was drawn into intercivilizational
networks—cultural and economic—centred on them, and this involve-
ment co-determined its internal dynamics. This was not merely a
matter of interaction with existing centres and models: the succes-
sive 'renaissances', i.e. the rediscoveries of classical traditions by the
rising West, have no parallel in the two other civilizational com-
plexes, but they drew—in decisive yet different ways—on both
Byzantine and Islamic links to antiquity. Finally, the early dynamic
of Western expansion and the subsequent transition to a later phase
were closely linked to confrontation with the two neighbouring civi-
lizations. On the one hand, the first sustained push beyond cultural
boundaries—the crusades—was in the first instance directed against
a resurgent Islam, but its main effect was to damage the Byzantine
realm beyond repair and thus to pave the way for a new and unprece-
dented challenge from the Islamic side; on the other hand, a more
successful local counter-offensive against Islamic expansion—on the
Iberian peninsula—helped to consolidate the states which then took
the lead in the first wave of early modern overseas expansion. In
brief, the civilizational triangle that took shape in the aftermath of
late antiquity is interesting both in its own right and as a back-
ground to the rise of the West. If it has not figured as prominently
as it deserves on the agenda of civilizational analysis, that is in large
measure due to the historical fate of its central part. Byzantine civi-
lization—initially the most developed but subsequently the most vul-
nerable of the three formations—disappeared from the political scene,
left an elusive and contested cultural legacy, and became marginal
to Western visions of history.[4]

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[4] The most interesting questions about a Byzantine background have to do with
the Russian Empire and its path to modernity. Attempts to construct an Orthodox and
ultimately Byzantine pedigree for Russian Communism were too one-sided and spec-
ulative to carry conviction. More plausibly, it can be argued that the geopolitical

1.3 *Civilization and modernity*

The above survey should not be mistaken for a theoretical program.
Rather, the aim was to show that civilizational themes and view-
points have been an integral part of recent developments in mod-
ernization theory; the specific contexts of such arguments correspond
to traditional demarcations of civilizational areas; and the relevant
civilizational perspectives are in every major case open to debate
between different approaches. The point of this stocktaking is not so
much to chart a course as to focus attention on more basic ques-
tions to be asked before proceeding further. In particular, the con-
troversies about real or possible links between civilizational traditions
and modernizing transformations call for closer analysis of an under-
lying issue: the civilizational status of modernity as such. Models and
analyses of modernization are based on more or less explicit inter-
pretations of modernity, and the premises posed at the latter level
determined the weight given to civilizational aspects of specific mod-
ernizing processes. Modernity may be seen as a self-contained and
complete civilization, a self-projection of one civilization imposing its
patterns and principles on others, or as a set of infrastructural inno-
vations that can be adapted to diverse civilizational contexts; these
alternative positions entail correspondingly different views on the role
of older civilizational legacies.

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and geocultural space within which successive Russian states took shape was on
the crossroads of multiple civilizations, and that in this context, the Byzantine fac-
tor was of major but varying importance. In an early phase (the second half of the
first and the first centuries of the second millennium BC), the outposts of other civi-
lizational complexes competed for control of the region. Byzantine presence on the
Black Sea Coast was at first marginal, but became much more significant with the
Orthodox Christianization of a state which had been founded by warrior-merchants
from pagan Scandinavia; Inner Asian contenders included nomads as well as state
builders, and the latter were not all of the same kind (in particular, the Khazar
state was one of the most distinctive offshoots of Inner Asian conquest, and its con-
version to Judaism was a unique case). The Mongol conquest shifted the balance
in favour of the Inner Asian component, but the enduring dominance of Orthodoxy
in the Russian client states and the subsequent conversion of a Mongol successor
state to Islam perpetuated the multi-civilizational pattern of the region. The recon-
quest carried out by the Muscovite state (and completed after the disappearance of
its Byzantine parent polity) involved both a reaffirmation of Byzantine traditions—
however misconstrued—and a selective use of Mongol ones. A further twist then
came with the appropriation of European cultural models. In short, this is an emi-
nently instructive case of unfolding multi-civilizational dynamics.

A critical reflection on the relationship between modernity and civilization must begin with the fact that modern trends and patterns are embedded in a new intercivilizational constellation. Allowing for otherwise divergent definitions and criteria, the idea of modernity is in any case related to a cluster of historical phenomena which accompanied the global growth of Western power. The theories to be discussed below take note of this background, but its inherent ambiguity is reflected in their disagreement. The main point at issue is whether modernity should be theorized in terms of advances and inventions within the framework of Western civilizations, more or less open to replication by non-Western latecomers, or as a breakthrough to new civilizational dimensions, result in unprecedented worldwide changes of universal significance. As we shall see, strong versions of both positions have been put forward, but they are open to criticisms which the more nuanced ones have to some extent neutralized. The qualifications accepted on each side can serve as starting-points for further debate.

Theodore von Laue's analysis of 'the world revolution of Westernization' (1987) is probably the most ambitious attempt to revise the standard narrative of modernization from a geopolitical and geocultural angle. The case is not argued in explicitly civilizational terms, but references to an inclusive culturalist approach, concerned with whole ways of life and centred on power show that von Laue's line of argument is—in our terms—akin to the overall framework of civilizational analysis. As he sees it, a very exceptional combination of cultural skills gave Western societies a decisive advantage in the contest for global power; non-Western cultures were thus not only subjected to alien rule, but also undermined on their own ground and forced to imitate the victor in more or less effective ways. As Western powers 'exploited the world's resources . . . for their own gain . . ., Western political ambition and competitiveness became universal' (ibid.: 4). Von Laue goes on to argue that imitative strategies are often disguised as alternatives, and that even the most militantly anti-Western projects of the twentieth century—the totalitarian regimes— were, in the last instance, based on extreme and selective versions of Western models. The ultimate cause of their failure was the inability to 'match the cultural creativity of spontaneous cooperation' (ibid.: 6), and this weakness has—in more general terms—been a besetting problem for all non-Western responses to Western domination. It should be noted that von Laue's conclusions are equally critical of

anti-Western ideologies and of those who defend Western values
without acknowledging their unintended effects on the rest of the
world. But the first step towards a more adequate management of
the new world order created by Westernization would have to be
'a massive advance in the West's ascetic and self-enlarging rational-
ity' (ibid.: 9).

   The demise of Communism might seem to have strengthened von
Laue's thesis. The shift from ideological confrontation to overt imi-
tation of the West, although more limited in the Chinese part of the
post-Communist world than in the Soviet one, has thrown the self-
destructive subalternity of the failed model into relief. But the different
exits from Communism can also be seen as symptoms of an under-
lying diversity that is now finding new outlets. In that sense, they
highlight the need for a more genuine multi-civilizational approach.
There is no denying that efforts to cope or compete with Western
power and match or borrow the resources of Western culture have
been an omnipresent aspect of transformative strategies in the non-
Western world, but the forms, directions and consequences of such
projects vary widely, and von Laue's model—which allows for more
or less unbalanced and self-denying Westernization, but not for last-
ing variations of any significance—pre-empts the results of a com-
parative analysis that has yet to be undertaken in systematic fashion.
The reductionistic thrust of the argument is most obvious when it
has to deal with the major non-Western paradigm of development.
The decline and fall of the Soviet model may have revealed the
inbuilt impediments of its earlier challenge to the West, but this does
not mean that its whole historical trajectory can be dismissed as a
phantasm. Its ability to present itself as a global alternative to cap-
italism and liberal democracy, its impact on world affairs, and—last
but not least—its appeal to oppositional forces within the West sug-
gest that the overall project went well beyond a mixture of futile
anti-Westernism and forced imitation. As for the less spectacular but
perhaps more durable remodelling of Western institutions in the East
Asian context, von Laue's view is strikingly dismissive: the Japanese
tradition is described as 'miraculously compatible' (ibid.: 5) with the
new rules imposed by the West, and there is no hint of any specific
traits that might have been conducive to autonomous uses of Western
inputs, or even to innovations capable of diffusion beyond their birth-
place.

In brief, the vision of modernity as a global projection of West-
ern power and its cultural underpinnings proves untenable: multi-
centred dynamics and contested meanings are no less characteristic
of the world revolution than of revolutions in the more limited and
conventional sense, and if we are to allow for genuine (rather than
half-deluded and half-dependent) attempts to match the Western
combination of culture and power, a multi-civilizational perspective
is the most plausible frame of reference. That is the line taken by
the recent ideological versions of civilizational theory discussed in
the first section of this chapter. The notion of modernity as a shared
and disputed terrain of multiple civilizations is not always clearly
defined; it may refer to a neutral set of resources outside the bound-
aries of civilizational identity, a new field of competition where long-
term advantages are not necessarily all on the side of the civilization
which pioneered the breakthrough, or to a levelling and homoge-
nizing force against which civilizational legacies must be defended.
The unfocused discourse leaves open the possibility of tensions and
disagreements within civilizationist ideologies (that seems to be the
case in China, where the overt commitment to a modernizing vision
since the 1980s goes hand in hand with a return to more positive
views of the Chinese tradition, as well as in Iran). But in Huntington's
version of civilizational pluralism, the lines are clearly drawn. His
key claims were discussed above; at this point, a closer look at his
reasons for not treating modernity as a new or universal civilization
may be useful. If we accept that 'modernization is a revolutionary
process comparable only to the shift from primitive to civilized soci-
eties, that is, the emergence of civilization in the singular' (Huntington,
1996: 68), the analogy can still be developed in very different direc-
tions. Modernization might appear as the second breakthrough and
final triumph of civilization in the singular, or as a new phase of
the latter's interaction with civilizations in plural. Early civilization
in the singular took the form of new units larger in size but more
markedly different in cultural character than primitive societies had
been; it would be legitimate to pose the question whether a similar
interplay of unification and differentiation can be attributed to mod-
ernizing processes.

Instead of tackling the issue in such terms, Huntington singles out
the most obviously homogenizing aspects of the modern condition,
but analyses them with a view to immunizing traditional identities

against their effects. The evolving industrial basis of modern soci-
eties—as distinct from the particular episode of the industrial revo-
lution—affects their whole structure (urbanization, social mobility,
and rising levels of education are the most visible consequences) and
leads to more intensive interaction among them. But whether these
trends add up to a civilizational break is another question. Huntington's
reasons for answering in the negative follow from his view of past
and present history: As we have seen, the persistence of a Western
cultural core (ibid.: 72) across the watershed of modernization and
the reaffirmation of non-Western traditions after the first wave of
modernization are invoked as evidence against universalism. The
supposedly inviolate civilizational cores are identified with value-
orientations and collective identities, more or less explicitly linked
to religious traditions, and the implicit theoretical assumption—never
argued in more detailed terms—is that the modern transformation
cannot lead to fundamental changes on this level.

   Those who reject that claim do not *ipso facto* defend the idea of
modernity as a new civilization. Both mainstream modernization the-
ory and much of the critical debate on modernity developed mostly
without any connection to civilizational theory, and often within an
evolutionistic framework which excluded any significant reference to
civilizations in plural. But when comparative and evolutionary per-
spectives are combined, civilizational connotations may become clearer.
Talcott Parsons' analysis of modernity and its origins, quoted above
in a different context, is an obvious case in point. As Parsons sees
it, the main direct source of Western modernizing potential is to be
found in Christian culture, more precisely in the latter's ability to
maintain a relatively high level of 'differentiation from the social sys-
tem with which it was interdependent' (Parsons, 1971: 29). The inno-
vative force thus released—and more effectively mobilized through
the Reformation—was in the long run transmuted into more dynamic
and universal value-orientations which set modern society apart from
traditional structures and at the same time allow us to see it as the
culmination of an evolutionary process. Both the more activist pat-
terns of adaptation and the more inclusive principles of integration
are, on this view, rooted in the Christian capacity to transcend given
contexts and boundaries. Inasmuch as it is based on a generalized
and globalized version of cultural orientations first adumbrated within
a specific tradition, modernity would thus seem to represent a new
universal civilization; but this conclusion is never explicitly drawn,

and its implications are overshadowed by the much more emphatic idea of modernity as an outcome of general evolutionary trends. From the latter point of view, the modern paradigm is too uniform and self-contained for questions about its openness to formative influences from other civilizational patterns to be relevant.

Niklas Luhmann draws a more marked contrast between the global unity of modern society and the more limited horizons of the largest premodern social units. He refers to the 'regional societies of earlier civilizations (*Hochkulturen*)' and their 'cosmic world-views', linked to political or at least moral unity (Luhmann, 1975: 64); by contrast, the modern 'world society' is supposedly based on purely cognitive integration of possible partners in interaction. A later more strictly systemic version (Luhmann, 1997: 145–170) of the same thesis defines the unity of world society in terms of communicative operations within limits set only by the planet. Moreover, the very notion of the world changes together with the society which constructs it. The world is, as Luhmann puts it, 'deconcretized' and reduced to an infinite horizon of alternative possibilities. Although Luhmann does not present this argument in civilizational terms, it may be read as a civilizational construct. The idea of a supra-regional mode of integration, based on purely cognitive premises, tacitly presupposes an effective neutralization of the factors which we have identified as the prime theme of civilizational theory: the configurations of interpretive patterns and power structures. A world society emerges when the networks of communication can no longer be contained within civilizational frameworks; this does not mean that the twin aspects of the latter—culture and power—cease altogether to obstruct communication, but their ability to do so is seen as such and can be treated as a problem within a system. Cultural diversity is recognized and thereby *ipso facto* relativized. The formulation of a reflexive concept of culture is therefore linked to simultaneous shifts in understanding of the world and the constitution of society (Luhmann, 1997: 151).

The civilizational aspect is, however, never thematized as such. Luhmann takes for granted that civilizational boundaries coincide with regional ones (the varying capacity of civilizational patterns to transcend regional contexts is left out of account), and only the latter are explicitly contrasted with the wider scope of world society. This conflation affects the whole problematic of world society, most obviously with regard to the question of differentiation. For Luhmann,

world society does not constitute a homogenizing super-system; rather, the enlarged horizon of communication opens up new possibilities of functional differentiation. The autonomous subsystems operate and interact in a global field and no regional framework can contain their dynamics. This vision of world society—a global plurality of mutually irreducible systemic logics—seems to be the main substantive content of Luhmann's thesis. It could be criticized from various angles, but for present purposes, we need only note the a priori neutralization of civilizational perspectives. By limiting the latter to regional units which appear only as obstacles on the road to world society, Luhmann sidelines the question of civilizational imprints on modern patterns of differentiation and civilizational variants of the trend towards global interdependence. The case for such considerations becomes more plausible if we accept that the universalizing (or region-transcending) potential of civilizations differs both in degree and kind, and that the openness of their respective legacies to modern readaptations is a theme for comparative study. It should be added that the same applies to another kind of closure which Luhmann mentions in passing as incompatible with the conditions of world society: the definition of social boundaries in terms of individuals who belong or do not belong. The construction of civilizational identity on the basis of a stark contrast between inclusion and exclusion can only be seen as a borderline case; the more representative and historically dominant traditions developed various ways of integrating social worlds beyond their primary boundaries into their interpretive frame of reference. As a comparison of Chinese, Hindu, Islamic and Christian patterns would show, this aspect of civilizational self-constitution can take very different forms, and the question of their impact on the transitory to modernity calls for more concrete analyses.

As we have seen, a stronger emphasis on modernity's universal and global character—exemplified by the shift from Parsons to Luhmann—tends to detach it more explicitly from a civilizational frame of reference. By contrast, the most clear-cut interpretation of modernity as a new civilization—developed by Eisenstadt in various recent works—is counterbalanced by a line of argument which sets some limits to its autonomy and universality. According to Eisenstadt, the global transformation brought about by Western expansion 'should be seen . . . as a case of the spread of a new civilization of a new great tradition—not unlike, for instance, the spread of Christianity

or of Islam or the establishment of the Great Historical Empires' (Eisenstadt, 1978: 172). It is true that conceptual distinctions are not always clearly drawn (the same text refers to the new tradition as 'modern European civilization'), but the logic of the argument seems unambiguous: we are dealing with an emergent pattern whose core characteristics set it apart from European sources and precursors. Modernity is, in other words, a civilization in its own right and with its own formative potential. But it thus appears as a new arrival within the world of civilizations in plural, some anomalous features are also evident from the outset. The global spread of modernity leads to 'the most far-reaching undermining of traditional civilizations that has ever occurred in history together with the creation of new international systems within which take place continuous shifts in power, influence and centres of cultural model-building' (ibid.: 172–73). Although this need not be seen as a sufficient reason for equating modernity with the triumph of civilization in the singular, the impact of an unprecedently global thrust on all pre-existing patterns suggests something more than one civilization among others.

There is, however, another side to the picture. As Eisenstadt points out, the global structures of expanding modernity do not add up to a coherent overall framework. Rather, the interaction of the ascendant West and the multiple non-Western worlds gave rise to a series of world-wide systems (ibid.: 175; but given the often ambiguous and fluid character of the formations in question, it might be more appropriate to speak of constellations). In particular, the international economic, political and ideological systems have a dynamic of their own and can follow divergent or conflicting paths; there is no comprehensive and coordinated world system. The changing and contested relations between the different sets of global structures, as well as the scope for variation within each of them, make it impossible to establish any uniform or universal patterns of modernity, and thus open up a historical space within which different civilizational legacies can play a more or less formative role. The plurality of civilizations is reflected in a pluralization of modernity. This applies to the major non-Western civilizational complexes whose modernizing dynamics were discussed above, but Eisenstadt has also singled out more specific cases of traditions integrated or transmuted into modern structures. At one end of the spectrum, the divergent historical paths of the two Americas after the European conquest can be seen from a civilizational angle: in the context of 'new societies' built by

settlers, the contrasting religious cultures of Europe—Reformation and Counter-Reformation—developed into broader frameworks of social life (Eisenstadt, 2002). Here the dynamic of European expansion transformed conflicting European tradition into alternative patterns of modernity. At the other end, Eisenstadt's analysis of Japanese civilization stresses the paradox of extreme civilizational distance from the West combined with exceptional ability to invent and maintain alternative patterns of modernity. On this view (Eisenstadt, 1996), Japan differs from the major non-Western civilizations in that it never developed cultural models with transcendental claims and universal goals (this is, in brief, Eisenstadt's understanding of the 'Axial' transformations which gave rise to world religions), but the very absence of such breakthroughs favoured an ongoing construction of adaptive strategies which could be adjusted to a new global environment and serve to redesign modern institutions in an inventive fashion but without a strong ideological input.

The two analytical perspectives, taken together, suggest an image of modernity as a civilizational formation *sui generis*, both more and less than a civilization in the more conventional sense: the modern constellation is marked by civilizational traits which distinguish it from its historical background and constitute an effective challenge to all pre-existing civilizational identities, but it is also in some degree adaptable to civilizational contexts which differ more or less radically from its original source. To synthesize both aspects is obviously no simple task, and Eisenstadt's work in this area has not—as far as I can judge—resulted in a conclusive theoretical account. The aim of the following reflections is to contextualize the question rather than to answer it; as I will try to show, the issue of modernity's ambiguous civilizational status should be linked to a broader problematic, and this may help to define the agenda of civilizational theory in more concrete terms.

We can begin with the global dynamic of new economic and political structures, i.e. those of modern capitalism and the modern state system. Their development centres on new strategies of accumulating wealth and power (the former can, of course, be treated as an aspect of economic power, endowed with more autonomous meaning in the modern context). On the other hand, a civilizational approach assumes that cultural premises are relevant to the autonomization of economic and political processes; the operative cultural definitions have to do with visions of mastery over nature as well as

with new horizons of institutional differentiation, and they call for broader and more complex interpretations than those involved in traditional accounts of the spirit of capitalism or ideas behind the modern state. But the intercultural context maximizes the scope and impact of differentiation. In the global arena, economic and political models are more easily separated from specific cultural frameworks and transferred across cultural borders. The strategies of capitalist development and the techniques of statecraft can be borrowed and used to resist or rival the hegemony of their inventors. In such cases, the relationship between modern innovations and civilizational legacies can develop in different ways, and only a comparative analysis can clarify to what extent the results represent distinctive patterns of modernity. If we discount the extreme positions criticized above, i.e. the reduction of civilizational claims to ideological uses of the past (Wallerstein) and the construction of civilizational identities immune to modern changes (Huntington), a broad spectrum of less clear-cut constellations remains to be analyzed. Civilizational frameworks, more or less selectively reconstructed and pragmatically readjusted, can serve to legitimize modernizing projects and mobilize social support for them, without translating into sustainable variants of modernity. On another level, aspects of the civilizational legacy may be reactivated to contain the social repercussions of modernizing processes, and to underpin strategic mixtures of traditional and modern structures. More effective inputs from civilizational innovations which can legitimately be described as reinventions of some key modern institutions. This term has mainly been applied to divergent forms of capitalism, but it is no less applicable to the modern state; as various case studies have shown, seemingly imported versions of it develop a structural logic and an adaptive dynamic of their own (Bayart, 1996). It should however, be noted that the idea of reinvention does not necessarily imply progress in any sense, technical or normative. Finally, responses to Western modernity's successful pursuit of wealth and power can take a more radical turn and result in alternative models with claims to global validity. This is a much less frequent phenomenon than reinventions for purely strategic purposes; the Soviet model is the only full-fledged case, but there are significant differences between its original version and the less orthodox offshoots (Arnason, 1993). A closer analysis of its core structures shows, however, that it draws on both Western and non-Western sources. Indigenous—i.e. in the first instance

Russian—patterns of political culture, state formation and state-centred social change combined with a selective synthesis of borrowings from a utopian counterculture internal to the West. To grasp the role of the latter factor, we must now turn to a third global formation: the ideological or cultural one, as distinct from those based on economic and political interconnections.

Here it seems appropriate to start with the global diffusion of a new cognitive model, linked to modern science and its self-interpretations. It depends on backgrounds and circumstances whether this model is closely associated with the technological uses of scientific knowledge, and its impact on the cognitive premises of cultural traditions also varies not only from case to case, but also from phase to phase within each major non-Western civilizational complex (a comparison of Islamic and Confucian trajectories from this point of view would be very instructive). In the case of the Soviet model, one of the decisive innovations was a systematic attempt to fuse a mythicized version of the scientific mode of thought with another component of modern culture: the new self-problematizing and self-transformative capacity that becomes effective at various levels of consciousness and society. There is no predetermined affinity between the two aspects, and they are mostly much less closely associated. For a better understanding of the explosive combination achieved by 'scientific socialism', we need to consider the self-questioning orientation—theoretical and practical—in its own context.

The Soviet mixture of scientistic metaphysics and redemptive utopia was—for some time—potent enough to overshadow other ways of appropriating Western cultural themes, but it can be seen as a particular configuration of more general trends. From the viewpoint of non-Western societies confronted with superior Western power, a combination of learning and resistance was the only viable response, and ideologies or utopias which transformed this twofold strategy into an alternative to existing modernity were attractive, even if not always easily implanted. Socialism—in the broad sense of an adaptable and variegated tradition, rather than a specific program—was the most adequate candidate for this role. Its adapted versions outside the original Western context were not equally intent on or effective in joining the two themes in question, and its explicit or unacknowledged concessions to non-Western traditions also varied widely. Its utopian vision, although invariably dependent on Western models, was more or less open to reinterpretation along indigenous

lines. The most obvious universal reason for its global appeal was its ability to reconcile borrowing from Western culture with protest against Western power, and to link up with a Western counter-tradition which had already articulated protest in the name of progress towards a better version of modernity.

This aspect—the translation of a Western ideology of protest into a vehicle of protest against Western supremacy in the global arena—is central to Eisenstadt's comparative analysis of socialism. He links it to a more general defining characteristic of modernity: the legitimation of protest and dissent as an integral element of its cultural foundations. As we have seen, this reorientation was foreshadowed by trends within premodern European civilization. The modern innovation—in Eisenstadt's terms: the incorporation of protest into the centre—did not follow the same path in all Western societies; the great revolutions are the most spectacular example, but other more or less protracted transitions to democratic rule reflect a similar underlying logic. The different political cultures of democratic regimes may vary in respect of the centrality and legitimacy of protest, and for that reason also with regard to the prominence of separate radical traditions (on this view, the strong presence of protest and dissent at the very core of American political culture was one of the factors that pre-empted the rationale for a socialist movement).

There is no doubt that the articulation and rationalization of protest loom very large in the context of modern themes transmitted by and turned against the West. But in relation to the original constitution and inbuilt potential of modernity, it would seem more appropriate to treat protest as one aspect of a broader current capable of taking other forms; this will result in an interpretation of modernity which differs from Eisenstadt's in significant ways but might also throw new light on links between his insights and the work of other authors.

We have already referred to a greatly expanded and radicalized self-questioning and self-transformative capacity, integral to the modern constellation and interacting with the equally innovative dynamics of accumulation. Modern forms of protest and the corresponding patterns of institutionalization reflect this capacity, but do not exhaust it. If it is defined in more positive and comprehensive terms, it can by the same token be seen as open to multiple interpretations. The notion of a self-selecting vanguard of social transformation, equipped with full understanding and entitled to sole control of the field, is a

recurrent component of modern political cultures; Eisenstadt refers
to it as the Jacobin paradigm and stresses its adaptability to diver-
gent political programs as well as its ability to act as a transforma-
tor of different traditions; in the present context, the focus is on its
close but contradictory relationship to democracy. The Jacobin vision
of radical change represents an attempt to monopolize the new self-
transformative capacity, convert it into a legitimizing resource for
new power structures (rather than a permanent counterweight to all
established power), and to contain the ongoing self-construction of
society within a definitive ideological framework. For all these rea-
sons, it runs counter to the visions of autonomy which at the same
time grow out of the historical experience of self-reflexive transfor-
mation. A central current of modern social and political thought
responds to the manifest de-stabilization of social structures by locat-
ing constructive capacity and claims to self-determination in the sov-
ereign individuals who seemed both more real and more authoritative
than society. The most sustained challenge to this liberal model comes
from a conception of radical democracy which reaffirms the social
meaning of autonomy—in the sense of an explicit, deliberative self-
institution of society—without denying its interconnections with the
individual one. Castoriadis developed this line of argument as an
interpretation of currents and movements which had—as he saw it—
been important enough in the making of modern history to stand
out in contrast to the mainstream of capitalist and bureaucratic accu-
mulation. On the other hand, the related but in some ways radi-
cally different theory of democracy proposed by Claude Lefort (1986)
is also defended as an explication of meanings operative in modern
societies and crucial to their institutional patterns. On this view, mod-
ern democracy represents a new form of the self-constitution of soci-
ety, and its key characteristic is an explicit recognition of social
division. The symbolic transfer of sovereignty from the rulers to the
ruled sets new limits to the appropriation and embodiment of power,
and thereby redefines a traditional division in radically new terms.
This separation of effective authority from ultimate legitimacy pre-
cludes the fusion of power, law and knowledge in an uncontestable
centre; on the side of society, it opens up new spaces for the artic-
ulation of separate spheres and rival discourses.

    In short, then, the self-questioning and self-transformative aspect
of modernity appears as a field of mutually contested interpretations
(reflected in rival theories which can be taken as guides to the his-

torical constellation), rather than a definite structuring or normative principle. Some aspects of this field are more transferable to the global arena than others, but the trends and structures of the global ideological constellation depend on non-Western responses as well as Western inputs. Worldwide projections of democracy and its disputed contents therefore vary with changes on both sides. The ideological ascendancy of socialism was in large measure based on its promise to link the radicalization of Western democracy to a reactivation of more or less genuine indigenous countercurrents (especially those which could be construed as harbingers of an alternative path to modernity). The decline of the socialist idea paved the way for a very different project: a supposedly standard Western version of liberal democracy came to be seen—not only by its prime beneficiaries, but also by aspiring reformers outside its heartland—as a universal and necessary corrective to temporarily deviant forms of modernization. Ideological uses of civilizational discourse are, as noted above, the most salient responses to this new conjuncture. But civilizational theory can envisage a more balanced approach. A comparative analysis of variations within the socialist and the liberal paradigm, as well as of more atypical cases apart, would have to tackle the question of civilizational legacies and their varying effects on ideological reinterpretations of Western modernity. This is not to suggest that civilizational factors are the only ones involved. Changing configurations of the world systems, successive patterns of the overall modernizing process and conflicts between rival paradigms of modernity also shape the course of history and the relative weight of civilizational dynamics can only be determined by concrete analyses.

Our discussion has centred on a dual image of modernity: the accelerated pursuit of wealth and power is accompanied—and in significant ways contested—by a self-questioning and self-transformative capacity which finds its cultural and political expression in the multiple meanings of modern democracy. There is, however, another side to the self-problematizing aspect of modernity inseparable from the cultural space opened up by democratic transformations but articulated in a different context. The conflict between Enlightenment and Romanticism has often been singled out as a key feature of modern culture, but the variety of theoretical interpretations shows how ambiguous the underlying historical trends are. For our purposes, the main question concerns the civilizational meaning and implications of the conflict. If Romanticism is understood as a

critical response and counter-project to the Enlightenment, the most convincing interpretive key is the idea of a distinctively romantic reaction to modern paradoxes of meaning and progress. The Enlightenment, although initially grounded in strong claims to provide principles of new meaning, is perceived as a force conducive to gradual and general loss of meaning; the Romantic response to this predicament is a multiform—and often disunited—effort to activate or reconstitute countervailing sources of meaning. The Romantic stance has an inbuilt tendency to misrepresent itself as a reaction against modernity (its antagonist appears as the prime mover of the modern world), but from a more detached theoretical viewpoint, its constitutive links to a modern contest are clearly visible. Romanticism takes shape on a modern basis, and if it appeals to premodern traditions, it does so in a way marked and relativized by the modern background. A modern variability is evident in the multiple and mutually dissonant sources invoked against the threat of a meaningless world: they range from reaffirmed or invented traditions to visions of creative subjectivity and from images of a reenchanted cosmos to new forms of collective identity.

At the same time, the contextual meaning of Romantic orientations depends on their relationship to the above-mentioned structural components of modernity. The idea of the Enlightenment is ambiguous in that it refers to cognitive preconditions for the accumulation of wealth and power as well as to the autonomy of individual and collective subjects and thus to the anthropo-sociological premises of democracy. The Romantic diagnosis of the modern crisis is more directly linked to the former aspect (the reduction of the world to an undifferentiated object of rational mastery seems particularly destructive of meaning), but the Romantic universe of discourse also allows for a regeneration of meaning through the transfiguration of power (Nietzsche is an obvious case in point). As for the other side of modernity, the self-determinative potential and the aspirations to autonomy, the link is closer in the sense that Romantic currents draw on the critical potential released by breakthroughs of individual and collective subjectivity, but the underlying affinity does not translate into uniform trends: from a Romantic perspective, modern conceptions of subjectivity and autonomy stand accused of blindness to natural, social and cultural contexts (nationalist critiques of abstract universalism are the most familiar concrete example).

The Romantic tradition is less capable of intercultural diffusion than are cognitive models or political ideologies. It is nevertheless of some importance to the transformation of Western cultural themes in the global arena: romantic elements enter into the self-redefinition of non-Western cultures in response to Western expansion, most obviously through notions derived from Western patterns of national identity and nationalist discourse. On a less practical level, references to Western Romanticism can be detected in attempts to reinterpret non-Western traditions in explicitly culturalist or civilizational terms. And in a more recent phase, Romantic sources have served to substantiate 'post-colonial' critiques of Western modernity (Hansen, 1997). On the other hand, it can be argued that intercivilizational encounters were already involved in the making of European Romanticism. Other civilizations and their cultural traditions could be invoked as correctives to a modernity in want of meaning; Romantic approaches were never the only ones operative in this area, but they played a key role in some of the most significant cases (India is the best-known example). Various aspects of this problematic will be discussed below. At this point, suffice it to say that if Western and non-Western civilizations are seen in the context of multiple global constellations, they must be interpreted in terms of changing interconnections between culture and power, rather than as a mere projection of unchanging power structures (the latter view has been too easily accepted by the critics of 'Orientalism').

The above considerations on Western modernity and its global impact are by no means incompatible with the idea of autonomous modernizing trends in the non-Western world. One of the more interesting recent developments in comparative history is the search for early modern parallels between changing states and societies in various parts of the Eurasian region. Japan is obviously the most convincing case, but plausible claims have also been made on behalf of South and Southeast Asia (Lieberman, 1997). It seems likely that the overall interpretation of modernity will move towards a more balanced picture, emphasizing the multiple origins of modern constellations as well as the global role and ramifications of hegemonic centres in a subsequent phase.

To sum up, the aim of our discussion was to link the civilizational perspective to an important but underdeveloped theme in the theory of modernity: the dynamics of tensions and conflicts, between basic orientations (such as the cumulative pursuit of power and the

more ambiguous moves toward autonomy) as well as between divergent institutional spheres—economic, political and cultural—with corresponding interpretive frameworks. Enough has been said to suggest that the unfolding and interplay of these two disuniting patterns can be more fully understood if we take the global arena into account. The internal fractures and divisions of the new civilizational formation which grew out of European origins become more visible through interaction with other civilizations. But the fragmenting and polarizing dynamics of modernity, writ large on world scale, are also relevant to the question posed above: can we speak of a civilizational pattern which simultaneously transcends the boundaries and breaks up the identity otherwise typical of civilizational units? As we have seen, the global challenge to all other civilizational frameworks and assumptions is unprecedented, but this very breakthrough to universal dimensions accentuated the inbuilt conflicts and ambiguities which opened up new spheres of influence—limited but far from insignificant—for the disestablished civilizations. If the character and course of modernity are shaped by conflicting orientations, different settings of modernizing processes may be reflected in ways of containing the conflicts, unbalanced options for one side or the other, or in radical reinterpretations which aspire to change the terms of contest and choice. The range of responses is perhaps best exemplified by transformations of capitalism and democracy in various contexts, including the totalitarian counter-project which rejected both capitalist and democratic institutions but drew indirectly on notions and images associated with both sides. Similarly, the pluralization of sociocultural spheres—and the emergence of rival models within each of them—is conducive to a differentiation of overall patterns: alternative ways of combining them link up with specific constructions of their respective logics.

It is because of this twofold variety—with regard to basic but malleable conflicts as well as to the changing interplay of differentiation and integration—that we can speak of multiple or alternative modernities, and link them to the historical legacies and experiences of the societies in question. And if these background factors are at least to some extent grounded in civilizational frameworks, it is by the same token appropriate to treat the divergent patterns of modernity as combinations of civilizational sources. In view of its internal pluralism and its openness to different models, modernity does not constitute a self-contained civilization; the margin of structural inde-

terminacy is significant enough to ensure a partial survival of pre-existing civilizational patterns. It might be objected that the modern constellation is not obviously unique in this regard. As Eisenstadt points out, the expansion of world religions—and the cultural models more or less closely associated with them—is to some extent comparable with the global spread of modernity. Analogies to modern discord and differentiation may be less evident, but it seems clear that some premodern civilizations are in this respect closer to the modern condition than others (for example, Weberian and post-Weberian analyses of India suggest a higher level of internal tensions and a more advanced rationalization of separate spheres than in China). This question will have to be reconsidered in a different context; for present purposes, let us merely note a strong *prima facie* case for seeing modernity as at least *the* major example of internal conflict and contested identity.

1.4   *Rethinking basic concepts*

With the reference to civilizational theory as a framework for combining or confronting analytical perspectives on modernity, we reach a level where basic questions about conceptual issues must be revised. This is, however, the least developed aspect of contemporary debates: very little has been done to link the concept of civilization to reflections on the structure of social theory and clarify its relationship to other fundamental concepts. We will therefore have to adopt a more conjectural approach, based on explicit suggestions by civilizational theorists but going beyond them to outline possible points of contact with more central themes.

   The most elementary implications of civilizational discourse have to do with collective identity. Such notions serve to ground the ideological versions of civilizational theory, whether in terms of Huntington's 'ultimate tribes' or Wallerstein's identity-boosting images of the past. Forms of collective identity are, however, inseparable from broader cultural patterns of interpretation and orientation, and these connotations come to the fore when the civilizational paradigm is defended in a more constructive vein. A specific and supposedly more adequate conception of culture and its role in social life is the most common rationale claimed by those who advocate civilizational analysis as a distinctive mode of social theory. For example, V. Kavolis

(1995) defines the civilizational paradigm in contrast to several other
schools of thought in the sociology of culture; leaving aside the details
of the argument, the civilizational approach seems to be credited
with three main strengths: it focuses on large-scale and long-term
cultural frameworks which encompass a wide range of co-existing
and/or successive societies; it emphasizes the overall formative role
of culture, especially in its capacity as a 'symbolic configuration',
rather than circumscribed functions; and it is sensitive to the mutu-
ally irreducible specific contents of cultural worlds, which tend to be
disregarded by the various functionalist and structuralist models.

    In contrast to this strictly culturalist approach, the most significant
recent contribution to civilizational theory is based on a more com-
plex model of interrelations between culture and power. Eisenstadt's
paradigm shift from structural-functional to civilizational perspectives
began with a comparative study of imperial formations (one of the
most underexplored areas of historical sociology), and the results
reflect this starting-point. A closer analysis of imperial regimes showed
that their dynamics were too autonomous and diverse to be sub-
sumed under the uniform systemic and evolutionary patterns of
Parsonian theory; the civilizational angle draws attention to the under-
lying cultural premises of these different historical trajectories. Cultural
projects embodied in power structures thus emerge as the most cen-
tral and distinctive theme of civilizational theory. But it should be
added that Eisenstadt conceptualizes both sides of the nexus in a
way which highlights the scope for diversity and contingency. Cultural
models of order shape social institutions and practices, but the images
of order are characterized by a double articulation, i.e. a distinction
between the levels of mundane reality and fundamental principles;
the latter level serves to maintain a distance between cultural hori-
zons and social structures, a permanent capacity to problematize the
existing version of order, and a discursive space for divergent inter-
pretations that can be linked to the strategies of social actor power.
Eisenstadt avoids the reductionism inherent in conventional elite the-
ories: as he sees it, the main initiators of change and protagonists
of cultural projects are coalitions of elites linked to different areas
of social life, organized around cultural models whose interpreters
are also partners to the coalitions in question and pursue their specific
goals. The dynamic of elite differentiation and interaction give rise
to counter-coalitions and protest movements, more or less capable
of developing alternative traditions and translating them into strate-

gic practices. The interplay of culture and power, marked by mul-
tiple components on each side, thus leads to the emergence of 'anti-
systems' (Eisenstadt, 1986a: 28) within civilizational and societal
settings: their strength and visibility varies from case to case.

The general thrust of this new paradigm in the making is no less
clear than its critical implications for a whole range of established
notions, especially those of the functionalist tradition. But there is
no extensive analysis of the concept of civilization as such or of its
relationship to other central concepts. Eisenstadt's view seems to be
that such tasks should be tackled after more substantive preparatory
work: a preliminary outline of the civilizational frame of reference
is enough to guide the comparative study of major cases, and the
results of that inquiry—still in an early phase—will in turn serve as
foundations for a more informed conceptual analysis (this strategy is
somewhat reminiscent of Weber's approach to religion). The con-
ceptual underpinnings and ramifications of Eisenstadt's work in this
area will be explored at length later, and as we shall see, they are
closely related to the problematics of culture and power. At this
point, we only need to clear the ground for further discussion and
put it into proper perspective.

There is no denying that innovative reconceptualizations of cul-
ture and power have played some role in recent and contemporary
social debates. Theoretical arguments can often be related to these
two themes, even if the authors in question prefer to use other terms
(for example, the idea of imaginary significations—developed by
Castoriadis—is first and foremost a reinterpretation of culture, and
a new understanding of power is more central to Giddens' theory
of structuration than a first reading might suggest). But the focus is,
in such cases, either on culture or power. Those who thematize one
tend to neglect the other; most importantly, the question of their
interrelations does not figure prominently on the agenda of social
theory. From that point of view, culture and power have been over-
shadowed by another conceptual pair, variously defined as agency
and structure or action and system, whose unrivaled primacy in the
field is too well known to require further discussion. This two-dimen-
sional frame of reference is sometimes seen as too restrictive, and
the need to theorize culture alongside structure has been noted
(Archer, 1996), whereas references to power are more frequently
associated with a general critique of abstract structural models
(this is the line taken by the advocates of figurational sociology); but

arguments in this vein do not constitute an alternative to the problematic of agency and structure. The latter dichotomy is therefore the obvious starting-point for a reexamination of basic conceptual choices.

The joint stress on agency and structure—or action and system—and the search for a balanced model of their interrelations can only be understood as a reaction against one-sided views. As is well known, the most seminal arguments in post-classical social theory centred on an ongoing effort to theorize action, and the shortcomings of that approach provoked a shift towards systemic perspectives (the interplay of these trends is evident in the work of Talcott Parsons, as well as in later attempts to revise either his action frame of reference or his systemic paradigm). The primary justification for the focus on action was derived from the history of ideas: the trajectory of modern social thought, up to and including the sociological breakthrough, could—as Parsons saw it—be reconstructed in terms of growing insight into the structure of action and gradual overcoming of obstacles to that goal. From this point of view, the question of counterparts to structural action is at first indistinguishable from the problem of 'order' understood as the coordination of action; the manifest inadequacy of that approach makes it difficult to resist the temptations of systems theory. Some later authors shift the focus from the history of ideas to historical experience and thus arrive at a more balanced and open-ended view of the relationship between agency and structure. The key point is a characteristic ambiguity of the modern condition: an ongoing social transformation opens up new horizons and possibilities of individual action, but aspiring actors are at the same time confronted with increasingly complex structures and their inbuilt constraints. Recognition of this background to modern social theories does not, however, rule out attempts to rethink it in a way that would minimize the distance between the two poles. Conflating interpretations are, in other words, a permanent part of the theoretical spectrum, and they continue to tempt those who take an instrumentalist view of basic concepts. The case against conflation is not always argued along the same lines; at its most emphatic, it is linked to an explicit ontological turn. A clear and fundamental distinction between agency and structure—ultimately grounded in a more or less radical reformulation of the traditional contrast between society and individual—then appears as a constitutive trait of social being and the human condition (Archer, 1995).

The ontological connection may, however, suggest a way to relativize the problematic of agency and structure, reorient the construction of basic concepts, and put civilizational theory on more solid foundations. For this purpose, we should take our bearings from the most radical and innovative formulation of the ontological question. Castoriadis' reflections on the imaginary institution of society (Castoriadis, 1987) begin with a critique of 'inherited thought': instead of thematizing the social-historical as an original and specific mode of being, traditional approaches tended to subsume it under models derived from other regions of reality. Castoriadis extends his questioning of received paradigms to the notion of being as determinacy which he sees as a fundamental philosophical premise of the Western tradition. The turn thus taken—it leads to a strong emphasis on social-historical creativity—is not the only possible outcome of explicit reflection on social-historical being: an attempt to translate the latter perspective into a more systematic guideline to concept formation can link up with some landmarks of the sociological tradition (from Durkheim's reference to society as a reality *sui generis* to Luhmann's claim that only systems theory can do justice to the emergent characteristics of society), but the overall direction will inevitably diverge from dominant trends.

It should be noted that Castoriadis' approach to the ontological question is hermeneutical in a threefold sense. Conceptions of social-historical being appear as interpretive frameworks, acknowledged or unacknowledged, but indispensable to analyses with more specific aims; the case for a more adequate understanding must be argued in the context of rival interpretations; and the main theme at issue is meaning as a mode of being. The critique of traditional views is therefore implicitly directed against their hermeneutical shortcomings, i.e. the isolation from interpretive contexts, insensitivity to the specific problematic of meaning, and spurious identification with scientific models, as well as against their specific contents. There are, as Castoriadis sees it, two typical and equally inadequate ways of aligning the social-historical with other domains of reality: the physicalist and the logicist lines of argument. The former reduces the social-historical sphere to natural patterns, either on the basis of essentialist assumptions about human nature or by construing society as an organism *sui generis*; the latter posits logical determinants of social life, either in the sense of universal and elementary components or with reference to a totalizing rational project. This

dichotomy is obviously modelled on the alternative paradigms of functionalism and structuralism which dominated the field at the time, and the main focus is on society rather than history (it would even seem that the critique is more directly aimed at anthropological rather than sociological versions, i.e. at Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss rather than Parsons and Althusser). But Castoriadis goes on to argue that the two approaches entail correspondingly reductionist visions of history. The physicalist view privileges causal explanation, whereas the logicist one is conducive to teleology. This enables Castoriadis to extend his critique beyond its primary targets; Hegel's philosophy is an exemplary case of logicism in a finalist mode, and Marxism can be seen as a synthesis of causalism and finalism. There is, however, no denying that theories of history are treated in a more perfunctory way than theories of society. Neither the evolutionist trends in recent functionalist thought nor the structuralist conception of history as a process without a subject are taken into consideration.

Castoriadis' explicit and potential contributions to civilizational theory will be discussed later; at this point, we are more concerned with the implications of his critical arguments. His most fundamental objection to the two traditional models is that they share a faulty premise: they conceive of society as made up of determinate elements and relations analytically separable from each other and from the composite whole, and reducible to uniform patterns. This results in a threefold misrepresentation of the social-historical world. The fixation on self-contained and separable components obscures the constitutive involvement of a broader context in every particular aspect; a theory in search of invariant units or features cannot do justice to the open-ended variety of the contexts in question, structured as they are by different configurations of the social historical world; and the self-creative capacity evident in the ongoing movement from one configuration to another is equally refractory to functionalist and structuralist frames of reference. In more positive terms, Castoriadis' argument draws attention to under-theorized sources of differentiation within the social world: the plurality of different constellations and the contextual meanings of their components reflect a self-creative and self-transformative capacity that cannot be confined within any determinate framework. As we shall see, the innovative and diversifying potential of meaning—understood as a domain of the creative imagination—is crucial to this image of society and history. But a new perspective on differentiation is, by the same token,

a reason to rethink integration. The self-instituting capacity of society gives rise to different patterns of coherence and identity, and the maintenance of identity against the background of ongoing self-alteration involves the integration of past, present and future. Here the critical reference to functionalist and structuralist models helps to specify the issue. In the functionalist tradition, differentiation and integration rank as basic concepts of the highest importance, but they are defined within a restrictive framework; the structuralist critique highlighted the limits of functionalism (as Lévi-Strauss put it, it is a truism to say that a society functions, but it is nonsense to claim that all aspects of a society are functional and nothing but functional). The proposed alternative was, however, another version of systemic closure; both variations within a single society and contrasts between societal types, as well as the patterns of overarching unity, were to be subsumed under a set of meta-social and ultimately invariant rational structures. Castoriadis rejects the underlying assumptions of both sides.

The ideas recapitulated above have to do with limits to theorizing in general as well as limits to particular theoretical frameworks. Castoriadis does not see the indeterminacy of social being as an absolute obstacle to conceptualization, but he prefers to describe the kinds of interpretive reflection which he pursues as elucidation rather than theory, so as to emphasize the open and permanently self-questioning character of the project. His critique of identitarian thought allows for conditional use and partial integration of theoretical concepts, while subordinating them to a metatheoretical perspective which invalidates all system-building strategies. Further exploration of the space between self-absolutizing theory and self-limiting reflection may be useful; as I will try to show, the paradigms criticized by Castoriadis are somewhat more adaptable than his claims would suggest, and their internal debates therefore less radically different from the revised framework which he outlines. In that context we can then make a tentative case for civilizational analysis as at least one of the links between the theoretical legacy and the new problematic.

To begin with, the account of the two rival but interrelated models is incomplete in that it does not refer to a third factor which limits their reach and leads to readjustments on both sides. The entrenched but misconceived vision of society as made up of individuals is mentioned, but only as an example of the illusions of inherited thought (what the latter fails to understand is that society

is always already involved in the constitution and activity of the indi-
vidual), and without any clear view of its relationship to the more
articulated physicalist and logicist modes of interpretation. Castoriadis
sees the individualistic image of society as a recurrent obstacle, but
does not discuss the new theoretical directions that developed in con-
nection with modern individualism. More specifically, theories of
action in general and the sociological 'action frame of reference' in
particular must be understood as offshoots of individualist traditions,
even if the conceptual resources are sophisticated enough to allow
some questioning of more straight-forward versions of individualism.
Critics of Parsonian theory have objected to its 'oversocialized image
of man', but a case can be made for a rather different view: as a
result of the inability to thematize society in its own right, too much
of it is—by conceptual fiat—put inside the individual. The difficulties
of that position led Parsons to restructure his theoretical framework
and reinstate the paradigm of functional analysis. The most elabo-
rate and influential version of functionalism in sociological theory—
a conceptual scheme which stresses the common features of all living
systems—is thus marked by a detour through analyses focused on
individual actors and an effort to retain some lessons from that con-
text. Conversely, attempts to revive or upgrade the theory of action
are based on the claim that it can account for innovative and trans-
formative dynamics which transcend the limits posited by systemic
models; the most convincing variation on this theme centres on the
creativity of action (Joas, 1996). On the other hand, the most uncom-
promising version of systems theory—developed in great detail and
increasingly totalizing terms in Niklas Luhmann's work—is best under-
stood as an unprecedented synthesis of the two traditional models
criticized by Castoriadis. The notion of the self-referential system,
capable of producing within itself the relationship between system
and environment, provides a much more flexible framework for func-
tional analysis; for Luhmann, systemic codes, boundaries and dis-
tinctions are based on logical operations (more abstract than those
of conventional logic) rather than general laws of living organisms.
In this way, the logicist perspective becomes an integral and enabling
part of the physicalist one. The result is an image of society which
gives more scope to contingency, difference and openness than ear-
lier forms of functionalist theory could ever do.
    This brief sketch should at least indicate the direction of an on-
going debate that is modifying inherited paradigms and taking them

beyond their traditional limits. Castoriadis' critique of the two dom-
inant models must now be seen in the context of their unfolding
cross-connections, but also in relation to the broadly defined prob-
lematic of agency and structure; the latter appears as a constraining
but not inflexibly closed frame of reference for the question of social-
historical being, and recent trends suggest a shift towards less reduc-
tionist views of the themes which Castoriadis wanted to explore
outside the confines of inherited thought. As suggested above, they
can be grouped under the general heading of less restrictive per-
spectives on differentiation and (less explicitly) integration. If some
progress in that direction can be observed in current social theory,
it would seem worthwhile to examine other concepts and approaches,
beside the dominant ones, with a view to their potential contribution.
The following reflections will deal with the concept of civilization
from this angle. We can—in the light of the above discussion—
take for granted that civilizational theory will focus on configurations
of culture and power and therefore depend on more detailed theo-
rizing of the two latter themes; at this point, the prima facie case
for the most central concept should be stated on a more general
level. When the notion of civilization is used in the pluralistic sense,
it carries more or less explicit connotations that may serve to out-
line a thematic agenda without conflating it with a theoretical model.

There is—to begin with the most basic point—an implicit refer-
ence to social-historical creativity: civilizations appear as emergent
overall patterns (to call them totalities implies a one-sided emphasis
on closure) which shape the texture of social life and the course of
historical events on a large scale and over a long span of time. Given
the plurality of such constellations, we can speak of a creative self-
differentiation of the social world. At the same time, the civiliza-
tional complexes in question must be integrated enough to be
identifiable as such and distinguishable from each other; but the
specific particular meaning, degree and mechanisms of integration
can only be understood in relation to the diverse civilizational con-
texts. This complementarity of differentiation and integration extends
to other levels of analysis. If the concept of civilization refers to
large-scale and long-term constellations within which more organized
societies can coexist or succeed each other, both the differentiating
dynamic which gives rise to multiple units within a civilizational
framework and the integrative forces which maintain unity across
societal boundaries must differ from the corresponding aspects of

subordinate structures. And since it is the latter level (discrete soci-
eties seen as more self-contained than they were) that has been the
primary domain of sociological theory, civilizational analysis is a
potential corrective to mainstream conceptions. The same applies to
the temporal dimension. The unfolding of civilizational trends and
potentials involves processes of differentiation, more specific and con-
text-dependent than the general evolutionary patterns favoured by
the functionalist tradition. At the same time, the persistence of civi-
lizational identity—never without ongoing reconstruction and adap-
tation—depends on specific ways of integrating past, present and
presumed future within the framework of a tradition. Civilizational
theory is by definition critical of levelling concepts of tradition, inter-
ested in the diversity of traditions and attentive to their historical
legacies.

Another set of questions concerns the problem of collective iden-
tity. This is, as Castoriadis notes, one of the key issues involved in
the constitution of a socio-cultural world: 'Society must define its
"identity", its articulation; the world, its relationship to it and to the
objects which it contains, its needs and its desires' (Castoriadis, 1987:
147) The question 'who are we, as a collectivity?' is, in other words,
closely linked to other aspects of an ontological problematic which
demands answers but does not impose uniform solutions. The grow-
ing cultural and political importance of identity questions has, how-
ever, highlighted the relative neglect of this theme in classical and
post-classical sociology. If the construction, maintenance and trans-
formation of collective identity have—as many critics argue—been
marginal to the agenda of theorists who focused on social action,
structure and change, this may in part be due to underlying con-
ceptual blockages rather than conjunctural reasons. Collective iden-
tity is relational in a twofold sense: it is inseparable from specific
ways of locating society in the world, and it depends on demarca-
tion from other collectivities. In both respects, inbuilt biases of the
sociological tradition have obscured the issue. A sociocentric approach—
in other words: an overly self-contained image of society—minimizes
the constitutive role of relations to the world; a corresponding pref-
erence for single-society models—related to the unacknowledged par-
adigm of the nation-state—tends to sideline the analysis of inter-societal
relations in general, including those pertaining to the construction
of identity. These obstacles were reinforced by specific traits of the
dominant Parsonian school. The 'action frame of reference' was from

the outset prone to short-circuit social order and individual action, and thus to neglect a whole range of questions concerning their inter-relations; when this approach proved inadequate, Parsons adopted a systemic model which stressed the givenness and permanence of a socio-cultural framework fundamentally similar to simpler organisms. Neither the first not the second view could throw much light on the problems of identity construction and its interconnections with other aspects of the constitution of society.

Questions of identity and identity-building have—for a variety of reasons—come to the fore in contemporary debates, but they are rarely discussed in the specific context of civilizational theory. For present purposes, we need only note a few fundamental but under-theorized implications of the civilizational approach. The first point to be underlined is the linkages between collective identity, cultural world-perspectives and societal self-constitution: if civilizational patterns can be seen as the most comprehensive constellations of inter-pretative premises and institutional principles, the identity structures established at this level are most directly embedded in ultimate frame-works of meaning and relevance. The cultural cores of civilizational complexes contain the most basic answers to the questions which Castoriadis—as quoted above—locates at the heart of social-histori-cal being. This is not to suggest that the relationships in question are uniform. Interpretations of the world, the human condition and the social realm may be more or less closely aligned with founda-tions of collective identity; conversely, world-views and visions of social order may be more or less conducive to the formation of iden-tities going beyond local or regional limits (the universal religions are an obvious case in point). Such variations call for comparative study. But other aspects of the same problematic should also be con-sidered from a civilizational angle. Analysts of modern nationalism and its ideological constructs have often contrasted it with the much more composite pattern of collective identity that tends to prevail in premodern societies, where ethnic and local collectivities may co-exist with religious and political ones in a way no longer compatible with the ground rules of the nationstate. This line of argument is valid and insightful, as far as it goes, but is mostly fails to address the question of overarching civilizational contexts and their rela-tionship to multiple identities at lower levels. The civilizational dimen-sion of collective identity is important not only in its own right and as distinct from others, but also in view of its varying impact on the

constitution and interaction of subordinate identities. Comparative analyses along such lines might, among other things, throw new light on the diverse historical sources and corresponding types of modern nationalism.

In addition to this brief and selective overview of substantive questions, some metatheoretical implications of the civilizational approach should be noted. First and foremost, it expands the horizons of interpretive sociology in a distinctive and far-reaching fashion. The civilizational perspective serves to renew the original concern of hermeneutical thought with historical distance and cultural difference (Calhoun, 1995: 49). A heightened awareness of these twin challenges was crucial to the formative phase of modern social theory, but later accounts of understanding tended to narrow its domain down to more circumscribed fields; this trend is not only evident in the persistent efforts to equate understanding with intersubjective comprehension, but also in the limited character of more culturalist models (Calhoun argues that a tacit alignment with national boundaries has affected the concept of culture in much the same way as that of society). But the reconceptualization of culture in the context of civilizational theory is double-edged. On the one hand, it involves vastly enlarged horizons of intercultural understanding. Although some versions of civilizational theory are more open to hermeneutical self-reflection than others, comparative approaches must in principle be grounded in intercivilizational encounters: a pluralistic conception of cultural patterns is not synonymous with radical cultural relativism, but it must at least clarify the cultural preconditions of greater openness to other cultural worlds, and comparative theorizing on that basis can only be understood as a reflexive continuation of historical trends. Civilizational theory—in the sense advocated here—is thus based on strong claims to understanding across varying historical distances and a broad spectrum of cultural differences. On the other hand, the very broadening of the cultural frame of reference sets specific limits to understanding. The cultural orientations at the core of civilizational complexes do not crystallize into closed worlds, but they are—if the idea of civilizations in plural is to be applicable—reflected in comprehensive modes of thought and conduct, and mutual translation is always partial and contestable. Some interpretive frameworks entail a stronger emphasis on such limits than others, but they share the self-limiting logic of pluralistic theory. This inherent ambiguity of the multi-civilizational per-

spective has tempted some schools of thought—those more concerned with typological detail than with conceptual foundations—to short-circuit the problem and bypass the challenge of cultural difference. The loosely theorized versions of comparative analysis, exemplified by the writings of Spengler and Toynbee and more widely known than sociological alternatives, tend to over-emphasize the self-contained character and irreducible originality of civilizational units. At its most extreme, this view insists on the incommensurability of outwardly similar phenomena in different cultural contexts. But the very images of closed worlds and separate trajectories can also suggest intuitive analogies which seem to prevail over cultural difference. In particular, the notion of emerging, unfolding and declining cultural totalities can be elaborated into a uniform cross-civilizational model of growth and decay. Such constructions tone down the relativistic logic of radical pluralism; they go furthest in that direction when based (as in Spengler's philosophy of history) on a thorough-going assimilation of cultures to organisms. Another inbuilt difficulty of civilizational theory has to do with the tension between privileged sources and inclusive claims. The focus on enduring and constitutive cultural orientations inevitably leads to a strong emphasis on the representative texts in which they are articulated (and by the same token to a potentially misleading empathy with dominant self-images of the civilizations in question); on the other hand, the idea of a civilizational complex calls for a comprehensive reconstruction of patterns operating in all areas of social life, even if they are only in part accessible through self-thematizing discourses. It may be true that there has been a shift from one-sided textual interpretations to growing interest in material practices and power structures, but it is hard to see how the difficulties inherent in combining the two perspectives could be avoided: as long as the analysis of cultural world-perspectives remains central to civilizational theory, key texts will be of crucial importance and the twin obstacles of indigenous ideologization and interpretive preconception on the part of theorizing readers will continue to pose problems. The secret for shortcuts around these issues has been closely linked to the currents discussed above in relation to cross-cultural understanding. Comparative analysts outside the sociological tradition tended to work with a priori assumptions which minimized the distance and the possible dissonance between cultural premises and civilizational practices. Spengler's notion of 'primary symbols', i.e. ultimate paradigms of meaning which

underlie and determine all aspects of life within a particular cultural
world, is perhaps the most extreme example; Toynbee's emphasis
on creative minorities and mimetic responses to their innovations
can perhaps be seen as an answer to the same question.

Finally, the project of civilizational theory has some bearing on
the question of explanation in social inquiry. This is perhaps easiest
to show against the background of ongoing controversies in the field.
All attempts to theorize the specific character of social (or social-
historical) reality raise doubts about the deductive-nomological model
of explanation: it is seen as an uncritical extension of rules applic-
able in the natural sciences. From this point of view functional analy-
ses represents a first step towards more grounded theorizing, but
functionalist explanations are still vulnerable to criticism because of
their ambiguous relationship to causal ones. Critics of functionalism
have in the main proposed two alternative ideas of explanation, both
of which remain methodologically underdeveloped. On the one hand,
attention has been drawn to the contextuality of all explanatory con-
structs; this serves to link the social sciences with commonsensical
notions of explanation, underline the distance from the natural sci-
ences (or at least from their conventional image), and avoid a restric-
tive preconception of the patterns involved in social constellations.
Anthony Giddens, who stresses the contextual nature of explanation,
adds another reason to reject uniform and all-embracing models:
reflexivity, in the sense of an ongoing interaction between social
knowledge and social practice, is not—as defenders of scientistic views
might want to argue—a guarantee of progress towards more gener-
alizable insights. Rather, the reflexive appropriation and applica-
tion of knowledge changes the frameworks of social life in multiple,
uncoordinated and unpredictable ways, thus enhancing the relative
character of all interpretations. Reflexivity is, in other words, a con-
textualizing factor in its own right. On the other hand, the 'figurational'
paradigm, developed by Norbert Elias and his more or less ortho-
dox followers, centres on the analysis of long-term processes—espe-
cially those which involve a competitive redistribution of power—and
links this thematic focus to specific explanatory claims. The inbuilt
directions of dynamic configurations cannot be analyzed in teleo-
logical terms; the conflicting trends and forces at work in historical
processes do not conform to systemic logics; and the causal inter-
connections in question are too complex and case-dependent to be
subsumed under law like patterns. The interplay of strategies, con-

straints, unintended consequences and adaptive transformation appears
as an explanatory mechanism of higher order than the idealized con-
structs of rational, causal or systemic regularity.

As we shall see, the analysis of long-term transformations of power
structures—pioneered by Elias—can and should be integrated into
a pluralistic civilizational theory. At this point, however, our main
concern is with metatheoretical issues. No clearly defined explana-
tory models have grown out of the multi-civilizational approach, but
it can at least serve to suggest ways of strengthening and synthesiz-
ing the two ideas outlined above. If social inquiry is contextual in
an enabling as well as a limiting sense, the question of directions
and limits set by civilizational macro-contexts must be of particular
importance; and if the dynamic analysis of long-term processes calls
for explanatory strategies of a specific kind, a multi-civilizational per-
spective would link this task to understanding of the different con-
texts within which the processes unfold. In both respects, civilizational
theory underlines the complexity as well as the relativity of expla-
nation in the social-historical field; but this point has to some extent
been obscured by the ideas already discussed in connection with
other problems, i.e. the more holistic versions of comparative analy-
sis. The seemingly recurrent patterns of rise and fall, theorized or
at least implicitly understood in terms of organic growth took the
place of explanatory models. On the other hand, those who kept
their distance from such solutions and upheld a sociological per-
spective were often disinclined to defend explanatory claims. When
Louis Dumont (1975: 156) argued that the sociological analysis of
civilizations should strive to interpret rather than explain, he was
taking a more widespread trend to extreme lengths.

These reflections on prospects and premises should suffice to round
off our survey of civilizational themes in contemporary sociological
theory. The overall picture suggests that a whole complex of inter-
connected questions, more or less directly related to the pluralistic
idea of civilization, has been—or can be—reactivated from different
angles and in response to developments within diverse fields of inquiry.
The following discussion will not aim at a comprehensive coverage
of all the issues mentioned above; thematic priorities and criteria of
relevance are determined by a theoretical project which will take
clearer shape in the course of the argument. But the introductory
overview may help to keep our choices in proper perspective and
clarify them in the context of ongoing debates.

CLASSICAL SOURCES

In linking the project of civilizational theory to a reconsideration of the sociological classics, we are taking a line which has proved fruitful and persuasive in other areas. Not that it is uncontested: some strategies of theorizing are based on a radical break with the classics and an ostensibly self-sufficient fashioning of conceptual frameworks from new beginnings. This applies to paradigms otherwise as different as the theories of rational choice and self-referential systems. In both cases, however, the decision to discard the classics rests on strong and exclusive assumptions about the tasks of theory-building. More balanced views of the present agenda tend to go together with more constructive use of the tradition in general and the classics in particular. For example, the unfinished debate on agency and structure is inseparable from conflicting interpretations of Marxian, Durkheimian and Weberian ideas. In this regard, the hermeneutical procedure pioneered by Talcott Parsons is of more lasting importance than its initial results; successive versions of Parsons' theoretical system have been subjected to telling criticism, and his way of 'mining the classics' is now widely seen as inadequate, but those who retain the problematic of agency and structure (or action and system) have often linked their alternative accounts of it to new perspectives on the classical legacy.

Civilizational theory is, as noted above, one of the fields neglected because of the predominant concern with agency and structure; but as I will try to show, it can also benefit from a return to the sources, although its classical antecedents are more elusive than those of action theory or functional analysis. Civilizational themes and approaches in the formative texts of the sociological tradition do not add up to more than a fragmented and submerged problematic. They are overshadowed by other concerns which came to dominate the emerging discipline, and their potential reach is often obscured by inadequate conceptual means. Moreover, there is a striking lack of contact between theoretical reflection and substantive research: the most explicit and seminal formulation of a multi-civilizational perspective was—as we

shall see—not backed up by concrete analyses of the same calibre, whereas the most significant project of comparative civilizational studies suffered from conceptual gaps and ambiguities. A far-reaching critical reconstruction will therefore be needed to show that the classical sources are relevant to our argument. The discussion must begin with the French sociological tradition and its attempts to define the domain of civilizational theory; against this background, Max Weber's pioneering contribution to the comparative study of civilizations can then be assessed with due emphasis on its merits as well as its weaknesses. To conclude, we will briefly consider an alternative tradition which developed mostly outside the boundaries of sociology and without a clear view of its role in regard to the human sciences in general.

2.1 *Durkheim and Mauss: The sociological concept of civilization*

The common eighteenth-century origins of the two concepts of civilization—the unitary and the pluralistic—are still reflected in a significant overlap between them. Civilizations can be distinguished and classified in various ways, but such typologies mostly assume a general level of development as a precondition for the applicability of the concept. Conversely, the ability to invent specific forms of life and ways of relating to the world manifests itself in different civilizational patterns, but it may also be seen as a universal human competence, acquired or at least perfected in the course of a civilizing process. In view of these enduring interconnections, a historical reconstruction of the pluralistic approach should focus on its gradual—but of necessity incomplete—separation from the more common-sensical idea of civilization in the singular, and further reflections on the tasks of a pluralistic theory must take note of insights resulting from critical restatements of the unitary conception. A detailed analysis of the historical semantics in question is beyond the scope of the present project; our starting-point is the emergence of multi-civilizational perspectives in the most decisive phase of the sociological tradition, with particular reference to the Durkheimian school and the work of Max Weber.

The Marxian legacy is less relevant to these questions than to many other key topics of social theory. In brief, Marx's interpretive framework seems to bar access to the civilizational dimension as a distinctive field of inquiry: both the unquestioned notion of civilization

as a universal trend and the unacknowledged problem of civilizations as particular forms of life are relegated to the margins of historical and theoretical analysis, although not to the same degree. On the one hand, Marx is committed to a vision of history as progress, but he gives a new twist to this widely shared theme of early modern thought, and his explanatory constructs—the growth of the productive forces as well as the less linear dynamic of the class struggle—allow him to neglect the specific issues inherent in a civilizational view of human development. Marx stresses the civilizing effects of economic and technological progress and sees capitalism as a uniquely civilizing force, but this hardly amounts to more than a rhetorical gloss on claims argued in other terms. The reference to a universal civilizing trend serves to strengthen the suggestion of overall progress. The most emphatic statements in this vein can be found in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx eulogizes 'the great civilizing influence of capital', due to the conquest of nature, the progress of science, the many-sided development of human capacities and the elimination of all local and national barriers to social interactions. On the other hand, Marx's overriding interest in universal patterns and progressive dynamics of history precludes any grasp of civilizations in the plural. There are, however, two incipient lines of argument which can—in retrospect—be read as attempts to theorize civilizational difference without admitting its full import. When Marx describes the revolutionary effects of capitalist development on all areas of social life, his account of the 'great transformation'—as Karl Polanyi later called it—is clearly suggestive of civilizational change; and when he contrasts the unfolding new order with pre-capitalist forms (most extensively in a key section of the *Grundrisse*), the result is a typology of Oriental, Mediterranean and Germanic models, each of which appears as a distinctive mode of social life. Both revolutionary novelty and traditional diversity are thus taken seriously enough to raise some questions about the uniformity and continuity otherwise taken for granted at the most basic analytical level. But for all their intrinsic interest, these critical reflections never posed an explicit challenge to the evolutionist premises of Marx's thought.

In contrast to Marx, Durkheim arrived at clear and seminal formulations of the case for civilizational theory, and the programme thus outlined was further clarified by some of his followers. It can, moreover, be shown that his discovery of civilizations in the plural was closely linked to a reappraisal of civilization in the singular (it

may not be possible to reconstruct the chronological relationship between the two themes, and the extent of Mauss' contribution to the pluralist turn remains unclear, but on purely logical grounds, the introduction of the pluralistic concept is best understood as a consequence of changes to the unitary one). In *The Division of Social Labour*, civilization in the singular is effectively neutralized: the moral ambivalence of the civilizing process makes it irrelevant to an argument which aims at reaffirming 'mutual understanding and mutual sacrifice' as the sustaining core of social life. From that point of view, achievements and developments of a more utilitarian kind—usually associated with the notion of civilization—belong to the periphery of the social world. It might be suggested that a revision of this view is already inherent in Durkheim's, explanation of the division of labour as a mitigated form of the struggle for existence. But the later re-evaluation reflects more basic changes to his conceptual scheme. In an essay on 'moral facts', Durkheim (1965) quotes and accepts Comte's definition of sociology as the science of civilization; the return to this previously discarded thesis is prompted by new insight into the relationship between society and the individual. The primacy of society is now seen as implemented through a transformation of human nature: 'a man is a man only to the degree that he is civilized' (ibid.: 55). Civilization is the totality of this humanizing process, determined by societal causes but most dirrctly visible at the individual level. By the same token, it encompasses the totality of human values, including moral ones as a type among others. The concept of civilization thus signals a major departure from Durkheim's earlier tendency to equate morality and sociality. At the same time, the focus on values leads to the discovery of a hitherto neglected level of social integration: as Durkheim points out in a discussion of 'judgments of fact and judgments of value', the quasi-objective status of values is due to their being held in common by members of the same civilization (ibid.: 35–62).

This other side of civilizational phenomena—the particular as distinct from the universal—is further explored in a 'Note on the notion of civilization', jointly written by Durkheim and Mauss (1971; this text was first published in 1913 and is therefore roughly contemporaneous with *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*). This would seem to be the first sociological definition of the pluralistic concept of civilization. As Durkheim and Mauss see it, civilizations consist of social phenomena 'that are not strictly attached to a determinate

social organism; they extend into areas that reach beyond the national territory or they develop over periods of time that exceed the history of a single society'; they constitute 'a moral milieu encompassing a certain number of nations' or a plurality of interrelated political bodies acting upon one another' (ibid.: 810–813). Moreover, the phenomena in question are 'generally linked in an interdependent system' (ibid.: 812). But it is also clear that various regions and layers of the social world differ in their capacity to function as elements of civilizational complexes. One of the first tasks of civilizational theory would be to clarify the 'unequal coefficient of expansion and internationalization' (ibid.: 812).

These brief but far-reaching indications call for further comment. To begin with, Durkheim and Mauss do not claim to be coining a new concept; rather, they propose to open up sociological perspectives on problems which have been illegitimately detached from the sociological agenda and reserved for other disciplines, especially ethnography (W. Schmidt is mentioned as a representative of this trend). Although they do not deny that the concept of civilization may be useful for a comparative analysis of primitive societies, their main concern is to bring it into the study of 'historic peoples' and their social life. In this way, a pre-existing but problematic notion would be redefined from the viewpoint of a nascent discipline which would at the same time add a whole new field to its domain. But it would be misleading to see the concept of civilization only as an extension of more basic categories. As introduced by Durkheim and Mauss, it is—at least potentially—a complement and corrective to the core concept of society, and an attempt to identify the most comprehensive and self-contained forms of social life. It refers to 'a life which is in some ways supranational' (ibid.: 810). This has mostly been overlooked by those who criticize the Durkheimian school for modelling its idea of society on the nation-state and thus imposing a reductionist frame of reference on the whole subsequent sociological tradition. In reality, that objection is more justified in regard to the Parsonian interpretation of Durkheim's work.

The trans-societal implications of the concept of civilization have to do with space as well as time: if we take the view adumbrated by Durkheim and Mauss, there are diverse civilizational areas and civilizational traditions, and their historical individuality differs from that of single societies. Both the spatial and the temporal unity of civilizations can be more pronounced in some contexts than others

(the unequal aptitude for expansion is, by implication, also reflected in different degrees of traditionalization across historical boundaries). In particular Durkheim and Mauss seem to assume that relatively high levels of cultural integration—material as well as symbolic—are compatible with political pluralism; the coexistence of multiple power centres within a civilizational complex appears as the rule rather than the exception, although it may be possible to restate the argument in more flexible terms and treat the forms, degrees and dynamics of political unity as variables within the framework of civilizational theory. Moreover, the persistence of political division presupposes some grounding in collective identity at a sub-civilizational level—most obviously in the case of modern nation-states, but premodern analogies or approximations to national identity can play a similar role. For Durkheim and Mauss, the civilizational perspective was clearly relevant to modern no less than premodern societies: 'there still are diverse civilizations which dominate and develop the collective life of each people' (ibid.: 812), and the repeated references to national life, culture and territory show that civilizations are in the first instance set against the background of more familiar modern units.

Mauss returned to this problematic in a later text (1968; this paper was first read to a symposium on civilization in Paris in 1929). Here he repeats in stronger terms the earlier critique of anthropological misconceptions. Spengler's morphology of civilizations is dismissed in passing as a literary extrapolation of ideas first developed within anthropology; those who classified primitive societies in terms of mutually exclusive cultural forms or areas were reacting against the errors of evolutionism, but they failed to grasp the more complex approaches that were taking shape within sociology. Mauss goes on to outline the programme of a sociological theory of civilizations in much greater detail than before. In doing so he singles out five thematic foci; they are unevenly developed, and some definitions are unclear, but taken as a whole, the argument nevertheless represents the most ambitious and systematic project of its kind among the classical sources.

The first and most basic task is to identify *civilizational elements* or phenomena, and to distinguish them from other social phenomena. Civilizational elements range from techniques to myths, and from money to models of political organization and images of salvation; they are by definition 'capable of travelling (*aptes à voyager*)', although not all to the same degree, and this sets them apart from the more

singular and self-isolating aspects of particular societies. They are, in
other words, 'common to a more or less large number of societies
and more or less extended part of those societies' (ibid.: 459). But
it is only through specific combinations that the diffusion of elements
gives rise to *civilizational forms*. This is the second—and most impor-
tant—theme mentioned by Mauss; his emphasis on the combinatory
and therefore variable character of the forms is obviously directed
against the cultural anthropologists who tried to isolate one domi-
nant trait or 'core idea', but this approach proves more difficult to
translate into positive terms. Mauss' most explicit definition is some-
what inconclusive: 'The form of a civilization is the sum total of the
specific appearances taken (*aspects speciaux que revêtent*) by the ideas,
the practices and the products common or more or less common to
a certain number of given societies, which are the inventors and
bearers of this civilization' (ibid.: 464). Since the forms exist in and
unfold through history, Mauss introduces the concept of *civilizational
layer* (couche) to describe the state of a specific civilization during a
particular period of time; this term is proposed as a more precise
label for what historians call styles or epochs, but Mauss does not
discuss the matter further. Civilizations exist and function as geo-
graphical units, i.e. as *civilizational areas* of varying size, with more or
less clearly defined boundaries, and with an internal distinction
between core and periphery. Forms and areas become visible and
comparable through each other. Finally, the *patterns of interaction* within
civilizational frameworks based on forms and areas can vary in space
as well as time. This is one of the least developed parts of Mauss'
programme, but he makes one very suggestive point. As he puts it,
societies 'singularize themselves' and create their individual charac-
teristics against a common civilizational background (ibid.: 462). At
the beginning, the concept of civilization was defined with reference
to trans-societal fields of interaction and integration, but Mauss
now seems to be taking the argument one step further: the social
units first identified and analyzed by the new discipline of sociology
constitute and demarcate themselves within civilizational contexts.
Moreover, this view implicitly raises the question whether singular-
ization can, in the most pronounced cases, give rise to an alterna-
tive civilization, or at least a significantly different version of the
existing one. To illustrate the range of issues that can be linked to
the idea of singularizing development, it is enough to mention two
very different cases: the Japanese trajectory in the context of the East

Asian civilizational area and the emergence of ancient Greece and ancient Israel on the periphery of older civilizations of the Near East.

A civilization, in the sense summarized above, is 'a family of societies;' Mauss also refers to it as 'a hyper-social system of social systems' (ibid.: 463). This terminology should not be taken to mean all the things it came to mean in the more streamlined language of systems theory (Mauss' vision of the social world is too nuanced for that), but it is clear that Mauss wants to theorize civilizations as the most comprehensive and self-sufficient social units. He thus confronts a question inherited from the tradition of political philosophy, and his answer to it merits more attention than it has hitherto attracted; it has, in particular, been overlooked by those who accuse the sociological classics of unmitigated failure on this score (Niklas Luhmann is the most prominent case in point). But if we take a closer look at the cornerstone of Mauss' argument, the concept of civilizational form, some basic shortcomings must be noted. The reference to 'ideas, products and practices' suggests—by comparison with the 1913 statement—a broader horizon and a more determined attempt to go beyond strictly culturalist views; on the other hand, the description of forms in terms of 'appearances', as well as subsequent comments on 'style' as the defining characteristic of a civilization, seem to reflect an underlying culturalist bent and a corresponding predilection for aesthetic metaphors. This impression of residual culturalism is reinforced by the markedly cursory treatment of power. Power structures are not thematized as such but they are implicitly acknowledged as a differentiating factor: when Mauss speaks of separate societies within a shared civilizational framework, he is referring to politically organized units. In brief, the problematic of culture and power—which we have already identified as the main concern of civilizational theory—is only touched upon in an oblique and one-sided fashion. Neither of the twin themes appears as a field of inquiry in its own right, and their interconnections are seen from a purely negative angle: culture would seem to be the ultimate guarantee of civilizational unity, whereas power is more visible in its capacity as a divisive force.

Some further ideas emerge from Mauss' discussion of more popular notions of civilization, more or less different from the sociological one but justifiable—up to a point—as adaptations of it. Mauss accepts, for example, the notion of French civilization; it refers to the undeniable and historically significant fact of French cultural

influence far beyond the boundaries of the French state. On a more
critical note, we might say that this usage indicates the difficulty of
drawing a line between national singularization and civilizational
variation. A second point concerns the case of very large states which
succeeded in unifying whole cultural areas. In that sense, Mauss sees
nothing wrong with speaking of the Byzantine empire as a civiliza-
tion; as for China, he points out that it was at the centre of a much
larger civilizational complex. But the same could be said about
Byzantium: some historians have used the term 'Byzantine Common-
wealth' to describe a cluster of states within the civilizational orbit
of the empire but not under effective imperial control. The broader
question at issue here—not included in Mauss' outline of a theo-
retical agenda—has to do with the varying relationships between
imperial formations and their civilizational contexts. Finally, Mauss
considers the problem of civilizations defined in explicitly religious
terms. Such claims can only be made about some religions and some
civilizations, but in the case of Buddhism and Islam, Mauss sees the
pervasive influence of religious beliefs and attitudes on social life as
reason enough to treat these two universal religions as civilizational
patterns. The question of Buddhist civilization is further complicated
by the fact that it first emerged—and flourished for some time—
alongside a different civilizational complex on the Indian subconti-
nent (whether Hinduism can then be described as a religion in the
same sense as Buddhism or Islam is another question). Mauss does
not pursue this argument further, but his examples raise far-reaching
questions about the varying roles of religious traditions in the cons-
titution of civilizations.

   On the basis of the ideas summarized above, Mauss sketches two
complementary lines of argument. On the one hand, he reconsiders
the basic Durkheimian concept of social fact in the light of the civ-
ilizational context. Civilizational phenomena are the most striking
illustrations of a characteristic common to all forms of social life:
their fundamental *arbitrariness*. 'All social phenomena are to some
degree creations of a collective will, and to talk about collective will
is to talk about a choice between different possible options' (ibid.:
470). At the civilizational level, the notion of choice obviously becomes
even more metaphorical than in the case of single societies, and the
resemblance to later structuralist conceptions may be deceptive (the
structuralist assumption of a given range of pre-structured possibilities
makes the idea of choice more meaningful). For present purposes,

let us merely note that civilizations are—in Mauss' view—not so much 'ultimate tribes' (Huntington) as the ultimate large-scale and long-term expressions of a general human capacity for the creative and coherent patterning of socio-cultural life.

On the other hand, Mauss considers the possibility of civilizational convergence, or—to put it another way—a common ground made up of universal patterns and universalistic ideals. This does not lead to any sustained interest in intercivilizational encounters. Mauss's comments on specific cases show that he was sensitive to such developments (for example, he regards it as an established fact that the Neo-Platonic thought of late antiquity was influenced by Indian traditions, and that this connection was in turn important for the development of Christian mysticism), but the problematic is never defined in general terms. Rather, Mauss seems to envisage a shift towards global unification—and thus towards genuine progress of civilization in the singular—from within a particular civilizational context. Civilization in the singular, defined in terms of unifying patterns and universal principles, was at first an ideological self-image of Western civilization (Mauss draws a parallel with the self-images of classes and nations); but more recently, the global spread of Western inventions—from modern science to the cinema—has brought about a genuine growth of the 'capital of humanity'. This development is, however, neither unambiguous in itself nor adequately reflected in the accompanying ideologies. For Mauss, the ultimate ambivalence of civilization is as obvious as that of progress (his view of progress is summed up in a virtually untranslatable formulation (ibid.: 483): 'il y a un mouvement général vers le plus être et vers quelque chose de plus fort et de plus fin. Je ne dis pas vers le mieux être'). The 'acquis général' is subsumed under a variety of collective standards and paradigms; in the most extreme and therefore revealing cases, they subordinate the civilizing process to the hegemony of a particular nation or to a cosmopolitan ideal beyond national differences. Mauss thus singles out the nationalization of transnational efforts and achievements as an important aspect of modern nationalism. And although he refers to attempts to reconcile the two trends—i.e. to legitimate the 'civilizing mission' of a nation through an appeal to universal principles—he is not too optimistic about the future. He envisages—in 1929—a new separation of the nation from humanity that would transform the common fund of civilizational elements into instruments of particularistic violence.

The interpretive framework outlined by Durkheim and Mauss is obviously tailored to the most visible and most widely agreed cases of civilizational unity. As we have seen, the conceptual elaboration of this approach does not go very far, and some key questions are left open, but further suggestions may be made on the basis of Mauss's work. The notion of the 'unequal coefficient'—the uneven capacity of social phenomena to play a civilization-building role—is a convenient starting-point. If we take the same view of civilizational complexes as such, their unity and autonomy appear as historical variables, not to be mistaken for given premises: the trans-societal patterns in question differ in regard to coherence, scope and continuity, and it may therefore be useful to speak of an open-ended spectrum of more or less self-contained civilizational forms and formations, rather than trying to construct a closed list of civilizations defined in a uniform sense (the latter option has been more attractive to civilizational analysts outside the sociological tradition). The variations may be due to specific choices within the field of possible foci for civilizational patterns (it is, for example, of major importance whether civilizational identity is defined in overt and unconditional religious terms, and how the relationship between religious foundations and other aspects of social life is structured), but they can also arise from contextual factors which affect the interaction of civilizational components. This relativizing thrust is implicit in Durkheim's and Mauss' overall approach, as well as in a more precise point noted above: if the 'singularization' of societies within civilizational fields can in principle give rise to distinctive variants, or even mutant offshoots of the patterns shared with other units, the boundary between societal and civilizational levels of integration is obviously a shifting one.

It remains to be seen how far this flexible and nuanced notion of civilization can be made fit for analytical use. As I will argue, inputs from other traditions are essential to the construction of a serviceable model. But to conclude our overview of the classical French contribution to civilizational theory, some less central sources should at least be briefly mentioned. The most ambitious attempt to apply Durkheimian (and/or Maussian) categories to a non-Western civilization is Marcel Granet's work on China (1968a, b). Although Granet did not undertake a detailed comparative study, comparisons with the West are used to underscore some decisive points of his argument (most importantly, he argues that there are no Chinese

equivalents of the Western notions of state, law and god). His concept of civilization refers to a community and continuity of human experience; but as the Chinese case shows, the corresponding social cluster is not necessarily composed of national or quasi-national units. Far from assuming the unity and specificity of Chinese civilization as a fact, Granet concentrated on a detailed reconstruction of the formative period of its history (i.e.—as he saw it—the feudal phase of the first millennium BC and the emergence of the empire). But his treatment of the historical background highlights a very peculiar relationship between static and dynamic aspects: an exceptionally turbulent and creative epoch culminates in the constitution of a stable and comprehensive civilizational pattern which does not exclude further developments, but manifests a unique capacity to minimize their impact and significance with regard to both social life and the life of the mind. Despite the lack of a correspondingly thorough account of the imperial era, this interpretation is *prima facie* more plausible than either the traditional idea of an unchanging China or the more one-sided reactions against it.

On closer inspection, however, the distinctive characteristics of Chinese civilization appear as symptoms and consequences of a more fundamental trait: the predominance of civilizational patterns as such over other dimensions of the human condition. According to Granet (1968a: 14), 'the sentiment of a civilizational community motivated the Chinese to defend themselves against the attacks of the barbarian confederations and made them accept the unification of the country in the form of a great empire.' The Chinese world constituted a civilizational grouping, and the strength of this particular kind of solidarity made it possible to downgrade or do without some other forms of the social bond. In particular, the institution and the idea of the state did not develop to the same degree as in the West. On this view, the consolidation of the empire shows that the underlying civilizational model has reached the stage of maturity. The political doctrines and symbols associated with the imperial regime are designed to block any movement towards the autonomy of the political sphere (Granet saw the 'Legalist' school as an abortive step in that direction); both the 'administrative function' and the 'function of sovereignty' are represented as 'educational work' (*oeuvre d'enseignement*), and the tasks of government are subsumed under the diffusion of a cultural ideal. A conception of social life that lays an 'exclusive stress on decorum' blocks the development of universalistic moral principles

on the one hand and rational rules of statecraft on the other. Last
but not least, the main currents of Chines thought pursue a similar
aim. Their main concern is with the elaboration of 'guidelines for
civilizing activity' (Granet, 1968b: 20), rather than with the quest for
speculative insight or scientific knowledge. Moreover, their common
image of a cosmic order reflects this interest; Granet refers to the
idea that the principle of a universal harmonious agreement (*bonne
entente universelle*) coincides with the principle of a universal intelligi-
bility as the undisputed premise of all Chinese schools of thought.
This synthesizing frame of reference—a concrete totality encom-
passing nature and culture, modelled on the social order—defuses
the conflicts which other world-views tend to polarize. The contrasts
between sacred and profane, hierarchy and autonomy, collectivism
and individualism—to mention only the most important issues—are
thus moderated by an all-pervasive 'esprit de conciliation'.

To sum up, Granet's holistic concept of civilization tends to rel-
ativize all boundaries between different spheres of social life; the gen-
eral blurring of distinctions also makes it difficult to grasp concrete
conditions and trends of historical change, and since the primacy of
civilizational patterns and values appears as the *differentia specifica* of
Chinese society, setting it apart from the Western world, the poten-
tial basis of comparative analysis is interpreted as a symptom of other-
ness. Granet's work shows, in other words, that the general notion
of civilization, outlined in very provisional terms by Durkheim and
Mauss, was vulnerable to absorption by specific cases. This slide from
a universal to a particular context can be compared to transforma-
tions of other themes in Durkheim work. His search for compre-
hensive frameworks reflects an inbuilt ambiguity of his concept of
society: it refers to visibly demarcated and relatively self-contained
units (this aspect is, as critics have pointed out, closely linked to the
nation-state), but also to the social world as such and in its capac-
ity as a reality *sui generis*. Other concepts are then used to concretize
the latter meaning and open up broader perspectives beyond the
level of particular societies; as we have seen, both the unitary and
the pluralistic idea of civilization serve this purpose. But in Durkheim's
later work, the adumbrations of civilizational theory are overshad-
owed by a new theory of religion which provides another answer to
the same question. Instead of a 'hypersystem', the focus is now on
a 'meta-institution' (this is G. Poggi's rendering of Durkheim's pro-
ject): religion appears as the source and support of other institutions.

But the choice of a primitive society to exemplify this primacy of the religious life tends to highlight the contrast with more advanced societies, rather than a common denominator. Durkheim's speculations about modern forms of the sacred are too inconclusive to redress the balance.

Durkheim's sociology of religion was, however, the starting-point for another offshoot of the French tradition, and in that context, some implications for civilizational theory should be noted. Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology can (notwithstanding the importance of direct engagement with Mauss's work) be seen as a revised version of the strategy first tried in Durkheim's work on primitive religion: the search for the mainsprings of social life through a close analysis of its most elementary forms. But the argument is now developed on a different level. An unconscious mental infrastructure of social phenomena, ultimately reducible to natural and invariant traits of the human intellect, replaces the collective representations which Durkheim had put at the centre of social life; man-made religion as the primal medium of societal self-constitution gives way to innate rationality as a set of rules for the construction of social and cultural worlds. This new paradigm is presented as a more balanced way of reconciling the unity of human nature with the plurality of cultures. When it comes to concrete analyses, Lévi-Strauss takes a line marked by another major departure from Durkheimian views: a distinctive and radical critique of civilization in the singular. As noted above, Mauss had taken a cautious view of the trend towards civilizational unity, but his main concern was that progress might be put at the service of particularistic forces; later experiences led to more direct questioning of civilization as such, and Lévi-Strauss' variation on that theme is one of the most uncompromising. For him, the apparent transformation of phantasms into knowledge and knowledge into power over nature is 'little more than our subjective awareness of a progressive welding together of humanity and the physical universe, whose great deterministic laws, instead of remaining remote and awe-inspiring, now use thought itself as an intermediary medium and are colonizing us on behalf of a silent world of which we have become the agents' (Lévi-Strauss, 1997: 477–78).

The notion of self-alienation through growing knowledge has been developed in different contexts (the Frankfurt School is a familiar example); the originality of Lévi-Strauss' position will become clearer if we consider the details of his case against civilization. Above all,

the long-term logic of universal history is seen as a paradox: the pursuit of power, accompanied by the structured inequality and permanent imbalance which distinguish civilized societies from primitive ones, culminates in a more absolute and unveiled dependence on nature (as well as an inevitable awakening to the mortality of the human species). Another paradox results from the homogenizing effects of civilizational dynamics. Lévi-Strauss stresses the importance of cultural encounters and cross-fertilizations for the innovative capacity of human societies, but also the growing uniformity inherent in progress and the loss of creative impulses derived from human diversity. Monoculture and mass civilization are the final outcome of cultural interaction. When this self-cancelling process is thematized by the human sciences, the result is a double-edged insight which Lévi-Strauss describes most explicitly as 'the paradox of civilization': 'its [civilization's] charms are due essentially to the various residues it carries along with it, although this does not absolve us of the obligation to purify the stream . . . Social life consists in destroying that which gives it its savour' (ibid.: 384). The paradox cuts both ways: if civilization destroys its own 'charms', it has also created the capacity to enjoy and understand them. And the recognition of cultural plurality enhances the paradox: 'the less human societies were able to communicate with each other and therefore to corrupt each other through contact, the less their respective emissaries were able to perceive the wealth and significance of their diversity' (ibid.: 43).

It is not the empirical validity of these mid-twentieth-century visions that concerns us here; rather, the point is to clarify their connection with ideas more directly related to our agenda. Mauss had applied the pluralistic concept of civilization to both primitive and historical societies; Lévi-Strauss critique of civilization in the singular leads him to regard primitive societies as more compatible with human diversity. But here the concept of civilization seems superfluous, and a statement which Mauss had made about civilizations can be rephrased with reference to small-scale societies: 'each society has made a certain choice, within the range of human possibilities' (ibid.: 470). In this way, the unity of human nature can be reconciled with the plurality of its social forms and the duality of its historical orientations (primitive and civilized). A balanced relationship between unity and diversity is, however, not equally characteristic of all primitive societies: for Lévi-Strauss, the paradigmatic cases are communities which have completed the neolithic revolution but not yet invented the

state. They have retained the internal and external equilibrium—
and the ability to keep history at bay—which disappears with the
emergence of civilization, but at the same time, they have achieved
a level of control over nature which allows them to realize their cog-
nitive and constructive potential more freely than could be done at
earlier stages of development. The 'structuring structures' of the
human mind are thus most adequately brought to bear at the begin-
ning of the transition from primitive to civilized societies, rather than
in an unalloyed primitive condition; and Lévi-Strauss' unmistakably
romantic image of this relatively brief phase is not altogether unlike
the views which stress the integrity and diversity of civilizations in
the plural.

The retreat to the neolithic world does not entail a complete break
with civilizational analysis. Lévi-Strauss' least academic but arguably
most important work, *Tristes Tropiques*, contains some reflections in
a comparative vein; they have—understandably—been overshadowed
by the more developed parts of his work, but they are of some inter-
est in the present context. The starting-point is an exceptionally
promising but abortive intercivilizational opening. Lévi-Strauss sees
the mutual discovery of the Greek and the Indian world during the
Hellenistic era as an indication of what a balanced unification of the
Eurasian ecumene might have achieved (ibid.: 482–507). This brief
episode was the beginning of a longer phase of closer contact between
major civilizational complexes, but the creative fusion prefigured by
Greco-Indian encounters (especially early Buddhist art) was never
realized on a larger scale. Lévi-Strauss' description of the Greco-
Indian moment and its betrayed promise is reminiscent of the neolithic
communities at the threshold of history; the sequel to the Hellenistic
age was, however, shaped by the interaction of particular civiliza-
tions, rather than by the dynamics of civilization in general. Islam
created a barrier between East and West, and as Christianity matured
into a civilization in its own right, it became by the same token
more similar to Islam.

The reasons for Lévi-Strauss' harsh judgment on the two uni-
versal monotheistic religions are grounded in a more general argu-
ment. He is often accused of leaving the religious dimension of the
primitive as well as the human condition out of account, but in the
text mentioned above, he outlines a theory of religion and its civi-
lizational role which merits more attention than it has so far received.
His view of primitive religion is decidedly negative: it has more to

do with 'the malevolence of the Beyond and the anguish of magic' (ibid.: 499) than with any recognizable version of the sacred. In that regard, he seems to admit that neolithic communities had a problem which civilization could help to solve. But the only world religion to propose a genuine solution was Buddhism, whose 'radical critique of life' negated the world and itself as a religion together with all otherwordly mirages. The history of universal religions thus begins with an unprecedented and unsurpassed vision of liberation, and this breakthrough coincided with the Hellenistic advance towards the East (there is no discussion of Greek preconditions for the encounter). The other world was restored by the universal religions which spread from 'the West of the East', and their doctrines of salvation served to legitimize this—worldly powers. Although Islam is singled out for special condemnation and described in oversimplified terms (Lévi-Strauss seems to accept the claim that it abolishes the distinction between the temporal and the spiritual) the essentials of the argument are—apart from some concessions to early Christianity—directed against the two monotheistic world religions and civilizations, rather than the more extreme case alone.

On this reading (and contrary to those who accuse Lévi-Strauss of Orientalism), Islam and Christianity share the ambiguity of universal belief systems which at the same time demarcate their adherents from the unbelievers. The tendency to translate this unstable combination of universalism and particularism into aggression against others is reinforced by more specific theological premises: salvation depends on dogmatic beliefs which have to be spread by more or less coercive means. At the same time, the monopolization of religious truth and authority becomes an integral part of the mundane power structure. The most noteworthy aspect of this brief but suggestive sketch is its anti-Weberian thrust, although it seems very unlikely that this was a motivating factor. Lévi-Strauss' argument can be construed as an alternative to Weber's typology of religious rejections of the world: here the most insightful and liberating rejection is one which begins with a critique of life and moves through a dissolution of encompassing frameworks of meaning towards a disengagement from the very illusion of meaning. In that sense, the most genuine *Entzauberung* preceded the rise of universal monotheism, and the latter—together with its civilizational consequences—must be seen as a regression. This thesis is not developed in detail, but it is closely related to Lévi-Strauss' general critique of civilization.

Historical Buddhism may have been implicated in the relapses ascribed to monotheistic religions, but the original message of Buddhism appears as the most adequate answer to the self-questioning of a civilization which might yet be capable of mitigating its own destructive dynamic and learning from archaic societies without forgetting the insights derived from intellectual progress beyond them.

To complete this overview of the French tradition, we need to note a more recent line of argument which links up with Lévi-Strauss' reinterpretation of primitive societies. The work of Pierre Clastres (1977) and the more far-reaching theoretical perspectives which Marcel Gauchet has opened up through a critical dialogue with Clastres (1975a,b, 1997) have a direct bearing on the domain of civilizational theory. By reconstructing the distinctive cultural logic of primitive thought and institutions, Lévi-Strauss had effectively challenged the long-held view of the societies in question as in some sense more natural or closer to a natural condition than their civilized successors, but his residual commitment to a Rousseauian idea of anthropology as 'knowledge of natural man' prevented him from drawing the appropriate conclusions. Clastres took the anti-naturalist approach further and set out to theorize the world of the primitives (or savages, as he preferred to call them) as an alternative mode of sociocultural being. His most crucial contribution was a new account of the downgrading and containment of power in stateless societies; they were, as he saw it, 'societies against the state', organized and oriented in such a way that they actively blocked the path to state formation. Clastres thus revives the Maussian idea of a macro-social choice, implicit in a whole institutional design even when it is not expressed in discursive terms, and links it to the problematic of cultural visions of power, which we have already singled out as a key theme of civilizational theory. The broader implications of this new beginning in political anthropology are best understood in the light of Gauchet's interpretation.

It is not being suggested that primitive societies can function without the practical exercise and symbolic projection of power. But the overall institutional context prevents the forms and figures of power from coalescing into a separate centre. The power wielded by leaders in war does not go beyond temporary arrangements for specific purposes. More importantly, it is counterbalanced by the prestige and symbolic authority of chiefs entitled to speak on behalf of the community but not to assert effective control or accumulate means

of coercion. This division of authority would, however, be incomplete and unstable without a religious basis: the attribution of ultimate authority to mythical ancestors and an order created by them in a timeless past. On this point, Gauchet's analysis goes far beyond Clastres. The practical alterity, unalterability and integrity of the foundations identified with a mythical past are the defining characteristics of primitive religion, and they add up to the most absolute version of religious heteronomy. This account of religious limits to the separation of political power from society can also be read as a variation on Durkheimian themes: for Gauchet, the sacred is a self-projection of society, but he differs from Durkheim in stressing projection into the past, abdication of autonomy and blockage of institutional differentiation as constitutive features of primitive religion. The original primacy of religion is, in other words, a more indirect and self-limiting expression of social creativity than Durkheim thought.

The multiple restraints on power have momentous effects on all aspects of social life. Since there is no separate political centre to be conquered and used for strategic purposes, the role and scope of conflict is correspondingly reduced: the most effective resource and most attractive prize is absent. Conversely, the institutional framework contains inbuilt checks on competing ambitions which might threaten to activate power. Gauchet stresses the role of symbolic exchange as a sublimated and self-limiting form of rivalry. But the limits to strategic and conflictual action also affect social action in the most general sense. The symbolic anchoring of a total social order in a timeless past, as well as the institutional patterns based on this premise, exclude the very idea of constitutive or transformative action in the present. Furthermore, the radical dissociation of order from action affects the whole relationship between society and history. The unquestioned continuity of inherited norms and rules leaves no room for history as a specific dimension of experience and action. The all-encompassing institution of kinship should be seen against this background: as Gauchet (1975b: 73) puts it, kinship is 'the human order explicitly understood as succession', and the guarantee of unbroken transmission of the ancestral heritage. There is no denying that the ideas developed by Clastres and Gauchet need further debate and more detailed analysis of the evidence. Fieldwork on South American tribal societies was the main empirical source of Clastres' theories, and plausible claims have been made

with regard to other regions. Questions could be asked about varying historical contexts: protective devices against state-building may have emerged in primitive societies as a result of encounters with civilized ones, and the reconstruction of conditions prior to that stage is notoriously difficult. The theoretical argument as such would benefit from a closer connection with processual models of state formation (Clastres was more inclined to see the emergence of the state as a historical mutation), and with the conjectures of prehistorians who have suggested that it may be useful to think of early state formation as a reversible and renewable process. Yet another relevant question has to do with the perception and interpretation of power in primitive societies: a systematic effort to minimize the presence and meaning of power in social life would seem to presuppose a conscious rejection, but this cannot—ex hypothesi—be based on direct experience of power in action. Marc Richir (1987) has suggested an interesting but not self-evident solution to this problem: in primitive societies, power may be perceived as 'quasi-nature' and the dangers inherent in it assimilated to the natural forces which pose a permanent threat to social order.

In brief, the idea of 'societies against the state' and the interpretive constructs derived from it represent a novel and promising but still not fully developed approach to the study of primitive societies. For over purposes, however, its internal problems are less important than its implications for civilizational theory. On the one hand the emphasis on the interrelations of cultural and political patterns—and on the very peculiar shape which this field of inquiry takes in the primitive world—seems to fit into the framework outlined above in connection with Durkheim's and Mauss' concept of civilization. This would confirm and clarify Mauss' tacit extension of civilizational perspectives to the domains of prehistory and anthropology. On the other hand, the structural obstacles to action, change and conflict—noted by Clastres and Gauchet—also set limits to differentiation of the kind implied in the concept of civilization. In particular, the cultural variety of power structures, from the basic strategies of state formation to projects of universal empire, set civilized societies (in the more limited sense) apart from primitive ones; the same applies to varying visions of history and dimensions of historical experience. This is not to deny the diversity of primitive societies. A theory which stresses the cultural logic of their institutions, rather than any direct impact of external or internal nature, can by the same token

allow for differences due to inventive and adaptive variation. But the differentiation of cultural frameworks or societal types in the primitive world takes place on a small scale and—if we follow Clastres and Gauchet—within the strict limits imposed by the containment of power, the rejection of history, and the total authority vested in a mythical past. In view of this fundamental divide between two historical worlds, it seems appropriate to speak of civilizations in the plural only in regard to the large-scale patterns and complexes that are most frequently associated with this use of the concept, i.e. the historical field covered by the German term *Hochkulturen.* In this way, we will retain a connection between civilizations in the plural and civilization in the singular; what we can—most obviously—gain from the work of Clastres and Gauchet is a better understanding of the uniquely radical change brought about by the emergence of the state (the key factor in the transition to civilization), even if the stronger emphasis on state formation as a process must raise questions about historical boundaries.

2.2   *Max Weber: The comparative history of civilizations*

For the purposes of civilizational theory, Max Weber's comparative studies are without any doubt the most important substantive part of the classical legacy. A detailed evaluation of Weber's concrete analyses is, however, beyond the scope of this book. Some aspects of his interpretations of major civilizational traditions—Eastern and Western—will be discussed below in connection with the work of later authors who have drawn on them. But their arguments will also serve to highlight another side of the problem. Efforts to build a more systematic theory on more or less modified Weberian foundations are linked to conceptual innovations which reflect a critical view of Weber's project. Perceived gaps and short-circuits in his interpretive framework are to be remedied by a more complex set of basic categories. These double-edged reformulations of the Weberian agenda (most notably those of Nelson and Eisenstadt) can thus be seen as responses to a problem mentioned above: in classical social theory, the main body of metatheoretical reflections (beginning with Durkheim) is separate from the most seminal but markedly undertheorized attempt at comparative analysis. This disjunction is in keeping with the general lack of contact between Durkheim and Weber

which has been noted by historians of the sociological tradition. But as I will try to show, implicit cross-connections may help to synthesize insights derived from the two sources in a way that would also link up with contemporary debates in civilizational theory. There are, in other words, some reasons to claim a convergence of Durkheim's and Mauss' ideas with Weber's analyses, even if it is of a much more specific, limited and latent kind than the convergence postulated by Talcott Parsons and used as a launching pad for an all-encompassing version of general theory.

To substantiate this thesis, we must take a closer look at Weber's road to civilizational analysis. The overall framework of his theorizing—a plurality of large-scale cultural units identified in regional terms—suggests a rough parallel with the macro-social structures to which Durkheim and Mauss applied the concept of civilization, whereas the most fully explored aspects of his problematic—patterns, of rationality and processes of rationalization—reflect a more specific research interest and raise questions about further contextualization. The particular aims pursued and approaches preferred by Weber are more directly attuned to comparative history than those of the French school. It seems clear that his turn to a sustained study of non-Western civilizations was closely related to a change of direction in his ongoing efforts to grasp the distinctive character of the Western trajectory. In the *Protestant Ethic*, he argued that a religious reorientation had played a key role at a particularly crucial moment in the history of the West, and that the effects of this factor were best understood in the context of a pluralist and historical conception of rationality. The long-term rationalizing dynamic which Weber ascribed to the Puritan radicalization of Christian religiosity must be confronted with other lines of development; contrast and comparison are essential to the very understanding of the connection Weber wants to establish, and not simply ways of testing an empirical hypothesis about observable phenomena. And given that the focus is on the relationship between religious traditions and broader cultural horizons of rationality, the most obvious way to broaden the framework is a closer examination of the diverse civilizational complexes that tend to be defined—at least provisionally—on the basis of religious identities.

Weber does not use the term 'civilization' to demarcate the domains of comparative inquiry. Rather, he refers to 'cultural worlds' and 'cultural areas'. It might seem tempting to relate these two notions

to different levels of meaning (a cultural world would then be a more integrated and self-contained kind of cultural area), but Weber does not make a clear-cut distinction; both terms refer to regional and historical configurations such as the Chinese, Indian and Occidental world. It should be noted that the boundaries of the last-named area are not always drawn in the same way. In some contexts, the affinities between Europe and the Near East (especially with regard to the interrelated monotheistic traditions) count for more than the contrasts, and the most fundamental divide sets this enlarged West apart from the Indian and Chinese worlds. From other points of view, the Occident seems to be equated with a developmental sequence which begins in ancient Greece but culminates in northwestern Europe; here the 'cultural world' in question is a historical trajectory with a shifting geographical centre. The most restrictive—but not least relevant—conception of distinctively Occidental traits and trends has to do with the new phase that began with the rise of autonomous urban communities in medieval Western Europe. In that context Weber obviously wanted to stress the difference between Occidental Christianity and the less transformative Eastern branch of the same religion (but the absence of any reflection on the Byzantine world as a cultural complex is one of the more striking gaps in his comparative project). As these examples show, the ways of defining and demarcating cultural worlds depend on varying analytical perspectives. But the term is never used in a purely geographical sense; when Weber subsumes China and India (not the Islamic world) under an 'Asian cultural world', the main reason given for speaking of Asian unity is the omnipresent influence of Indian religions of salvation, not only in their strictly religious capacity, but also as cultural resources in a much broader sense (by comparison Chinese cultural influences are of minor importance).

In defining the tasks of comparative studies, Weber uses the concept of culture without any reference to the well-known German distinction between culture and civilization. The focus on culture reflects strong assumptions about the role of meaning in social life, but the emphasis is on the cultural patterning of social practices and institutions in general, rather than on any privileged domain. Since Weber's cultural worlds or areas are obviously to be seen as macrostructures which retain some kind of continuity and identity over long periods of time and across boundaries between smaller units, they represent the same level of social reality as the formations for

which Durkheim and Mauss reserved the concept of civilizations in the plural. In that sense, Parsons had valid reasons for translating the word *Kulturwelt* used—in relation to the West—at the beginning of Weber's most programmatic statement, as 'civilization' (Weber, 1968a: 13).

In the same text (ibid.: 23) Weber refers to his own field of inquiry as a 'universal history of culture'. If we want to spell out the conception of culture implicit in such statements, we must turn to Weber's metatheoretical and methodological writings; the most revealing formulations are to be found in his well-known but often misunderstood essay on objectivity (Weber, 1949: 50–113). This text is a crucial counterpart to the substantive study of religious traditions and rationalizing processes, begun at roughly the same time: if the *Protestant Ethic* represents a new turn in Weber's genealogy of the West and an opening move towards a comparative project whose scope had to be clarified in the course of further progress, the essay on objectivity outlines the interpretive frame of reference for the case studies and concrete analyses. The unity of the human sciences—and of Weber's own interdisciplinary programme—is based on a common reference to culture is there by contrast, no unifying notion of society or the social), and the core concept of culture is defined in terms which reflect a distinctive philosophical anthropology. The key statement stresses two aspects of culture in the most general and fundamental sense: 'The transcendental presupposition of every *cultural science* lies not in our finding a certain culture or any 'culture' in general to be *valuable* but in the fact that we are *cultural human beings* [*Kulturmenschen*], endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it *significance*' (Weber, 1949: 81; translation modified). Here the 'lending of significance' seems to be second to a 'deliberate attitude', but another formulation places a stronger emphasis on meaning: '"Culture" is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process [*Weltgeschehen*], a segment on which *human beings* confer meaning and significance' (ibid.: 81).

A 'transcendental presupposition' is a premise which structures the field of inquiry as such; the reference to the creation and imposition of meaning shows that this premise has to do with culture in the most comprehensive and constitutive sense; and when Weber speaks of a 'certain culture', as distinct from the constitutive traits of culture in general, that implies a variety of ways to channel and

concretize the human capacities in question. There are, to use the language of the second quotation, multiple segments of meaning and significance; and once this point is accepted, further questions about their comparative scale and status suggest themselves. The concept of civilization that emerged from our discussion of the French tradition would, in Weberian terms, refer to large-scale, durable and relatively self-contained segments.

Before pursuing this potential opening to civilizational theory, a few words should be said about the philosophical background to Weber's approach. The Neo-Kantian connotations of his key concepts are obvious and in line with a more general tendency of his work, noted by many interpreters. The question of other influences or convergences is more controversial. For our purposes, the acrimonious and inconclusive debate on Weber's relationship to Nietzsche can be left aside, but we may note in passing that the emphasis on the will and on the world as process (*Weltgeschehen*) suggest some affinity with Nietzsche's unfinished philosophy of interpretation. There is, however, another connection that might be more germane to our argument. When Weber refers to the world as 'meaningless' and to meaning as 'conferred', he seems at first sight to equate meaning with conscious intention, in a way reminiscent of his later definition of action from the viewpoint of the actor. But it has been shown, beyond all doubt, that his concrete analyses take a more hermeneutical line: he allows for horizons and constellations of meaning that go beyond the conscious grasp of the individual groups involved and thus remain open to interpretive efforts and conflicts. This implicit acknowledgement of a trans-subjective dimension relativizes the contrast between imposed meaning and meaningless world. Furthermore, the general definition of culture is evidently meant to capture a common ground which enables different cultures—in some degree—to understand each other, and which can therefore not be seen as a domain of sovereign and arbitrary world-making. Such considerations suggest a need for further reflection on being-in-the-world as the most elementary level of meaning.

If this admittedly sketchy and ambiguous problematic is the outcome of a transformation of the philosophy of the subject, and more precisely of the Kantian mainstream of that tradition (this part of Weber's genealogy is undisputed, whatever additions or correctives may have been proposed by some interpreters), a comparison with other such transformations would not seem inappropriate. The shift

from transcendental to post-transcendental phenomenology is of particular interest. Here the key figure is Maurice Merleau-Ponty; although his work did not tackle the substantive questions of civilizational theory, a highly suggestive connection between the phenomenological concept of the world and the idea of civilizations in the plural should be noted: 'It is a matter, in the case of each civilization, of finding the Idea in the Hegelian sense, that is, not a law of the physico-mathematical type, discoverable by objective thought, but that formula which sums up some unique manner of behaviour towards others, towards Nature, time and death: a certain way of patterning the world which the historian would be capable of seizing upon and making his own. These are the dimensions of history' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: XVIII).

This brief comparison with a major but unfinished philosophical project shows the reach of Weber's reflections. Their points of contact with later probings of largely unexplored territory should be borne in mind when returning to the question of implicit but unfulfilled guidelines for Weber's own comparative studies. As we have seen, he distinguishes two aspects of culture: the interpretive and the evaluative. The former has to do with the constitution and imposition of meaningful perspectives (or, to put it another way, with the opening up of horizons of significance), the latter with value-oriented dispositions towards the world and more or less integrated ground rules for action. A comparative analysis could begin with the diverse meanings and directions which different cultural patterns give to both sides. But the worlds or traditions to be compared can also differ in regard to their relative emphasis on the interpretive or the evaluative side, as well as their ways of relating them to each other. Finally, the difference between the cultural pattern and its world horizon (or, in terms closer to Weber's formulation, between a finite presence and an infinite absence of meaning) is not necessarily explicit; its constitutive role may be obscured by surface configurations. The rejection of an established culture in the name of an idealized nature, briefly mentioned by Weber, is a case in point: this attitude amounts to a culturally motivated inversion of the relationship between nature and culture. Weber's analyses of two fundamentally opposed modes of thought, magic and science, suggest other possibilities. The world as a 'magic garden' (*Zaubergarten*) is a total, all-embracing complex of meaningful relations; here the cultural core seems to absorb its natural horizon, but the subterranean survival of the distinction is

borne out by the vulnerability of magic to new cultural orientations. At the other extreme, modern science as a cultural enterprise appears to negate the very presupposition of culture as such. Its transformation of the world into a causal mechanism leaves no oasis of meaning untouched. But a closer look at this logic of demystification— the rejection of the very question of meaning in relation to a world consisting of things and events—might relativize its pretensions. It remains, in other words, to be seen whether its tasks and goals are not defined on the basis of a culturally conditioned and circumscribed image of the world.

The comparative perspectives opened up by Weber's interpretation of culture as a way (among others) of patterning human relations to the world are—up to a point—akin to those of the French tradition. For Durkheim, the plurality of civilizations was a conclusive argument against homogenizing constructs of human nature: civilizational patterns are not superimposed on an otherwise universal nature of human beings, but affect 'the fundamental substance of their way of conceiving the world and conducting themselves in it' (Durkheim, 1977: 324). The human condition is, on this view, open to different and in part incompatible cultural definitions, although Durkheim did not specify the contexts and dimensions of variation in the same way as Weber; more generally speaking, the French classical sources reflect a stronger interest in the social than the anthropological aspects of civilizational patterns. Conversely, the Weberian definition discussed above disregards the social context of culture. This is in line with the overall thrust of his most programmatic statements. For example, his well-known distinction between interests (which determine human action) and ideas (which give meaning and direction to interests) makes no mention of the institutional frameworks within which these two factors interact. Closer reading of his substantive works has shown a stronger focus on institutional patterns than the better known brief formulations might lead us to expect. But in the present context, it is more relevant that Weber failed to develop his early and incomplete but nevertheless clearly outlined concept of culture through direct contact with comparative studies; the road that might have led to a more balanced account of the relationship between cultural and social patterns was, in other words, never taken. Instead, a retreat to narrower views obscures the connections between Weber's project and the French ideas discussed above.

Weber's shift towards a more restrictive framework reflects a tacit but consistent decision to focus on one of the two dimensions of culture: the attitudes to the world. The main criteria used to distinguish the Western tradition from the Indian and the Chinese are defined on this basis. The dominant ethos of Chinese civilization favours adaptation to the world, in contrast to the religious rejection of the world which has—in one form or another—shaped both Western and Indian value-orientations; as for the main differences between Western and Indian lines of development, Weber traces them to different versions and long-term logics of world rejection: the monotheistic mode, characteristic of the Occident, does not *ipso facto* lead to the activist ethic of innerworldly asceticism, but it opens up the possibility of such an outcome, whereas the Indian alternative precludes it. As a result of this one-sided interest in evaluative attitudes to the world, interpretive patterns and their transformations remain under-theorized. This applies most directly to cognitive paradigms: in Weber's account of rationalization, philosophy has no specific place of its own, apart from its role as a precursor of science, and the changing cognitive models of science itself are less important then its lasting association with the project of rational mastery over the world.

A further narrowing of the focus is due to the unequal status of the major civilizational complexes. When all is said and done, the most authentic 'deliberate attitude'—the only example of cultural humanity opting for a sustained confrontation with the world, instead of accepting it in a more or less circuitous way—is to be found in an advanced phase of the Occidental tradition, marked by the cultural orientations of inner-worldly asceticism and activist rationalism. The normative concept of culture thus tends to converge with a transitory self-definition of Western culture. Finally, the erosion of religious foundations leads to the disappearance of the ethos which they served to support. This view is already evident in Weber's early portrait of the post-Protestant bourgeois, whose way of life gradually loses the character of a consciously chosen and rationally articulated attitude to the world. But his later discussion of science as a vocation makes the point in even more radical terms: an unquestioning confidence in calculating reason—the belief 'that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation' (Weber, 1970: 139)—replaces the value-commitment inherent in Puritan activism by a self-propelling and self-legitimating mechanism, combining a universal

instrument and an undifferentiated goal. This conviction (which should obviously not be confused with scientific inquiry as such) requires no moral position and no 'deliberate attitude'; it only asks for identification with a supposedly irresistible force.

Weber's comparative history of civilizations thus seems to begin with a contraction of cultural horizons and culminate in the diagnosis of advanced modernity as a tendential withering away of cultural humanity as such. But the unreflecting rationalism which undermines the value-ideas of autonomy and responsibility is inseparable from an overall interpretive shift which makes it possible to perceive the world as an object of control and calculation; Weber's failure to thematize this obverse of the advanced modern turn (and to analyze it as an interpretive extrapolation of scientific practice) reflects his more general tendency to downgrade the interpretive dimension of culture. An underdeveloped part of the initial project thus reappears as an unanswered question about the results. The ultimate source of these imbalances is an unsettled relationship between two problematics, rather than a mere conceptual lag. In brief, the major steps towards the neutralization of culture coincide with openings and landmarks of rationalization, and the uncontested predominance of the latter theme has obscured other implications of Weber's arguments. Those who read Weber primarily or exclusively as a theorist of rationalization were often tempted to translate his insights into the language of more or less openly evolutionary theory, and correspondingly disinclined to pursue the comparative analysis of civilizations. To strengthen their case, they reconstruct Weber's ambiguous concept of rationality in a way which makes it more easily separable from cultural contexts; such attempts may centre on a complex model of purposive rationality (Schluchter, 1981a) or on communicative foundations of rationality (Habermas, 1982). The ongoing debate on models of rationality and rationalization is beyond the scope of this book; but for the purposes of the following argument, some crucial implicit connections between culture and rationality in Weber's work should be noted. As I will try to show, Weber's fragmentary reflections suggest a constructive role of cultural patterns, and a pluralistic civilizational theory would be the proper framework for further discussion.

It seems appropriate to begin with Weber's most general—and provisional—definitions of rationality and rationalization; they are notoriously inconclusive but one of them is particularly adaptable to

our purposes. In connection with an overview of the economic ethics of world religions, Weber (1970: 293) distinguishes two patterns of rationalization (and, by implication, corresponding models of rationality as well as types of rationalism): the effort to achieve 'theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts' and the methodical pursuit of 'a given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means'. Logical and teleological rationality are, in other words, mutually irreducible. But Weber adds that the two 'very different things' are in the last instance inseparable. As his critics have often pointed out, he does not explain the nature of the connection.

If we want to explore the common ground, we should first clarify the dimensions and divisions of each side. Logical rationality must be set against a broader background: the elaboration of 'increasingly precise concepts' takes place in the context of more comprehensive interpretations of the world, and the varying horizons of more or less institutionalised meaning are not usually adaptable to the rules of theoretical reason. Formulations used elsewhere show that Weber applied the concept of rationalization to interpretive efforts which did not obey the logic of conceptual precision and cognitive growth. The most extreme case has to do with rationalizing developments within the framework of magic; more importantly, the rationalization of religious world-views—central to Weber's whole comparative project—is surely not reducible to the strict norms of theoretical mastery. The solutions to the 'problem of theodicy', which Weber places at the centre of this field of inquiry, are based on changing combinations of reasoned constructs, palliative devices to defuse perceptions of the problem, and attempts to put the issue beyond the bounds of questioning and understanding. In view of these and other interpretive formations, the notion of interpretive rationality in a broad sense may be used with reference to the articulation, explication and systematization of cultural patterns, and the differentiation of logical rationality from other aspects of this complex then appears as a matter for comparative analysis. On the other hand, Weber's definition of logical rationality contains an implicit reference to interpretive premises which remain in force, regardless of the level of differentiation: the status, meaning, prospect and criteria of 'theoretical mastery of reality' depend on a broader cultural context.

Similarly, teleological rationality can be subsumed under a broader notion of practical rationality. Weber's reference to 'a given end'

and 'calculation of means' suggests not only a strictly teleological conception of action, but a narrowly instrumentalist version of that view. In later debates around the theory of action, both the teleological model as such and its more restrictive offshoots (exemplified by rational choice theory) have come under sustained criticism. To mention only two major contributions, Jürgen Habermas treats purposive-rational action as both a particular type and an elementary structure integral to other types of action, whereas Hans Joas develops a more internal critique of the teleological model and theorizes the 'creativity of action' as a capacity to redefine means and ends in an ongoing and inventive confrontation with problems. Although Weber's explicit theory of action has not been central to such efforts, the results have some connection with his concrete analyses. Weber's interest in the interrelations of strategic action and broader patterns of the conduct of life (*Lebensführung*) centred on a specific (and particularly counter-intuitive) project: the search for affinities between economic ethics and visions of salvation. Weber's explorations of this problematic (only vaguely reflected in his distinction between purposively rational and value rational action focus on rationalizing trends and transformations in a comprehensive as well as a restrictive sense, i.e. with regard to both the overall horizons and orientations of action and the distinctive logic of action striving to maximize efficacy, control and utility. In the broader sense, rationality and rationalization have to do with the articulation of underlying premises. There is no pre-established harmony between that level and the more strictly goal-oriented fields of activity; the links which Weber constructs are often of a paradoxical kind. In the *Protestant Ethic*, he tries to show that a religious vision which in principle disconnected salvation from purposive efforts (that is the logic of the doctrine of predestination) was nevertheless conducive to an unprecedented breakthrough of purposive rationality in mundane affairs.

The expanded concepts of interpretive and practical rationality correspond to the two dimensions indicated in Weber's definition of culture: the interpretive patterns that lend meaning to the world and the value-orientations which lay down the most basic guidelines for action in the world. The above considerations suggest that the common denominator of rationality, invoked but not identified by Weber, might be definable in terms of a relationship to culture, rather than as a self-contained principle. The concepts of rationality and rationalization in the most general sense refer to the self-articulation,

self-explication and—at least potentially—self-questioning of culture. Given the existence of a plurality of cultures, self-articulation includes the interpretive confrontation of one culture with another. At this point, the problematic of rationality seems to translate into questions about the reflexivity of culture. Rationality—or rationalizing capacity—would, on this view, be an inbuilt but unequally developed aspect of culture, marked by an ineradicable tension between contextual foundations and transcontextual aspirations, and capable of developing in conflicting directions. The link-up with reflexivity allows us to introduce a theme which is largely absent from Weber's account of rationalization: cultural breakthroughs to higher levels of self-problematization, such as the Greek and late medieval Western innovations which Castoriadis describes as projects of autonomy.

Even the most elementary notions of rationality are thus implicitly linked to cultural premises and open to further differentiation on that basis. At the other end of the thematic spectrum (and from a different angle), Weber's reflections on the long-term logic of rationalization as a universal-historical process also point to an under-theorized cultural context. Activities, ideas and institutions can—as Weber often noted—be rationalized from different points of view, in divergent directions and for incompatible or even incommensurable purposes. The meta-context most suitable for a general definition has to do with the beginning and the end of interpretive world-building: for Weber, the history of human culture begins with an omnipresent and uncontested dominance of magic, but from the viewpoint of a modern world in search of its sources, the most important turning-points are the otherwise diverse innovations which directly or indirectly contribute to the long-term process of *Entzauberung*, i.e. the elimination of the original as well as the derivative forms of magic and—by the same token—the conversion of the world into an object of ever-expanding rational mastery. This perspective was central to the historical and comparative project which grew out of the *Protestant Ethic*. But on closer examination, Weber's particular emphasis on 'de-magifying' forces and processes—from Greek and Judaic beginnings to early modern religious, and scientific breakthroughs—is not without ambiguity. On the one hand, the constellations of meaning undermined and devalued by the dynamic of *Entzauberung* range from archaic origins to the much more refined and reflexive constructs of advanced civilizations. If the 'magic garden' can nevertheless be seen as a source and substratum of these

later patterns, that implies an ongoing process of cultural transfor-
mation which accompanies and counterbalances the more distinc-
tively anti-magical trends. And in view of the above reflections on
interpretive rationality, this other process has a rationalizing poten-
tial of its own. On the other hand, the vision of a radically and
thoroughly 'meaningless' but at the same time indefinitely conquer-
able world is a cultural project, rather than a self-sustaining ratio-
nal insight. Weber's well-known reference to the 'belief that we can
master all things by calculation' (Weber, 1970: 139) can only be
understood in such terms.

   The ultimate ambiguity of the rationalizing push against magic
and its offshoots is even more evident when Weber reflects on the
modern condition as a whole. From that point of view, the belief in
calculating reason appears as one of the rival orientations whose
multiple conflicts lead Weber to speak of a new polytheism ('de-
magified', to be sure, but also de-centred and de-totalized with regard
to the traditional Christian model of religious unity). The interpre-
tive project inspired and sustained by the practice of modern science
may be decisive and irreversible in the sense that it destroys the very
idea of a meaningful cosmic order, but it leaves the field open to—
and has to contend with—a plurality of more particularistic 'world
orders', linked to spheres of human activity (economic, political, intel-
lectual and aesthetic). Within Weber's frame of reference, no over-
coming of this fragmented modernity can be envisaged. In brief, the
final phase of rationalization not only throws the limits and counter-
weights to rationality into relief, but also confirms the irreducible
plurality of perspectives and directions conducive to rationalizing
processes.

   Having outlined the unfolding problematic of rationalization and
the persistent background reference to culture, we should now return
to Weber's comparative studies and the question of their relationship
to the privileged as well as the marginalized parts of the overall pro-
ject. Earlier interpretations, backed up by mainstream moderniza-
tion theory, often mistook the analyses of India and China for mere
counterexamples to the *Protestant Ethic*: on this view, Weber's only
aim was to show that the absence of one crucial rationalizing fac-
tor could explain the failure of major non-Western civilizations to
invent a modern version of capitalism. More recent reconstructions
of Weber's work have disposed of this thesis. But the different aspects
of his problematic are so unevenly developed and the theoretical

conclusions so tentative that it is difficult to avoid reductionist readings. The exclusive emphasis previously placed on Protestantism tends to shift to more broadly defined developmental patterns of a monotheistic religious tradition (the Protestant turn can then be seen as a reactivation and radicalization of the most transformative aspects of that tradition). This entails untenably simplified claims with regard to 'the Asiatic world' and 'the Asiatic tradition' (Schluchter, 1981a); to justify the stark contrast between West and East, Buddhism and Confucianism are—notwithstanding Weber's emphasis on the underlying 'acosmism' of the former—subsumed under the construct of a 'cosmocentric world view'. There is no denying that Weber's strong interest in the logical as well as the practical implications of religious ideas—not counterbalanced by any clear account of constants and changes in the relationship between culture and religion—is often difficult to distinguish from a priori assumptions about their primacy, nor that the legitimate and unavoidable use of the West as a starting-point can easily lead to amalgamations on the other side. But the restructuring of Weber's research project after the *Protestant Ethic* involves both an unfinished pluralizing turn and an ongoing but unsystematic reflection on unifying perspectives. To grasp the particular contribution of the cross-civilizational comparative studies, they must first of all be linked to other ways of broadening the framework; as I will argue, the various openings to new themes and horizons are interconnected, but neither equally developed nor adequately theorized.

As Weber moved beyond the horizon of the *Protestant Ethic*, he came to see the early modern interconnections of religious reform and capitalist development as a key episode in a longer and broader rationalizing process which drew on a wide range of religious and non-religious sources. The constellations thus brought into focus include combinations of cultural traditions (such as the ongoing interaction of Greek and Judaic contributions to the rationalizing process); interrelated dynamics of social-historical forms, some of which (e.g. the Occidental city) are of major importance to the breakthroughs of rationalization but incompatible with its long-term direction; and the complex of institutional innovations which mark the emergence of modernity (apart from the 'fateful force' of modern capitalism, Weber is at first mainly interested in modern law and bureaucracy). A pluralistic conception of the social world is thus inseparable from a pluralistic vision of history, and the emergent unity of rational-

ization must be seen against that background. The pluralistic under-
standing of the West and its genealogy guides Weber's approach to
non-Western civilizations; it is taken for granted that they must be
analyzed as changing constellations of interdependent factors, and
the particular aspects or connections singled out for closer inquiry
depend on the inbuilt choices of the comparative project, but the
lack of clearly defined concepts limits the scope of the argument.
Weber stresses the civilizational contrasts between forms and trans-
formations of cultural (especially religious) political and economic life,
but he does not pose the question of affinities and differences between
overall patterns of interdependence.

Weber's critics have often accused him of overdrawing contrasts
between West and East. This objection must, however, first be con-
sidered in the light of the fact that Weber's comparative studies deal
with two major civilizational complexes, the Chinese and the Indian,
and it is only at the end of the second instalment that he draws
some limited and tentative conclusions about the Oriental world in
general. The analysis of ancient Judaism is not of the same scope;
although Weber's work may to some extent be usable in support of
the idea of a distinctive Jewish civilization (Eisenstadt, 1992), his
aim—in the context of a larger project—was to clarify the particu-
lar case of a religious tradition whose indirect impact on later civi-
lizational patterns vastly exceeded its ability to transform its own
historical environment. As for Islam, critical reconstructions (Schluchter,
1987) have shown that Weber's unfinished and disjointed work in
this field was geared to more limited goals than his analyses of India
and China. Shared civilizational origins in the Near East, kindred
monotheistic traditions, and a long history of conflicts and contacts
made the Islamic world much less alien to the West; the contrasts
could therefore be narrowed down to bifurcations of a common
legacy, and there was, less scope need for an interpretive confrontation
of global constellations.

In the Chinese and Indian cases, it is implicitly taken for granted
that the 'cultural areas' or 'cultural worlds' function as distinctive
and substantially self-contained frameworks for rationalizing processes.
This does not mean that Weber 'compares civilizations as unified
wholes' (Van der Veer, 1998: 286); his analyses focus on specific
connections and single out particular aspects for a comparative view
which highlights parallels as well as contrasts. But the contrary claim
that Weber undertook 'no *comprehensive* analyses of cultures' (Schluchter,
1987: 25) is misleading. The Chinese and Indian worlds are clearly

perceived as comprehensive cultural formations and the discussion of their specific dynamics covers a wide range of distinctive features, although Weber's failure to develop his incipient theory of culture prevented him from tackling the question of cultural unity and difference in explicit terms. Neither the relationship between cultural, institutional and structural aspects nor the possibility that China and India might represent different versions of it can be thematized at the appropriate level. In short, Weber's treatment of whole civilizational complexes as objects of comparative study is deeply ambiguous: the underdevelopment of basic concepts makes it impossible to spell out underlying notions of cultural integration, but at the same time, it helps to immunize some tacit assumptions against the test of historical experience and leaves the reader with unanswered questions about the degree of primacy imputed to key factors (especially the religious side to the interplay of ideas, institutions and interests).

As we have seen, Weber's interest in two major non-Western civilizations reflects and reinforces—but does not complete—the pluralizing trend characteristic of his overall project. In addition to the issues already noted, a further question is clearly indicated in the titles of the two studies and obviously pertinent to both Chinese and Indian experience. The references to 'Confucianism and Taoism' 'Hinduism and Buddhism', and—more pointedly—to 'orthodox and heterodox conceptions of salvation' in India show that Weber was aware of the need to distinguish orthodox and heterodox currents within civilizational traditions, as well as of the different forms which this dichotomy could take in different civilizational context. But in both cases (albeit not in the same way), the concrete analysis of relations between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is overshadowed by one-sided and restrictive conceptions. Although Weber speaks of a distinctively Chinese world-view, jointly created by orthodox and heterodox currents, his account of the specific but subordinate role of Daoism reduces heterodoxy to an aggravation of flaws inherent in orthodoxy. If the ethical vision (and therefore the rationalizing potential) of Confucianism is limited by its inability to break with the magic universe of meaning and to challenge the popular religiosity which perpetuates the spirit of magic, Daoism is simply an inferior and less official version of the same compromise: the toleration of magic became an active cultivation. Daoist versions of the shared (and distinctively Chinese) notion of cosmic order are only briefly discussed and dismissed as a self-canceling alternative. According to Weber, the Daoist mode of Chinese thought—exemplified by

Laozi—began with a shift which made the idea of socio-cosmic order more conducive to withdrawal and indifference than to involvement and adaptation, but no coherent alternative to the role model of Confucian officialdom was developed, and the ethical message did not go beyond a hedonistic twist to Confucian utilitarianism. Both the original ambiguity and the subsequent inconsistencies of Daoist thought explain the absorption of its philosophical themes by an organized religion with strong links to popular culture: the institutionalized Daoism of imperial China was, as Weber saw it, based on a fusion of intellectual visions of escape from the world with traditional techniques of magic. Heterodoxy had become a semi-official domain of ideas and practices devalued by orthodox thought.

By contrast, Weber's analysis of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Indian world seems to stress paradoxes and polarizations rather than compromises. Buddhism—a world religion eradicated and forgotten in its original homeland—appears as the heterodoxy par excellence. But on closer examination, Weber interprets the teachings of early Buddhism as the most consistent and rationalized version of a more general Indian tradition of religious rejection of the world; given the paradigmatic status of Indian religiosity, Buddhism can even be seen as 'the most radical form of salvation . . . (*Erlösungsstreben*) conceivable' (Weber, 1958: 220). This very radicalism weakened its position with regard to the more adaptable religious culture whose core idea it had taken to extreme lengths. Buddhism could not compete with Hindu ways of accommodating popular religion and was therefore—in the long run—bound to lose out. But before it disappeared from the Indian scene, it had become a missionary religion. Weber notes some internal aspects (of a material as well as spiritual kind) which facilitated this turn, but the decisive factor was an external and contingent one: the rise of an empire which could use the new religion to strengthen its hand against the old social order. The empire proved ephemeral, but the religion retained the missionary dynamism which it had developed during a brief symbiosis with an aspiring universal state. Its success in East and Southeast Asia was, however, based on adaptive transformations analogous to those which in India had given Hinduism the advantage: visions of salvation were adapted to individual and popular needs and to the cultural.

In both cases, Weber thus adumbrates the problematic of conflicts and connections between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, but applies models which cannot do justice to the historical complexity of the

field. The same tension between interpretive horizons and analytical constructs marks Weber's treatment of many other themes. But one of them is particularly relevant to our argument. As Stefan Breuer (1993: 5–32) has shown, Weber's political sociology oscillates between a narrow and a broad definition of the state. The former is most evident in the identification of the state with the modern Occidental pattern of rational domination; here the main emphasis is on legal order and bureaucratic administration. The latter is used—or taken for granted—in comparative analyses, especially those which have to do with the patrimonial state in varying cultural settings. It refers to territorial control and the monopolization of legitimate violence for that purpose but Weber's most succinct general statement also includes the constitution of a political community—distinct from and going beyond the collective satisfaction of needs—as a defining feature of the state. Breuer's thesis is that a more systematic reformulation of the broader concept could pave the way for a critical reconstruction of Weber's political sociology as a whole. On this view, Weber's reference to the political community is best understood in the light of his idea of legitimacy, and the notion of a community united through recognition of authority can at the same time serve to correct the frequent misrepresentation of legitimacy as a mere command-obedience relationship. Since the state's claim to legitimacy is an exclusive or at least pre-eminent one, the 'concentration and centralization of internal grounds of justification as well as of external means' (ibid.: 23) appears as the core of Weber's concept of the state. This restatement has obvious affinities with Norbert Elias' account of the monopolizing processes essential to state formation, but it also entails a significant twist to Weber's well-known typology of legitimate domination. For Breuer, charisma becomes an object of monopolizing strategies, and their success leads to the transformation of charisma into the more regular patterns and mechanisms of tradition.

Breuer's account of the discrepancy between two lines of argument in Weber's political sociology is convincing, but his proposals for further theorizing are too one-sidedly dependent on the Weberian framework. A possible alternative can be outlined on the basis of a more critical reading of Weber's key statements, combined with a more explicit use of Elias' work. To put territorial foundations of statehood in more concrete perspective, we must consider them in relation to the extraction of resources; the pursuit of the latter goal gives rise to more or less selective monopolizing processes, and in

the historical context analyzed by Elias, the monopoly of taxation
was of particular importance (in other cases, direct monopolization
of natural resources or of strategic economic activities may be a
more significant part of the picture than in medieval and early mod-
ern Europe). As for control over the means of violence, Elias' model
is an obvious improvement on Weber's summary definition. The
monopoly of violence now appears as a basic and inbuilt impera-
tive but not as an elementary precondition; rival efforts to achieve
it result in complex long-term processes which in turn give rise to
power structures with ramifications and repercussions far beyond the
original strategic goal. But the notion of legitimacy, which Weber
links directly to the control over violence, has yet to be brought into
line with the more historical and comparative approaches to state
formation. If we accept the general idea that varying cultural inter-
pretations of power are a source of civilizational difference, it can-
not be taken for granted that the principle of legitimation—or the
need for legitimacy—constitutes a universal and invariant pattern;
rather, the question of cultural presuppositions built into the over-
generalized construct of legitimacy must be posed, and the possibil-
ity of cultural premises conducive to other ways of attributing meaning
to power—or to varying strength of the demand for legitimacy—
must be considered. Weber never confronted these problems, but
they could be related to a wide range of more or less developed
themes in his work. Finally, the question of the political community
and its relationship to the state can also be reformulated in more
flexible terms. Instead of the close and unchanging connections sug-
gested by Weber, a wider range of historical possibilities should be
taken into account. At one end of the spectrum, the state uses its
various interconnected monopolies (material and cultural) to maxi-
mize control over the political community; at the other extreme
(exemplified by the Greek *polis*), the monopolizing dynamics of state
formation are systematically minimized, so as to achieve or at least
approximate a fusion of the state and the political community.
Different cultural interpretations of power can be compared with a
view to their implications for these issues.

   This reconstruction and broadening of an implicit problematic
might serve as a model for the treatment of other under-theorized
themes in Weber's work, but here we cannot pursue the discussion
further. To conclude, however, it should be stressed that Weber's
overriding interest in modern capitalism and its cultural sources was

not simply an obstacle to the formulation of a more balanced agenda for civilizational analysis. It played a more positive role in that it enabled him to bring the questions of economic institutions in general and the modern economic transformation in particular into the domain of civilizational theory; this specific cluster of problems was left virtually untouched by the French authors discussed above, but it is obviously of paramount importance for any attempt to interpret modernity from a civilizational perspective. Nor can it be said that the focus on capitalism led to uncritical acceptance of Western modernity. Rather, the famous description of capitalism as the 'most fateful force of modern life' should be taken to imply an emphasis on ambiguous effects and uncertain results. If the impact of capitalist development on the human condition is ultimately unpredictable (as Weber argues in the final section of the *Protestant Ethic*, nobody knows who will inhabit the capitalist cage in the future), a comparison with other trajectories in other settings may at least help to clarify the issues. This position seems to me as distant from the naive liberal image of a triumphant economic man as it is from the Marxist vision of an anti-capitalist revolution which would complete the self-creation of humanity. Weber's awareness of open questions explain the caution of his introductory remarks on the comparative project as a whole. A distinctive trait of Western culture—its rationalizing capacity—is taken as a starting-point for considerations on universal history, but it is presented as a developmental direction, rather than as an established model or paradigm; and the claim to universal significance and validity is a qualified one: 'as we at least like to think'. It seems clear that basic assumptions about the meaning and consequences of Western civilizational dynamics were to be put to the test in the course of comparative studies.

2.3   *From Spengler to Borkenau: Civilizational cycles and transitions*

As we noted in the introductory chapter, sociological contributions to civilizational theory were too fragmentary and inconclusive to develop into an accepted branch of the discipline; the field was thus left open to another approach, much less concerned with conceptual foundations and more difficult to locate within the academic division of labour, although some of the authors in question have tried to legitimize their projects as exercises in comparative history.

This version of civilizational analysis (writings of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee are by far the best known examples) is often dismissed as a less reasoned and no more scientific postscript to the classical philosophy of history. It deserves closer examination on its own ground, but in the present context the discussion must be limited to a few salient points that have come to the fore in recent debates. The revival of civilizational theory often results in unreflected mixtures of sociological and non-sociological traditions (that applies, as we have seen, to Huntington's use of his sources); the following comments will focus on possibilities of a more constructive dialogue.

There are good reasons to take Spengler's morphology of cultures as a point of departure for this discussion (it is irrelevant to our purposes that Spengler reserved the term 'civilization' for the declining phases of cultures: his choice of concepts reflects a distinctive approach to a more widely shared strongly culturalist agenda, but this need not stand in the way of comparison on the basis of substantive affinities). Spengler made the case for civilizational pluralism in particularly extreme terms, stated his claims in open defiance of criteria current in the social and historical sciences, and made his version of civilizational analysis accessible to a much broader public than the academic pioneers had ever reached. The almost unanimous critical verdict of later scholars in the field is often accompanied by findings to the effect that Spengler raised new and pertinent questions, however unbalanced his answers may have been. Franz Borkenau, whose own reformulation of the same problematic will be considered below, sums up the strengths and weaknesses of Spengler's *Decline of the West* in very clear terms. On the one hand, Spengler is given credit for having thrown new light on cyclical processes of rise and decline by identifying cultures or civilizations—rather than states, nations or empires—as their substratum. On the other hand, his 'monadic doctrine' of cultures as closed worlds, structured around primal symbols and following a 'path from nothingness to nothingness' (Borkenau, 1981: 36) is rejected and shown to be incompatible not only with historical evidence of contacts and interconnections but also with Spengler's own assumptions about the structural similarities of higher cultures (exemplified by recurrent forms of social, political and cultural organization). Monadism may have been a tempting way to highlight the new approach to questions of decline and fall, but it must be abandoned if cyclical processes are to be analyzed from historical and comparative points of view.

Borkenau's argument is convincing in that it underlines the two issues that must be central to any critical discussion of Spengler's work, but qualifying comments may be needed. Although traditional views of cyclical processes tended to focus on states and empires, Spengler's shift to a cultural framework was not as unprecedented as Borkenau suggests. If we look for pioneering accounts of the rise and decline of whole cultural formations, Vico appears as a particularly seminal thinker. More direct sources of Spengler's main thesis can be found in the works of nineteenth-century historians who took a more or less explicitly culturalist view of the most prominent historical case in point: the fall of the Roman Empire, seen as a civilizational collapse (Demandt, 1984: 431–66). Spengler's distinctive contribution must therefore be defined in more specific terms. He did not discover the cultural dimension of cyclical patterns in history, but he reaffirmed its importance in a forceful and innovative way at a time when mainstream conceptions of history and society were (in contrast to more diffuse currents of opinion) notably disinclined to theorize cyclical processes. Recurrent trajectories of rise and fall could be recognized, but classical social theory tended to subordinate them to long-term trends; this persistent bias in favour of evolutionism even if not always fully articulated, was one of the obstacles to adequate understanding of civilizations in the plural.

That said, there is no doubt about the validity of Borkenau's second point: the idea of cultures as closed monads predestined to a finite lifespan is the most visibly vulnerable part of Spengler's project and the most obviously self-contradictory aspect of his attempt to extent historical understanding across hitherto unquestioned cultural boundaries. Although the vagueness of Spengler's references to remote cultural worlds has often been noted, his interpretations of those closer to his own in time and space involve claims to cross-cultural insights (a 'fusion of horizons', to use the language of philosophical hermeneutics) which subvert the construction of monadic wholes. But the mirage of cultural monadism is not simply a blunder that might be disconnected from the rest of the argument. It is inseparable from Spengler's most distinctive approaches and best understood as an extreme—and therefore in the end self-defeating—version of an idea which we have already encountered on the margin of the sociological tradition: the analysis of civilizational complexes in light of the world-constitutive role of cultural orientations. A brief

glance at successive layers of Spengler's problematic may help to link it to a less hermetic context.

   The first step is a strong emphasis on the symbolic dimension of culture. This is *ipso facto* an attempt to counter the levelling logic of theories which tend to minimize cultural difference: symbolic aspects are by definition more open to creative elaboration and less reducible to common denominators than rational or functional ones (even the later structuralist efforts to subsume the play of symbols under an order of signs had to allow for a trans-functional diversity which in the end proved uncontainable within the proposed framework). Some of Spengler's critics saw his interest in the symbolic as an ideological move away from the more fundamental domain of material repro- duction (Adorno, 1977), whereas others acknowledged that he had opened up a new field to be explored with more caution. The sym- bolic styles which set cultural areas and traditions apart from each other have patterns and trajectories of their own, irreducible to any underlying material dynamics (Kroeber, 1963: 163). But controver- sies on this level bypass the most provocative and potentially inter- esting aspect of Spengler's thought. His general shift to the symbolic serves to pave the way for the much more far-reaching claim that a particular culture (in the specific sense of *Hochkulturen*) centres on and gives expression to one primordial, unique and essential sym- bol. It would, however, be misleading to interpret this construct as nothing more than a way to impose identities and boundaries on the otherwise fluid networks of symbolic meanings. For Spengler, the *Ursymbol* has a more specific role to play: it articulates the distinc- tive access to and vision of the world that defines a high culture.

   This idea is developed through a reinterpretation of Kantian argu- ments. The primordial symbol appears as a patterning of the most elementary world-making forms, space and time. The most impor- tant dimension of space, overlooked by Kant, is for Spengler 'the direction . . . away from oneself into the distance, the there, the future . . . The experience of depth expands perception into a world' (Spengler, 1972: 223). This enriched notion of space can link up with time in a way not open to the artificially separated Kantian concepts. Varieties of direction and movement in the world have implications for the experience of time as well as space (in meta- physical terms, time is a more fundamental dimension of life, but on the historical and cultural level, it is the symbolization of space that transfigures and ultimately denatures time: 'Time gives birth

to space, but space kills time' (ibid.: 224)). Spengler's morphology of cultures reflects this symbolic fusion of the two dimensions: the hallmark of the ancient world is resting in the near presence, 'Faustian is the energy of direction focused on the most distant horizons, Chinese is the wandering forth which once will lead to a goal, and Egyptian is the purposeful walk on the road once taken', but similar distinctions can also be made with regard to the symbols of extension that result from the type of direction: 'for the ancient worldview the near, clearly delimited, self-contained body, for the Occidental one the infinite space with the thrust towards the third dimension, for the Arabic one the world as a cave' (ibid.: 225). As the quoted formulations show, the cultural cores of meaning can be approached from various angles. Spengler's insistence on the symbolic character of the most basic cultural premises poses a question which neither he nor his critics did much to clarify: a symbol is, by definition, conducive to interpretive elaboration, and the symbols that demarcate whole cultural worlds from each other might be more or less compatible with an acknowledged plurality, open articulation and explicit confrontation of such efforts.

But Spengler's main reasons for postulating a unifying symbol for every distinctive cultural world were obviously not of the kind most conducive to hermeneutical reflection. His conception of the symbolic relationship to the world highlights intuition and minimizes the scope of interpretation as well as translation. In view of this a priori disposition to think of cultures as self-contained wholes, it is all the more striking that the relatively few positive judgments of Spengler's work by later historians have noted his innovative treatment of problems related to interactions and transitional phases between cultures. His account of cultural changes after the demise of classical antiquity has been singled out as a significant improvement on earlier views: the idea of 'decline and fall' gives way to a more positive analysis of cultural reorientation, even if Spengler mistakenly included the post-imperial West in the domain of 'Magian culture' (represented by early and Eastern Christianity before culminating in Islam). Although this assessment (Vogt, 1967) does not raise the question of conceptual foundations, it seems clear that Spengler's new understanding of the end of antiquity is inseparable from the concept of 'pseudomorphosis' which he applied more systematically to this case than to any other one. Arnold Toynbee's brief reappraisal of Spengler (within the framework of a more extensive retrospect on his own

work) deals with the concept as well as the case, and it leads to interesting reformulations of the underlying issues.

At this point, we can rely on Toynbee's summing-up of what he sees as one of Spengler's most productive insights. The concept of pseudomorphosis refers, in the first instance, to a discrepancy between cultural creativity and cultural staying-power: 'the more creative civilization will be constrained to conform outwardly to the more powerful civilization' (Toynbee, 1961: 670). For Spengler, the relationship between early Christianity and Hellenism was a paradigmatic example. But Toynbee went on to generalize the notion and apply it to 'satellite civilizations' which he tried to incorporate into the revised version of his model. Here the 'outwardly conforming' culture is not necessarily a self-contained alternative to the dominant one, but it does retain an original and individual core. Both the Indianization and the later Islamization of Southeast Asia can easily be described in such terms. More provocatively, Toynbee suggests that 'an example of "pseudomorphosis" on an oecumenical scale is presented by the Western surface of the present-day world as a whole' (ibid.: 673). Western patterns and techniques were more or less systematically superimposed on all non-Western civilizations; but in all cases, from the earliest and most thoroughly destroyed victims of Western expansion (Middle American and Andean societies) to the most effective rival (Russia), there is evidence of unexhausted potential for cultural revival. In view of this undecided contest, Toynbee concludes his discussion—and his whole theoretical project—by stressing the relevance of Spengler's concept of pseudomorphosis to the coming phase of world history.

On the other hand, this vastly enlarged version of the concept is accompanied by a critical reinterpretation of the original evidence. As Toynbee sees it, the forces that reasserted themselves against Hellenic influence were of more ancient origin than Spengler's analysis would suggest (and if the genesis of Magian civilization is projected into a more remote past the whole story becomes implausible: neither Zoroastrianism nor Jewish prophecy can be reduced to mere precursors of a culture which postdates them by more than half a millennium). For Toynbee it makes more sense to describe the constellation in question as a unique case of several civilizations decomposing and at the same time acting as solvents of each other. The dissolution of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations was followed by a more complex and productive mutual disintegration

of Syriac and Hellenic ones. Toynbee describes this constellation as a 'cultural compost'; but the metaphor is hardly more than an indication of the difficulties we face when trying to conceptualize the interaction of disembedded elements from multiple context. The outcome is, however, theorized in clearer terms than the background. The post-civilizational pattern of interaction gave rise to two strictly universal, i.e. trans-civilizational religions, Christianity and Islam, and they became—in due course—the main determinants of new civilizational formations (Toynbee speaks of a plurality of civilizations within the Christian as well as the Islamic world). On a less important level, the blurring of boundaries caused by the demise of four distinctive civilizations affected the course of political history: as the record of the Islamic Caliphate shows, an imperial tradition originating from a particular civilization (the Mesopotamian one) could be adapted to new actors and environments. In short, Toynbee's reconsideration of the relationship between late antiquity and Near East leads him to emphasize the capacity of religious visions (and to a lesser degree, political innovations) to break out of civilizational moulds. These conclusions reflect and reinforce a more general change in his outlook; the broader background to the shift will be discussed below.

In the present context, however, we should first of all note the far-reaching perspectives opened up by Spengler's concept of pseudomorphosis, and try to relate this legacy to the more problematic aspect of his approach. It would therefore seem useful to go back to his original formulations. He is obviously aware of the fact that the absence of forms and techniques borrowed from older cultures is a rare exception rather than a rule, and the distinctive features of pseudomorphosis must be defined in more specific terms (the almost universal pattern of transfer and borrowing raises questions about the monadic model, but Spengler's main work leaves them unanswered). The civilization with which the concept is most closely associated (the Magian civilization, most lastingly embodied in Islam) stands out as having spatial and temporal contacts with almost all the others (Spengler, 1972: 785), but it is not so much this diversity of interactions as the dependence on a particularly overwhelming other that makes it the paradigm case of pseudomorphosis. If we examine Spengler's attempt to pinpoint the decisive aspect, they seem rather vague: we can, as he sees it, speak of pseudomorphosis when the borrowing culture cannot appropriate forms without surrendering

to them (ibid.: 277), and when the dominance of the other culture blocks the development of full self-consciousness (ibid.: 784). But since self-consciousness is—for Spengler—inseparable from ways of symbolizing the world, we may justifiably ask whether the blockage does not affect the very content of the primal symbol, and it is tempting to suggest that the particular symbol in question—the world as a cave—might have something to do with the condition of being imprisoned within the 'empty forms of an alien life' (ibid.: 784). It is clear that Spengler does not want to draw such extreme conclusions (he tries to identify details and moments that can be seen as authentic Magian breakthroughs). but for our purposes, it is more significant that he encounters the problematic of inter-civilizational contacts at a level where it must—at least implicitly—be tackled in terms of effects on, developments due to and constraints imposed by the world-making capacity of culture. As noted above, the importance of Spengler's work as the effective starting-point for a separate tradition of civilizational analysis has to do with his untenable but undeniably suggestive attempt to theorize cultures as ways of world-making; and we can now interpret the concept of pseudo-morphosis as the point where issues excluded by the monadic model—the problem of intercultural horizons of meaning—return to the surface. The context of this rediscovery makes it all the more intriguing: Spengler links it to the very civilization which had (prior to the global Western ascendancy) shown the most marked ability to impose it around rules on others.

As I will try to show, this unresolved tension between two themes of civilizational theory—mutually exclusive cultural frameworks and mutually formative intercultural encounters—is crucial to the projects and problematics of later authors in the loosely demarcated tradition that began with *The Decline of the West.*[1] But the most significant response to Spengler does not engage directly with the issues raised

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[1] There is, of course, much more to be said on Spengler's work. But it is not central to the agenda of this book, and more specific questions will therefore have to be left untouched. For the most interesting recent discussion of Spengler, see Farrenkopf (2001). It is worth noting that—as Farrenkopf shows—Spengler's last unpublished writings reflect an effort to move beyond the earlier model of cultural closure and towards a stronger emphasis on the cross-fertilization of cultures. But these second thoughts did not enter into the tradition discussed here. For Toynbee and Borkenau (as well as for some other writers), it was the over-totalized and cyclical model that aroused interest and provoked criticism.

above. Toynbee's implicit refusal to confront the whole of Spengler's project was, from this point of view, more significant than his explicit polemic against a part of it. He seems to have—from the outset—defined his programme as a more empirically oriented version of comparative analysis, respectful of the plurality of civilizations but not committed to a priori visions of closure and separation. As his critics were to point out (and he was later to admit), the first phase of his work fell short of this claim: he continued to work with a model which greatly exaggerated the self-contained dynamics of civilizations, and to see this construct as a universal and exhaustive key to history. But on another level, he parted company with Spengler in that he shifted the focus of inquiry from the cultural to the social aspects of civilizational identity. As one of his critics put it, 'his "civilizations" are societies, not cultures' (Kroeber, 1963: 126). The whole problematic of distinctive world perspectives was taken off the agenda.

A closer look at Toynbee's first outline of the argument to come may help to place his approach in a broader context. His critique of conventional history and its fixation on the nation-state has some affinity with later sociological reflections on the same theme, and the proposal to theorize an enlarged frame of reference in civilizational terms is reminiscent of ideas which had already been put forward by sociological classics, although there is nothing to suggest that Toynbee knew their work. But when it comes to conceptual articulation of the new framework, the assumption built into theoretical projections of the nation-state is restated on a larger scale: civilizations are to be identified on the basis of far-reaching self-sufficiency, i.e. a largely (never absolutely) self contained history. Toynbee's civilizations are, in other words, large-scale societies with enduring identities. Having taken this first step, the logical next one is to ask whether civilization can be defined more precisely through contrast with another type of societies; since Toynbee intends to limit his inquiry to the field circumscribed by civilization in the singular, he links this question to the fundamental dichotomy of primitive and civilized societies and sets out to identify general and constitutive features of the latter. After an inconclusive discussion of the role of creative minorities, at first sight incomparably more important in civilized than in primitive societies, he abandons this line of argument (the contrast between inventive and stagnant societies turns out to be less clear-cut than expected), drops the issue and goes on to

elaborate an inventory of civilizations in an intuitive fashion and with a minimal conceptual input. This interpretive framework was then applied to history, but had to be subjected to major revisions before the project was completed.

The details of Toynbee's second thoughts are beyond the scope of our discussion; a few comments on some of the 'reconsiderations' in the last volume of his *magnum opus* (Toynbee, 1961) will suffice to single out the points at issue. Briefly, both social and cultural aspects of civilizational patterns are now analyzed at greater length, but only in order to clear the ground for a concluding reformulation which stresses the importance of a third dimension—the religious one— and interprets it in a way that relativizes the very idea of civilizations in the plural and outlines a new project of comparative studies. On the social side, Toynbee returns to the question of institutions (previously dismissed on the rather flimsy grounds that institutions exist in primitive as well as civilized societies) and admits that societies—including those which constitute separate civilizations—must be analyzed as institutional networks, but beyond a brief definition of institutions as more or less formalized relations between persons, there is no further reference to conceptual problems or to the tasks of a comparative analysis of institutions (ibid.: 268–71). At the same time, Toynbee concedes that he had neglected the question of comprehensive patterns of culture and failed to appreciate Spengler's understanding of civilizational styles (ibid.: 598–601). But this highly significant self-criticism is not translated into any effective theorizing of culture; Toynbee quotes and accepts two mainstream definitions— focusing on non-hereditary regularities of behaviour and on shared values—without raising any questions about background assumptions or inbuilt choices. The whole problematic of culture as a way of relating to, opening up and making sense of the world is left untouched. Toynbee now insists on the inseparability of cultures and societies, and the impossibility of studying either apart from the other. But given the very narrow limits of his critical reflections on both sides, this statement of principle does not amount to a new beginning. A much more significant shift—already under way in the later volumes of *A Study of History*—is reflected in Toynbee's final comments on the relationship between civilization in the singular and civilizations in the plural. The latter are 'representatives of a class of phenomena' covered by the former term; a re-examination of attempting to define civilization in general shows how difficult it is to establish

clear criteria; Toynbee then suggests that this might be more under-standable if we accept that civilization is—in a fundamental sense—a phase of transition. He concludes with a 'declaration of belief that the goal of human endeavours . . . is something beyond and above civilization itself' (ibid.: 279). The goal in question is the universal human community envisaged in different ways by the higher reli-gions, and their 'declaration of independence', i.e. the effort to tran-scend the boundaries of particular civilizations—half-hearted in the case of Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, more consistent in the case of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam—can therefore be seen as the most decisive turning-point in human history. But the uni-versalism of the higher religions presupposes a claim to have gained a more adequate access to the spiritual dimension of the universe. Religion becomes the distinctive and definitive medium of engage-ment with a problem which Toynbee had previously left out of account when constructing a framework for civilizational theory: the demand and search of ways of lending meaning to the world.

In the end, then, Toynbee's comparative analysis of civilizations seems to represent little more than prolegomena to a comparative—and much more explicitly evaluative—interpretation of religions. But the conceptual problems posed by the transition from the first pro-ject to the second one are never tackled in a systematic fashion.

The two major attempts to construct a comparative history of civ-ilizations thus left a very ambiguous legacy. Spengler developed his key ideas in extremist and internally inconsistent ways which under-mined his claims to have worked out a new philosophy of history; Toynbee saw the road taken by his predecessor as a blind alley, but his own approach bypassed the most crucial problems, and the revised version of his theory left them behind. This inconclusive state of play was the starting-point for a third theorist, much less widely known yet in some ways more relevant to the tasks and questions of a soci-ological theory of civilizations. Franz Borkenau's incomplete and posthumously collected writings on civilizational theory do not offer a fully-fledged alternative to Spengler and Toynbee, nor can it be said that he makes full use of the insights to be found in the more sociological part of his work, but his proposed line of argument is defined clearly enough to indicate a constructive approach to the problems which Spengler left unsolved and Toynbee tried to leave aside. Borkenau's critique of Spengler begins with the observation that the theory of cultural monadism is most effectively refuted by

Spengler's own inability to apply it; when it comes to the details of comparative history, the shared and recurrent fundamental patterns of high cultures taking their natural course tend to overshadow the supposedly incommensurable contents of their particular worlds. Once this point is established, further conclusions follow. For Borkenau, 'the idea of a clearly defined beginning and end of each culture seems to stand and fall with the monadism' (Borkenau, 1981: 37), and the critique of the monadic model therefore entails a new perspective on transitional phases between cultures. Far from being mere intervals of no intrinsic significance, such intermediate periods can now be seen as historical openings to new sources and possibilities which may become more or less central components of mature cultures that emerge after the transition. If we accept the general idea of a creative potential inherent in passages from one civilization to another, there can be no a priori paradigm of cyclical patterns. But Borkenau notes the recurrent phenomenon of 'barbaric periods' between the downfall of a high culture and the rise of another. They are best understood as combinations of three processes: the decomposition of an earlier culture, the influx of forces and elements from more primitive surroundings, and ongoing efforts to synthesize selected aspects of the two sources. The synthetic constructs are often short-lived and self-destructive, but the trend is sustained enough to suggest that it might be useful to analyze the making of high cultures from this point of view: as a successful and comprehensive synthesizing process (unbeknownst to Borkenau, Spengler seems to have toyed with this idea in his unpublished last writings).

The idea of cultural creation as a synthesis highlights human activity and historical innovation; it casts doubt on the Spenglerian vision of predetermined cycles, and trajectories of rise and decline will therefore have to be theorized in more flexible terms. But some further implications should be noted. Although there is no explicit reference to Weber, a Weberian connection is evident in Borkenau's account of the civilizational conventions that result from a viable synthesis: as 'social choices', leading to 'the adoption of one style of life to the exclusion of others', they reflect the 'inescapable subjectivity, the ineluctable ambiguity of all human choice and action' (ibid.: 52). From this angle a civilization appears as a 'bundle of closely correlated beliefs and rules of conduct' (ibid.: 52), and although effective closure is by definition impossible (there is always a context of other possibilities and imperfectly integrated areas of life), inbuilt visions

of it can have a more or less formative impact on their respective cultural worlds. An emerging high culture strives to impose a unifying pattern—Borkenau also describes it as a style—on different but interconnected fields of social life. The level of integration achieved in practice depends on historical factors that can be analyzed in comparative perspective but not subsumed under a universal model. A late turn to open internal conflict and progressive disintegration is, in any case, prefigured by the very logic of civilizational fusion. Both the presence of disparate elements and the resistance of unassimilated or uncontrollable forces are conducive to tensions; at a later stage, this subversive dynamic may develop into a direct confrontation of alternatives and a radical questioning of basic cultural principles; finally, the erosion of cultural unity may culminate in a new encounter with the basic ambiguities and enigmas of the human condition. At this stage, the essentially contestable character of civilizational choices becomes fully clear, but by the same token, the disintegrating process reaches a point where a new cultural cycle must begin.

Although Borkenau obviously sees this model as a tentative outline, his inclination to generalize is unmistakable, and it seems linked to the most speculative aspect of his theoretical project. The notion of inescapable but always contestable visions of the human condition is backed up by reflections on attitudes to death in different civilizational settings, as well as on the anthropological background to them. Borkenau draws on the major themes—not the changing details—of Freud's metapsychology to argue that conflicting responses to death are built into the human psyche and must therefore be assumed to be at work in every culture. A certainty of immortality is constitutive of the timeless, a-causal and a-logical unconscious; but the unconscious also knows a premonition of death (misinterpreted by Freud as a 'death instinct') which experience transforms into a certainty of death. To sum up, 'although we cannot simultaneously imagine death and immortality, we have an inner certainty of both' (ibid.: 70). Borkenau goes on to suggest that successive generations of cultures may reflect fluctuations within this underlying, always ambiguous and never stable constellation of mental life. In particular, the 'death acceptance' characteristic of Hellenic and Hebraic cultures stands in stark contrast to the 'death transcendence' to which early civilizations (most notably the Egyptian one) had aspired; but it can also be shown that Hellenic and Hebraic attitudes owed

something to new trends that had come to the fore during the last phases of the preceding cultures, and a later return to a firm belief in immortality completes the cycle.

There is—in retrospect—no denying that Borkenau's proposed alternative to Spengler and Toynbee seems as prone to speculative overstretch as the earlier projects. We need not linger over the most obviously short-circuited parts of the argument. It is true that strikingly different attitudes to death developed in early civilizations as well as later ones, and that we still have no clear understanding of their relationship to other components of civilizational patterns. As for the reference to Freud, a thorough rethinking of civilizational theory would have to raise questions about the interconnections between culture, society and psyche, and no approach to that field can ignore psychoanalytical debates. Finally, new light might be thrown on such issues—and many others—if we could construct a model of 'culture generations', i.e. the sequences of distinctive but genealogically related civilizational patterns. In all these regards, Borkenau was venturing far ahead of sustainable claims: much more work on conceptual foundations would be needed before tackling the most recondite substantive issues.

But there is another side to Borkenau's speculations. His analyses of late antiquity and its early medieval aftermath show once again that the divergent transformations of the Roman Empire represent a particularly instructive case of civilizational dynamics, and a privileged starting-point for theorizing about the diversity and creativity of transitions. Borkenau's interpretations of post-Roman constellations are best understood as parts of an alternative to the Spenglerian notion of pseudomorphosis. Toynbee's first attempt to improve on Spengler's account, based on the arbitrary construct of a 'Syriac' civilization coming back to life after a long hibernation and culminating in the Islamic conquest, did not seem worthy of serious debate, and the revised version—discussed above—was not yet available). As we have seen, Spengler used a single concept to sum up questions relating to asymmetric encounters in space and incomplete transitions in time: an emerging civilization remained dependent on the cultural repertoire of an earlier one on whose periphery it had first taken shape. The spatial aspect is, however, primary in that the original encounter sets the course for subsequent developments. Borkenau reverses this perspective and sees the phases of transition as conducive to new patterns of interaction between old and new

civilizational trends; the dynamic thus released may lead to more or less inventive combinations which re-establish a self-maintaining civilizational framework. But he also resorts to the model of interaction between civilization and barbarism—more precisely: a decomposing but not uniformly obsolescent civilizational pattern and an overtly resurgent but latently disrupted barbarian periphery—as a typical mechanism of transition. From this point of view he can diagnose the Middle Eastern trajectory and aftermath of late antiquity as unusual in important ways, but not in the same sense as Spengler or Toynbee. Rather, the decisive atypical feature is to be found in the relationship between a particularly durable civilizational centre and a long-delayed but in the end exceptionally momentous self-assertion of the periphery. The Eastern part of the Roman imperial domain was in the short run more resistant to disruptive trends than the Western one and in the longer run more capable of far-reaching readjustment without a collapse of the centre; the input from the barbarian margin was at first correspondingly limited, but when the breakthrough came (with the emergence and instant expansion of Islam) it took the unique form of a universal religion spreading through tribal conquest and becoming the most formative ingredient of a new civilizational synthesis. On this point, Borkenau's very tentative conclusions seem to be confirmed by the most recent work on the origins of Islam.

But the model in question is obviously more applicable to developments in the West. Without relinquishing the insights derived from changing perspectives on the Eastern transformation, Borkenau thus returns to the view that the Western one provides a better starting-point for comparative analyses (in contrast to Spengler who had used the construct of a supposedly cross-regional Magian culture to interpolate a whole historical layer between the end of antiquity and the beginnings of the Occident). As we have seen, Borkenau's account of the interaction between a declining civilization and an ascendant barbarian periphery stresses the disruptive impact on both sides; there are no intact tribal structures on the barbarian side, no irreversibly progressive trends at work within the civilized heartland, but a whole 'world of floating cultural wreckage' to be reassembled without guidance from given premises or frameworks. But when it comes to the details of the post-Roman road to Western civilization, a further element is added to the picture: the role of a more remote northwestern periphery, little affected or loosely controlled by imperial power and

not directly involved in the early aftermath of Roman rule, but capable of significant contributions to the new religious and civilizational patterns that took shape over a longer period of time. Among Borkenau's reflections on this theme, three lines of argument seem particularly relevant to current debates on the genealogy of the West.

First, the origins of Western Christianity—as a religious tradition and, in due course, a civilizational framework—are analyzed from a very distinctive angle and in a broad historical perspective which suggests comparison with better-known genealogies of the West (to the best of my knowledge, no attempt as so far been made to bring Borkenau's work into debates on that subject or draw on it as a source of alternatives to the Weberian and anti-Weberian approaches which dominate the field). The starting-point is a striking difference between early Christian traditions in two parts of the empire. Only in the East was there an indigenous development of Christian religious life on the levels of doctrine and organization, based on an ongoing elaboration of foundations laid during the most creative phase, and open to regional differentiations which foreshadowed later schisms. The West was, by contrast, much less receptive to Christian beliefs, dependent on their Eastern version, and at first characterized by a closer association of Church and state after the fourth-century conversion of the imperial centre. A partial but significant exception was the early growth of the African Church: here a particularly disciplinarian conception of church life, obviously indebted to the experience of Roman military discipline but probably rooted in local traditions that can no longer be plausibly identified, took shape long before the alliance of Church and empire and set the region apart from other western provinces. This peripheral vanguard of the Western Church was, however, dependent on the East for theological grounding, and it only developed a higher doctrinal profile when it had to face a challenge from the other extreme of the Western periphery. The Pelagian heresy gave rise to 'the biggest and longest drawn-out controversy of Western religious thought and practice' (Borkenau, 1981: 294). Although the precise location of its origins is unknown, its Northwestern connections are beyond doubt, and the persistence of a Pelagian current in the Irish Church is well documented. Augustine's response to the Pelagian threat, commonly seen as a formative moment in the history of Western Christianity, was—as Borkenau sees it—characterized by a very acute awareness of the crucial issue (the problem of salvation), but remained dependent on Eastern

theology for its defence of baptism as a basic sacrament, and the new emphasis on predestination was too fraught with problematic consequences to be fully compatible with the main body of Christian doctrine.

The ideas directly or indirectly at issue in Augustine's attack on Pelagius suggest a broader contrast between two cultural worlds of Christianity: if 'the deepest impulses of the Christian civilizations come out in the voices of their heretics', the characteristic—i.e. both permanently formative and potentially subversive—tendencies of Eastern and Western Christianity can be defined in provisional but historically opposite terms: 'Gnosticism is the constant lure, the inherent heresy, of the East. Conversely the West is obsessed with practical moral perfection' (ibid.: 304). The Eastern focus on salvation through the mystery of the incarnation facilitated the rise of a radically deviant religious culture (Gnosticism in the specific sense) and led—at a later stage—to recurrent schisms within the main body of the Church; the Western turn towards a more inner-worldly and practical path was reflected in the doctrinal and institutional profile of a Church that made history in a more autonomous fashion than its Eastern counterpart, but also conducive to deviations which finally took the heretic impulse beyond the bounds of Christian tradition. On the other hand, the Augustinian response to the very beginnings of a recurrent heterodox strain shows that it would be misleading to think of the two Christian civilizations as symmetrical patterns of coping with internal problems: the Western version is derivative in that it matures later and depends on inputs from the East at crucial moments, but unique in its capacity to transform and transcend the original mould. Augustine's emphasis on baptism reveals a limited but significant link to Eastern traditions as an ultimate recourse against the most innovative strivings of the Western periphery. But this Western use of Eastern theological resources in a different context culminated at a much later turning-point. The mid-ninth century affirmation of the dogma of transsubstantiation, crucial to the whole later doctrinal history of Catholicism, coincided with a new effort to draw on the models of Eastern (more specifically Syrian) theology, a new stage in the institutional separation of Rome from Byzantium, and a short-lived attempt to assert papal political supremacy in the West. Borkenau sees this episode as an anticipation of the more sustained push for reform and papal hegemony from the eleventh century onwards.

   This brief outline should suffice to illustrate the originality of
Borkenau's argument as well as its affinities with other variations on
the same theme: although this unfinished account of the Christian
origins of the West has so far gone virtually unnoticed by those who
continue to debate the issue, it calls for comparison with better-
known interpretations, and it is easily defensible against the objec-
tions often raised in order to discredit the very idea of a genealogy
centred on religious sources. More specifically, there is nothing essen-
tialistic about Borkenau's approach. He stresses the internal plural-
ity of the Christian tradition as well as the importance of historical
situations which brought different currents into contact and conflict;
the maturation of a distinctive religious culture in the West appears
as a long-drawn-out process which combined inputs from different
regions and traditions, and unfolded in close connection with changing
power structures; a particularly formative episode (the ninth-century
consolidation of the papacy on doctrinal, institutional and political
levels) is linked to a conjuncture which did not last but left a legacy
that could be reactivated in new circumstances. In all these regards,
Borkenau opened up lines of inquiry which suggest further analysis
of historical contexts and trajectories.
   The two other themes to be noted can be treated more briefly.
On the one hand, Borkenau's reflections on the origins of individ-
ualism in the Western tradition raise questions which have some
bearing on more recent approaches to this problematic. His specu-
lation on linguistic evidence for the rise of 'individualism of an activist
type' (ibid.: 200) must be left aside; they touch upon a whole range
of issues which cannot be explored further without interdisciplinary
contact of a kind so far untried. We are on somewhat safer ground
when it comes to social and cultural preconditions. If we accept that
the equation of individualism and modernity is untenable, and that
premodern patterns of individuality and processes of individualiza-
tion may have long-term implications for the constitution of mod-
ern forms, there are good reasons to take a closer look at post-Roman
and early medieval developments. Borkenau's analysis of this part of
the road to Western civilization centres on the consequences of col-
lapse and disintegration. As he sees it, the conventional view of
medieval civilization as a synthesis of Roman and barbarian lega-
cies has obscured another side of the picture: the mutually rein-
forcing dynamics of decomposition on both sides, affecting the tribal
order (already modified by prolonged contact with the empire) as

well as the whole complex of institutions and conventions built up under Roman rule. During the first post-imperial phase, this de-civilizing process was of much greater importance than any constructive innovations. The breakdown of rules was conducive to individualization in the negative sense of mutual isolation and general insecurity, culminating in what Borkenau takes to have been an age of predominant paranoia. But the loss of collective controls and bearings could—although this turn is never clearly explained—pave the way for the Christian creation of a new order which grafted a more constructive sense of individual responsibility onto the anomic legacy of the dark ages.

More importantly, however, the decline of imperial power had destabilized the remote periphery and triggered changes which had no direct impact on the processes unfolding in the continental domain lost to invaders, but were to prove important for later developments. When the imperial army retreated from its only insular outpost, the vacant space was open to other claimants. Overseas migration to the British Isles changed their ethnic profile and the course of their history (this may in fact have happened on an even larger scale than Borkenau thought: migration from Ireland to Britain seems to have unsettled Irish society to a greater extent than earlier historians assumed). The fifth-century wave was followed at a later stage by the Nordic overseas migration, which Borkenau saw as 'a natural expansion and continuation of the Saxon one' (ibid.: 181). His thesis is that 'the transition from land migration to overseas migration' (ibid.: 182) led to a more thoroughgoing dissolution of the pre-existing tribal order, and thus released an individualizing potential that could be channelled in different directions in different places: the ascetic ideal took hold in Ireland and inspired the unique Irish contribution to the Western Church, whereas the pagan culture of Scandinavia expressed its nascent individualism in competitions of prowess.

On the other hand, Borkenau notes the intriguing historical connections between the individualist legacy of invaders from the north-western fringe and their state-building activities in more central regions. Norman rulers (in Normandy, England and Sicily) played key roles in the political formation of medieval Western civilization, and some of their achievements were ahead of their time; but they came from an environment where the 'rejection of all subordination and practical rationality had been most complete' (ibid.: 432). Borkenau analyzes this paradox in light of simultaneous transformations in

other fields (among other things, his interpretation of the *Chanson de Roland* singles out the contrast between archaic and rationalized models of knightly conduct). The primitive but vigorous individualism of the Vikings could not simply be suppressed; it had to be transformed and made amenable to the discipline demanded by state-building strategies. But this reeducation of an ill-adapted elite depended on intellectual and moral resources drawn from a Church which had already embarked on its own path of empowering reform and proved capable of absorbing a less worldly version of the activist spirit. Sketchy as the argument is, it has an obvious bearing on the ever-controversial question of feudalism. No account of the feudal order can ignore the crucial role of Norman elites in its maturing and diffusion; Borkenau's analysis suggests that feudal institutions may be best understood as a central but neither self-contained nor durably structured field of interaction between the forces and projects that were reshaping the course of Western European history.

PATTERNS AND PROCESSES

Our short and selective survey of ideas developed outside the sociological framework has singled out promises as well as difficulties: the loosely textured tradition that began with Spengler (but did not give rise to any sustained dialogue with his work) can in retrospect be credited with some efforts to thematize problems neglected by the sociological classics, although the results fall far short of a balanced synthesis. On the other hand, the Spenglerian and post-Spenglerian approaches to civilizational analysis were often sensitive to historical cases and trajectories of the more atypical kind, and this resulted in insights which foreshadowed a more comprehensive revision.

   More recent developments in civilizational theory, linking up with the classical legacy after a long interval but still far from exhausting its potential, should also be seen against this background: the authors and ideas to be discussed below relate to the ambiguous record of the other tradition in explicit or implicit ways, and possibilities of further connections will be explored. But responses from yet another quarter must also be considered. Since the speculative constructs of Spengler and his successors reached a broader audience than the sociological arguments, they also provoked more principled objections; at the same time, those who set out to reassert the unity of history—or at least a prospective unity of inherent trends or directions—often had to qualify their case and admit new evidence of civilizational pluralism. The themes and issues thus added to an older problematic are, as will be shown, crucial to the understanding of contemporary civilizational theories as well as to the formulation of questions which they have yet to tackle. In particular, the visions of history as a continuous, periodical or possible movement beyond the boundaries of civilizations tend to reveal—in a more indirect fashion—the enduring importance of diversity. The paths which supposedly open onto a new arena also lead to rediscoveries of divergent horizons.

3.1 *Exits and openings*

William McNeill's reinterpretation of global history is perhaps the most significant counter-project that took shape in direct opposition to the cyclical models proposed by Spengler and Toynbee. But when he described his relationship to the two main advocates of multi-civilizational history as comparable to Marx's treatment of Hegel, he was also stressing the need to preserve an essential lesson learnt from their work. The search for cyclical patterns in parallel cultural universes had served to broaden the historical horizon beyond traditional Eurocentric limits, and the critique of radical pluralism should not cause us to forget the new ground broken by the most influential authors in question. McNeill set out to show that Spengler and Toynbee had not disposed of the history of civilization in the singular, but it could now be written in full awareness of the global perspective which they had opened up. Although 'the rise of the West as a long-term process' (McNeill, 1986) was still central to the whole narrative, a closer analysis would link the dynamics of this development to a broader context—first Eurasian and then world-wide—within which centres and regions had interacted and succeeded each other in leading roles. Moreover, the triumph of the West took on a less narrowly defined meaning as it transformed the rest of the world: the crowning achievement was the diffusion of Western inventions, rather than the much more precarious dominance of Western power (McNeill, 1990). In line with the view taken by Spengler and Toynbee, the modern transformation is thus seen as an integral part of the Western trajectory, but McNeill is much more inclined to stress the spread of modernizing processes beyond their original setting. The ascendant West is, in the last instance, better understood as an unrivalled spearhead of civilization in the singular—exceptionally capable of pooling lessons from other cultures and even more unique in its ability to reverse the process and set the agenda for others—than as a particular civilization prevailing over others.

As McNeill sees it, civilization in the singular 'expanded because most people most of the time preferred the enhanced wealth and power that civilized patterns of society conferred and this despite the inequalities of status and income that specialization involved . . .' (McNeill, 1986: 60). But the focus on power—and on wealth as another kind of power—also entails a strong emphasis on learning.

The pursuit of power depends, most decisively, on skills, inventions and receptivity to the achievements of other actors in the field. The development of human skills takes various directions in response to different environments, and this enduring source of diversity retains its importance throughout successive stages of history, but the shift from independent invention to borrowing as the main impetus to change is crucial. For McNeill, that trend is already evident in the set of transformative processes which gave rise to civilization in the Near East, and the emergence of the first civilizing centre—Sumer— is soon followed by the crystallization of sub-centres which ensure further diffusion. The historical turning-point commonly seen as the first breakthrough of civilization in the singular thus sets the scene for a derivative but not irrelevant development of civilizations in the plural: they are reduced to adaptive and reinforcing offshoots of the mainstream. Last but not least, civilization in the singular appears as a network of communication between multiple centres, and in this capacity, it enhances and rationalizes the pursuit of power.

In later writings, McNeill expanded and refined this model in various ways, without changing his main line of argument. He explored the questions of civilization as a global process from new angles; in particular, he went on to distinguish between two main phases. The 'urban transmutation' that completed the transition from primitive to civilized societies was—in due course—followed by a 'commercial transmutation' which began at the dawn of our era, on the basis of imperial consolidation in East and West, and led to a growing economic integration of the Eurasian ecumene as well as a progressive strengthening of market structures against imperial and bureaucratic mechanisms of control (McNeill, 1980). The notion of a long-term, inter-cultural and inter-regional dynamic of commercial growth opened up new lines of inquiry (among other things, it prefigured later efforts to apply the model of an emerging economic world-system to pre-modern history). On the other hand, McNeill became increasingly aware of the ecological contexts of history, and of the complex— often destructive—processes initiated by human intervention in ecological patterns. His work on this subject touches upon a whole set of issues that have yet to be brought into closer contact with civilizational theory.

But for present purposes, it is more important that the pluralistic concept of civilization tends to reappear as an indispensable analytical tool of global history. A minimalist version of pluralism was

already implicit in the emphasis on learning and borrowing: if the
acquisition of skills and the invention of techniques are central to
the progress of civilization, the formation of different sets of skills in
different settings makes it possible for multiple centres of develop-
ment to learn from each other. We could, in other words, speak of
separate civilizations at least in the sense of distinctive variations on
the common theme of adaptive innovation. Such differences are, as
McNeill notes, reflected in correspondingly diverse lifestyles. Further
reflections on the Eurasian ecumene and its history raised doubts
about this view. On the one hand McNeill now argued that a cos-
mopolitan framework had been developing—and undermining the
autonomy of separate civilizations—since well before the beginning
of our era; on the other hand, civilizations were—on closer exami-
nation—too 'internally confused and contradictory' (McNeill, 1998:
31) for the analogy of style to be appropriate. But at the same time,
the growing weight given to a global network of communication also
brought to the fore another aspect of particular civilizations. Although
they are never closed cultural worlds, their responses to the increas-
ingly cosmopolitan environment depend on their internal patterns of
communication (they can be seen as regional specifications of evolv-
ing communication systems), which in turn depend on normative
frameworks of values and institutions. For McNeill, this form of inte-
gration—always superimposed on a variety of more local cultures—
is inseparable from 'common subjection to rulers, whose continued
dominion was much assisted by the fact that they subscribed to a
set of moral rules, embodied in sacred or at least semi-sacred texts.
This, it now seems to me, is the proper definition of a "civilization"'
(ibid.: 30).

   Although he still wants to confine civilizations in the plural to a
residual role, McNeill is thus led to single out a set of phenomena
that have figured prominently in other accounts and lend themselves
to less restrictive interpretations: a ruling elite, unified and charac-
terized by cultural orientations whose authoritative expression is to
be found in sacred texts. As he sees it, the cultural aspects of this
constellation are an integral and subordinate part of the power struc-
ture: they facilitate consensus among the rulers and acceptance by
the ruled. But this claim obviously depends on more far-reaching
assumptions about the social world. At this point, we need only note
the most basic questions that can be raised and have been answered
in other terms by more culture-centred theories of civilization. The

cultural (and in a broad sense religious) patterns that serve to inte-
grate and legitimize an elite may also be seen as more or less artic-
ulate interpretations of human being in the world, and compared to
other such visions. It is not a priori obvious that all interpretations
will be equally adaptable to the demands and dynamics of power
structures. If the interpretive context transcends it ideological uses,
the question of inbuilt critical potential cannot be ruled out of court,
and civilizations or traditions differ significantly with regard to their
capacity to translate such resources of meaning into more or less
institutionalized cultures of dissent and protest (this is, as we shall
see, a major theme in the most important recent contributions to
civilizational theory). McNeill is, of course, well aware of the inter-
pretive conflicts which always accompany sacred texts, but he tends
to dismiss the whole issue as another symptom of the internal dis-
unity of civilizations.

   The return to a global history of civilization in progress thus ends
on a rather inconclusive note; it has, however, highlighted problems
and opened up perspectives that call for further consideration. Other
indications of themes to be explored come from a very different
source. McNeill's critique of misguided cyclical models was closely
linked to another change of direction: a 'reaching downward' (McNeill,
1986: 197) in order to bring the material infrastructures back to their
proper place. Cyclical delusions were, on this view, symptoms of a
spiritualist refusal to confront the real driving forces of history. But
an equally determined rejection of the cyclical paradigm could be
based on the opposite premise: the claim that Spengler, Toynbee
and their followers had not taken the spiritual trajectory of human
history seriously enough. Eric Voegelin's critique of Toynbee is per-
haps the most forceful version of this argument. Toynbee had wanted
to treat ancient Judaism as part of a broader 'Syriac' civilizational
complex, but found it difficult to dispose of this peculiar case with-
out allowing for a 'line of spiritual enlightenment' which continued
to draw on Judaic sources and cut across civilizational boundaries.
Voegelin went on to argue that this anomaly pointed to a more fun-
damental tension between the civilizational and religious dimensions
of human existence in history. The radical rearticulation of the rela-
tionship between humanity and divinity that began with Mosaic
monotheism gave a new meaning to history and led to a break with
the symbolic premises which had set civilizations apart from each
other: 'history is the exodus from civilizations. And the great historical

forms created by Israel, the Hellenic philosophers, and Christianity did not constitute societies of the civilizational type' (Voegelin, 1956: 133). The Jewish Exodus thus became an originating paradigm of successive transformations which took the historical form of existence beyond eternal recurrence of cultural cycles; as for the Hellenic philosophers, the interpretation proposed here hinges on the assumption that their break with cosmological myth is best understood in the light of the Jewish breakthrough.

Voegelin had a metaphysical and theological agenda of his own, but his critique of the cyclical model is to some extent separable from that background. At the very least, it draws attention to ambiguities inherent in the relationship between civilization and religions. On the one hand, the formative role of religion—with regard to world-views as well as institutions—is often seen as a reason for identifying civilizational complexes with religious traditions; analysts who otherwise disagree on key issues often fall back on religious factors when they need a criterion of civilizational identity. On the other hand, the religions that matter most in history—those commonly known as world religions—are characterized by universalist claims and expansionist dynamics which seem to challenge the very idea of civilizational boundaries; if we nevertheless want to retain a civilizational frame of reference, it becomes difficult to decide whether the civilizational pattern in question should be equated with the explicit project expressed in religious terms, the underlying network of particular orientations that become more visible when the project is confronted with rivals, or the broader historical—ipso facto limited and limiting—context of religious impulses at work.

The sequel to Voegelin's first encounter with Toynbee shows how complex and fundamental these problems are. Toynbee revised his model and elaborated his own version of the exodus: as he now saw it, world religions—especially the more genuinely trans-cultural ones, which grew out of innovative but ethnically embedded traditions. But as we have seen, this change of approach was not reflected in any sustained reassessment of the conceptual framework that has served to guide the comparative study of civilizations. From the present point of view, the changes to Voegelin's philosophy of history are more interesting. The attempt to grasp the order of history through a history of order (i.e. through a reconstruction of progressively more differentiated paradigms of order) had to be abandoned, and Voegelin was left with a more open-ended and ambiguous vision

of emergent meanings. This entailed a more qualified account of the Jewish achievement, previously singled out as a unique and decisive turning-point. Without doubting the significance of the revelatory word as a new mode of experiencing transcendence, Voegelin now rejected the widely held view that Judaism had broken new ground—and marked a new beginning of history—by attributing divine purpose and meaning to a unilinear course of events. Different versions of 'historiogenesis'—accounts of the origins of social order, based on mythical transfigurations of more or less systematic records of past history—emerged in all early civilizations, and the same form had been imposed on the potentially transformative experience of revelation. But the uniqueness of Israel and revelation could also be questioned from another point of view. The tension between spiritual innovations and traditional forms turned out to be characteristic of civilizations outside the Judaic and Hellenic orbit, most notably the Indian and Chinese ones, and the object of inquiry had to be redefined: it now appeared as a 'pluralistic field of outbursts' (Voegelin, 1974: 5), where discoveries of or encounters with transcendence were articulated in different ways and at the same time subject to reinterpretations which tended to align them with pre-existing patterns of cosmological symbolism.

   This line of argument led Voegelin to reconsider the question of the 'Axial Age', as Karl Jaspers had called it: a few centuries before and after the middle of the last millennium BC, which had seen a series of remarkably simultaneous changes to world-views and modes of thought in major civilizational centres. For Voegelin, Jaspers's notion of an Axial time reflected a misguided vision of history advancing on a single line, and Toynbee's objections—linked to his preference for a longer history of universal religions—suffered from the same handicap. The task of a more discriminating analysis was to make sense of multiple breakthroughs, each of which involved a distinctive access to dimensions beyond pragmatic history, but also to explain the interaction between historical and spiritual experiences. The aspirations to empire-building on an ecumenic scale (in the west, this trend began with the Persian empire and culminated in the Roman one) had a double-edged impact on religious and ethical life. On the one hand, they undermined local cultures and prompted further questioning of inherited traditions; but on the other hand, spiritual energies could be harnessed to imperial projects (to use Voegelin's more evocative language: the conflation of exodus and conquest was

an ever-present temptation). The imperial levelling of boundaries and uprooting of cultures also provoked other forms of resistance, including the currents which strove to absorb the Axial breakthroughs without accepting their most radical implications. Multi-civilizational syncretism is, for Voegelin, a defining feature of the Ecumenic Age (from the rise of Persia to the fall of Rome) and Gnosticism is the most significant case in point.

This late pluralistic turn cast doubt on Voegelin's initial premises and left his project in a very inconclusive state. Here we need not discuss the difficulties faced by those who argue for a Voegelinian paradigm or a Voegelinian revolution (Sandoz, 1991). But the changing perspectives on religions and civilizations are instructive: an uncompromising defence of one true religious path beyond civilizational bounds gives way to growing awareness of the complex interrelations between religious horizons and civilizational contexts. Both this general issue and the particular problems of Axial transformations were to become central themes of new—and more sociological—contributions to civilizational theory.

The search for a trans-civilizational dynamic or dimension can, as we have seen, focus on material foundations as well as spiritual summits of history, and in both cases, the results raise questions which no restatement of civilizational theory can bypass. A third twist to the same line of argument must now be considered: the obvious global thrust and apparent universalism of the modern transformation suggest that here the meanderings of history might have ended in a more genuine exodus from the civilizational stage. The discussed interconnections of cultural and material factors in the formation of modernity can then be seen as evidence of a multi-dimensional build-up to the breakthrough. But mainstream modernization theory was—consciously or not—too committed to the idea of civilization in the singular for this question to be put on its agenda. There was hardly any significant reference to the universe of discourse that had taken shape around Spengler and Toynbee. For pertinent and original reflections on the modern world seen against the civilizational background, we must turn to less conventional sources. The following discussion will centre on a very peripheral and long virtually unknown, but still astonishingly topical text: an essay on Toynbee's *Study of History* and its implications for modern times by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, written in 1955 and for obvious reasons unpublishable at the time.

The starting-point is the question of contrasts between primitive and civilized societies. As Patočka (1996: 243–46) reads Toynbee's statements on this subject, civilizations represent a higher level of historicity (a new ability to question and judge inherited traditions is added to the preserving and re-enacting stance of primitive humanity) and a new pattern of differentiation. Primitive societies are vastly more numerous than civilizations, but the originality of each type and the variations from case to case are much less pronounced. Every civilization is a civilizational type in itself, and although the identification of particular forms of life with the human order as such is obviously not alien to primitive societies, it becomes more explicit and ambitious in the case of civilizations: each of them claims the status of civilization par excellence (it might be objected that some civilizations are more ecumenic in principle and practice than others, but Patočka does not discuss such differences). In short, the higher historicity of civilizations finds expression in more conscious and sustained efforts to create whole worlds in their respective images.

Patočka's next step is to note that the world-constitutive capacity of civilizations involves the exercise and organization of power, and that a comparative analysis is best based on this highly visible outward feature. This emphasis on power is a significant departure from Toynbee's model, and it has far-reaching consequences for the whole field of inquiry. Patočka objects to theories which make power synonymous with force in general (this is implicit in interpretations of power as a transformative capacity or ability to achieve desired ends). A more specific definition would focus on force exercised on and through people ('every power is power over people, and the source of this power is force'—Patočka, 1996: 244). But although this stress on the inter-subjective nature of power is reminiscent of Weber, Patočka adds distinctions and qualifications which give a more original twist to the argument. Two basic criteria serve to classify the main forms of power. On the one hand, it can be exercised indirectly through external factors (in a conditioning, constraining or sanctioning mode), or directly through internal acceptance and alignment. On the other hand the exercise of power may follow habitual and unquestioned rules, but it can also take a reflexive turn and open itself to rationalizing processes. Both direct and indirect power are rationalizable, and in both cases, rationalization leads to awareness of limits as well as to the search for ways of overcoming them. There is, however, one crucial difference between direct (internal)

and indirect (external) power: only the direct mode can also make active use of irrational forces and unite rulers and ruled in common 'emotions of awe, fear or anguish, enthusiasm' (ibid.: 245). Although Patočka makes no reference to the Weberian concept of charisma, the affinities are obvious; but here the charismatic dimension has to do with a fundamental form of power as such, rather than with a way of legitimizing it. This shift towards a closer identification with the power in action does not mean that the cultural aspect of charisma disappears. Patočka links the direct and irrational form of power to the cultural nucleus of civilizations: their visions of an order and a meaningful pattern to be imposed on the world. These imagined world orders lend themselves to the communicative but trans-discursive exercise of power. And since all traditional civilizations are built around a religious core (in the sense that patterns of meaning and projects of order are anchored in a relationship to the sacred) it seems clear that charismatic force must play a correspondingly privileged role in their efforts to assert themselves and prevail over others. The fusion of particular meaning and irrational commitment is the most effective weapon that can be put at the disposal of civilizations in quest of hegemony. But this source of strength is also a limiting factor: the particular identity that takes shape around every civilizational pattern is bound to clash with other such identities and fall short of universal reach.

   Against this historical background, Patočka proceeds to consider the question of modern civilization and its specific status. The focus on power and its modalities serves to sustain fundamental objections to Toynbee's a priori treatment of modernity as a civilization among others. Modern forms of life have vastly surpassed all previous waves of expansion and attempts to achieve universal primacy; there is, moreover, an obvious connection between outward success and an unprecedented inbuilt ability to rationalize the exercise of power in all dimensions. Here Max Weber is mentioned for the first time and given credit for identifying rationalization as the crucial constitutive feature of modernity (a less explicit reference lists Marxist analyses among the relevant efforts to grasp this point). The impact of rationalization is most obvious on the levels of technology and organization, but modern science—the unending methodical pursuit of knowledge—is an integral part of the same process, and a particularly important one in that it opens the traditional domain of charismatic power to the dynamic of rationalization. The new cognitive

culture, centred on scientific models and procedures, undermines traditional world-views and modes of thought, and thus changes the conditions for a direct exercise of power. Religion and philosophy do not disappear, but they are forced to adapt to a changed cultural environment. In view of all these innovations, it seems appropriate to describe modernity as a 'super-civilization' (ibid.: 247), and more specifically as a rational super-civilization. Modernity would, on this view, be the real and final 'exodus from civilization', and the obliteration of traditional cultural boundaries would be a combined effect of rationalizing trends in all areas of social life.

Patočka does not rest content with this conclusion. The most interesting part of his argument casts doubt on the claims to have moved beyond civilizational pluralism. To begin, he notes that this issue has polarized the self-interpretations of modernity. Those who accept the finite and incomplete character of every rationalizing move are by the same token amenable to compromises or dialogues with premodern traditions, and capable of efforts to maintain or reconstruct these surviving sources of meaning. The recurrent attempts to establish a modus vivendi between science and religion is only the most conspicuous aspect of a broader interest in counterweights to the expansion of rationality. A civilization unrivalled on its own ground thus acknowledges a residual but persistent dependence on the legacies of less powerful predecessors. Patočka uses the term 'moderate super-civilization' to describe a culture where this attitude prevails. On the other hand the temptation to construct a self-contained image of modernity leads to mythologizing projections of rationality as an absolute authority on all questions of intellectual as well as practical life. This 'super-civilizational radicalism', as Patočka calls it, can appear in different forms and articulate its claims in more or less extreme ways. At a turning-point in Western history, two paradigmatic versions emerge almost simultaneously: the Jacobin vision of a comprehensive rational reordering of social life (for Max Weber, this was the archetypal charismatization of reason) and the much less emphatically revolutionary but no less uncompromising project of radical utilitarianism. For Patočka, however, the problematic of radical rationalism is obviously best exemplified by the theory and practice of Communism. Here the paradox of an unconditionally self-affirming and for that very reason unintentionally self-limiting super-civilization becomes fully visible: the doctrine that claims to represent a complete scientific world-view develops into a secular

religion which resembles the belief systems of traditional civilizations
in its dogmatic closure and resistance to questioning. Its role in the
accumulation of power thus follows the same pattern and suffers
from the same limitations as the earlier forms of charismatic mobi-
lization. The very attempt to complete modernity's triumph over all
other civilizations (and over civilizational difference as such) results
in a particularistic regression which brings super-civilization closer to
the condition of one civilization among others.

Patočka's preference for what he calls the moderate form of modern-
ity is obvious (only this version is open to explicit and public artic-
ulation of its internal problematic), but it should not be mistaken for
uncritical acceptance. As he notes, the moderate paradigm has its
own inbuilt dangers of regression. The inherent limits of every ration-
alizing project may be perceived or presented as grounds for sub-
ordinating rationalization in general to particular interests and identities,
defended in traditionalistic terms (this part of the argument has some
affinities with Mauss' reflections on particularistic threats to the
incipient convergence of civilizations). The possibility of particular-
istic turns is built into the very historical framework of modernity
from the outset (the privileged role of particular centres provokes
defensive and competitive reactions on the periphery), but some
specific cases stand out because of aspirations to chart an alterna-
tive path to modernity. For Patočka, this is the key to the deepen-
ing rift within the European world in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century. In Central and Eastern Europe, premodern elites
adapted nationalist ideas to enhanced imperial ambitions and thus
set a whole region on collision course with the West.

The particularist short-circuiting of tradition and modernity is not
the only threat to Patočka's moderate paradigm. His critique is also
directed against self-misunderstandings coming from within the most
established and seemingly least contaminated currents of modern
thought. Positivism and liberalism, linked together by shared empiri-
cist premises and jointly central to the dominant cultural model of
the West, are—as Patočka would like to show—already on the road
to civilizational decline and therefore vulnerable to the challenge of
radical rationalism. This is one of the most interesting aspects of
Patočka's analysis, but the underlying ideas remain somewhat unclear.
To begin, empiricist modes of thought are criticized for not doing
justice to the principle of *distinction* as defining super-civilization. But
what Patočka has in mind is, more specifically, a redrawing of the

boundary between the sacred and the profane, the irrational and the rational, as well as the finite and the infinite. All historical civilizations were to some degree based on theocratic foundations, in the sense that sacral elements were more or less prominently involved in the human exercise of power; only the modern super-civilization aspires to (which is not to say that it invariably achieves) radical discontinuity. Although T.G. Masaryk is not quoted, the allusion to his distinction between traditional theocracy and modern democracy is unmistakable.

There are, however, other sides to the ontological distinctions in question. The finite character of rationality does not foreshadow an end to rationalization, but it sets limits to the range and depth of all rationalizing processes: they remain dependent on trans-rational inputs and contexts, and the diversity of such preconditions renders the idea of a self-contained civilizational project illusory. The principle of distinction, with particular emphasis on the contrast between the finite and the infinite (which Patočka seems to regard as more decisive than the other polarities), is thus an antidote to holistic self-images of modernity. But a new understanding of finitude as a defining characteristic of the human condition can also become a corrective to liberal individualism. The vision of the human being as a 'self-conscious atom (ibid.: 290) obscures more fundamental aspects of finite existence: the embeddedness in trans-individual relations to other human beings and to the world, as well as the open question of transcendence (or, as Patočka prefers to call it, 'transcensus') in a more far-reaching sense, which a self-consciously finite reason can never pretend to disregard.

Patočka's wide-ranging but inconclusive reflections are obviously inspired by a specific diagnosis of his times. Liberalism and socialism appear as complementary forms of civilizational decline (ibid.: 194), and the first step towards a critique of their respective strategies of closure is a cultural reorientation. The idea of a self-limiting secularization, reinstated as a regulative principle of modernity, would reopen and perpetuate the mutual interrogation of philosophy, science and religion. At the same time, the absence of a complete and binding self-image would ensure a permanent opening to the traditions of historical civilizations. The implications of this philosophical twist to civilizational theory are not explored at any length, but a significant comment on the tasks of contemporary thought should be noted. Patočka dismisses both dialectical materialism and the less

clearly defined cluster of empiricist currents as 'negative metaphysics':
in both cases, an overt rejection of metaphysical premises is com-
bined with a covert reproduction of the metaphysical mindset. If the
logic of 'super-civilization' calls for a genuine overcoming of meta-
physics, it also demands a redefinition of this task as a matter of
permanent and open-ended questioning, rather than a replacement
of one set of premises by another.

These considerations do not go beyond a programmatic survey of
issues which have yet to be brought into closer contact with civi-
lizational theory. But to round off the discussion of Patočka's ideas,
a few words should be said about his critique of existing modern
societies. Apart from the regressive and self-impoverishing tenden-
cies mentioned above, both versions of modernity are beset and
undermined by internal contradictions. With regard to the Western
model, Patočka gives only a brief indication of his programme for
a critical theory, and it centres on an unusual combination of rad-
ical and conservative ideas. Marx's analysis of the accumulation of
capital is accepted, as far as it goes, i.e. as an account of the grow-
ing monopolization of economic power, culminating—beyond Marx's
explicit conclusions—in managerial control. Patočka then links this
'dialectic' of economic life to a parallel dialectic in the political sphere;
here he stresses the accumulation of power behind the facade of
democracy, and invokes Plato's critique of democracy as a pioneer-
ing insight. When it comes to the existing radical alternative, i.e. the
Soviet model (in its mid-fifties phase of incomplete transition from
autocracy to oligarchy), the critique is more detailed, but its focus
shifts to the level of social psychology. Briefly, the self-defeating dialec-
tic of totalizing radicalism is evident in its tendency to reproduce
and aggravate the very problems which had been singled out by
critics of its moderate rival: alienation, atomization, and a break-
down of communication between the public and the private sphere.
A regime aiming at total control through levelling mechanisms pro-
vokes defensive strategies which disrupt the links between state and
society; at the same time, the drive to impose conformity creates an
atmosphere of generalized mutual suspicion; the overall result is a
radical separation of public pretensions from private lifeworlds.

In the present context, there is no need to deal with further
ramifications of Patočka's argument. But the key themes outlined
above will be revisited from other angles. Most importantly, the
analysis of modernity's double-edged civilizational status opens up

theoretical perspectives which may prove useful for a more socio-
logical approach. Patočka's 'super-civilization' is, as has been shown,
both more and less than a civilization in the original historical sense:
more in virtue of its unique rationalizing capacity and its consequent
power to outperform all premodern cultures in the most crucial fields
of contest, less because the rationalizing turn has self-limiting impli-
cations which lay the modern world open to adaptations, reactiva-
tions or imitations of traditional patterns. This inbuilt ambiguity
enhances the variety of modern cultures, institutions and structures.
They reflect not only the dynamics of different historical settings,
but also the logics of varying solutions to the omnipresent problem
of civilizational identity. And if we follow Patočka's line of argument,
a widespread wish to create or at least imagine a self-contained
modernity has the paradoxical effect of pulling modern societies back
into the orbit of tradition: closure can only be achieved at the price
of restrictive choices which may be presented in universal terms, but
are inevitably grounded in particular perspectives and therefore prone
to rivalry. Divergent modernities can thus take on the likeness of
civilizations in conflict. The plurality of possible alternatives in this
vein is a permanent source of differentiation and the polarity which
prevailed in the mid-twentieth century world—the historical back-
ground to Patočka's reflections—was not the only conceivable global
outcome.

   Patočka's ideas on civilization and modernity were formulated
within a philosophical framework and bear the imprint of particu-
lar philosophical traditions, especially the phenomenological one. It
remains to be seen whether they can be developed in a direction
which would make them more compatible with the sociological
approach to civilizational analysis. The most convenient way to pur-
sue that question is, as I shall try to show, a dialogue with theories
which have encountered the same issues in different contexts and
gone some way beyond the very tentative arguments of Durkheim,
Mauss and Weber.

3.2   *Benjamin Nelson: Civilizational contents and intercivilizational encounters*

The otherwise disparate approaches discussed above converge on a
fundamental point: they question or relativize the idea of civilizational
pluralism on the basis of interpretations of universal history. More
specifically, the cross-cultural dynamic of historical breakthroughs—

variously dated and defined—is stressed to such a degree that all
boundaries between civilizations become questionable; this line of
argument is developed with critical reference to Toynbee and the
tradition which he represents, rather than to the sociological classics
who did not deal explicitly with the questions of civilizational clo-
sure and opening. At the same time, the critique is cautious enough
to admit the persisting reasons for speaking of civilizations in the
plural, and even to hint at new ways of doing so. The next round
of debates to be considered centres on attempts to revive and update
the sociological approach to civilizations, but the ideas developed
with that end in view also reflect a keen awareness of questions
raised by historical inquiry. Although there are virtually no explicit
rejoinders to the authors discussed above (and Patočka is, for obvi-
ous reasons, absent from the debate), the views which their work
exemplify are—as I will try to show—taken into account and seen
as challenges to be met by a more adequate version of civilizational
theory. A substantive connection can thus be made without any need
to document direct influence.

Benjamin Nelson's unfinished framework for a comparative analy-
sis of civilizations, most directly influenced by Max Weber but open
to ideas from other classical sources and responsive to changing his-
torical circumstances, has attracted much less attention than it mer-
its. It pinpoints issues and opens up perspectives which have yet to
be explored in a systematic fashion. For present purposes, the most
promising key to Nelson's problematic may be the notion of inter-
civilizational encounters; he seems to have been the first theorist to
use this term as a basic concept. In a very general sense, it provides
a unifying focus for the abovementioned points of criticism. This
applies most obviously to McNeill's idea of a historical turning-point
where borrowing from others becomes the most important way to
innovate: such a shift presupposes an enhanced ability to interact
with other cultures and a growing diversity of experiences to learn
from. But Voegelin's 'exodus from civilizations' through religious
transformations also involves encounters across boundaries: the uni-
versal visions reflect particular backgrounds and adapt to others in
the course of their expansion, even if the ultimate goal is a union
beyond civilizations rather than communication between them. Finally,
the image of modernity as a 'super-civilization' suggests a process of
global diffusion which disconnects the new pattern from its regional

context of invention and imposes it on diverse preexisting cultural worlds.

A theory which proposes to analyze encounters between civilizations without downgrading the plurality of civilizational patterns would therefore seem well placed to renew the debate. But a closer look at Nelson's writings will leave some basic questions open: he never defined the concept of intercivilizational encounter in clear and precise terms. It could even be argued that the vagueness of the notion is intentional and linked to Nelson's most fundamental reasons for defending what he called a 'civilization-analytical perspective'. He repeatedly attacked 'uniformitarianism', the obliteration of diversity in the name of abstract schematisms and stereotypes, as the most pernicious self-misunderstanding of advanced modernity (Nelson, 1981: 241–73). The uniformitarian trend was not limited to ideological systems which claimed total authority; rather, the drive to homogenize, uproot and pre-program is common to otherwise different currents and opposite parties in ideological conflicts, and it is inseparable from efforts to control. Although this diagnosis of our times—put forward in the early 1970s—never went beyond a broad outline, Nelson clearly wanted to suggest that totalitarian temptations can come from various quarters. The critique of 'uniformitarianism' can also be read as a statement on the very raison d'être of civilizational theory: if the uniformitarian drift—obviously seen as a perverse variant of rationalization—is an inbuilt deformation of modernity, a theory which stresses civilizational difference—as the most far-reaching form of human diversity—can aspire to play the role of a major intellectual corrective. In other words, Nelson's version of civilizational analysis has a critical mission which should be kept in mind when we consider its more specific claims. The reluctance to specify the meaning of intercivilizational encounters in advance may be due to this critical stance: only further experience of encounters could bring about a better understanding of human diversity.

There is however, no doubt that Nelson was thinking of interactions of the kind which relate to large-scale structures (hence the frequent reference to 'civilizational complexes' in connection with intercivilizational encounters) and—more particularly—involve, challenge or transform the structures of consciousness. And with this latter concept we are on much firmer ground. Typologies, developmental models and sustained case-studies of structures of consciousness are

central to Nelson's work. The most convenient starting-point is a distinction between three basic types which recur across boundaries in space and time. To avoid identification with particular traditions or trajectories, Nelson refers to the patterns in question as consciousness-type 1, 2 and 3. The first type is described, with explicit mention of both Durkheim and Weber, as a 'sacro-magical structure of consciousness' (ibid.: 93); it is characterized by a thoroughgoing fusion of cosmic and social order, of individual and collective orientations, and of cognitive and moral rules of conduct. The second is a 'faith-structure of consciousness' (ibid.: 94), exemplified by the passage from Judaism to Christianity, but also by Gnostics and Sufis (there is no explicit reference to cases outside the domain of monotheistic traditions, but it may be assumed that Nelson did not want to exclude that possibility). This category is clearly meant to relativize Weber's distinction between world-rejecting and world-affirming religions and to emphasize common characteristics due to a decisive breakthrough: 'The key to the faith-structures of consciousness is that individuals committed to faith feel themselves to be part of the truth, a manifestation of the divine in expression of the universal will or sovereign design' (ibid.: 95). But this new mode of religious life can lead to 'a new legitimation of the inherited patterns in the sacro-magical prescriptions or . . . to a radical devaluation of the activities of the world and produce the patterns that Weber ascribes to other-worldly asceticism' (ibid.: 94–95). It is compatible with—but does not necessarily entail—extreme specialization of religious virtuosi, and such developments sometimes culminate in ultra-elitist notions of transmoral consciousness.

Nelson is, however, less interested in differentiations within the second type than in its role as a background to the third one. 'Consciousness—Type 3' is a result of and a response to conflicts within the faith-structures. Its key characteristic is a rationalizing turn, provoked by disagreements 'as to the contents of the faith, the evidence of the faith and the implications of the structures of faith and action, belief and opinion' (ibid.: 95). Nelson's favourite example of this last breakthrough—preceded by a prime case of the second type—is the transformation of Western European thought in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This intellectual mutation began—paradoxically—with a self-misunderstanding effort to reestablish unity and certainty, in the face of growing disagreement on questions of belief and conduct. The first major codification of the new struc-

tures was a universalistic theology; in retrospect, it may be seen as a prime science and a matrix of further scientific innovations. Theological discourses embodied a model of systematic rationalization that could spread from its original context throughout a broader social environment; more specific and mundane sciences gradually emerged from within the theological framework; standards of argumentation, proof and criticism could be adjusted to the increasingly distinct requirements of particular domains. Nelson concludes that the Comtean distinction between theological, metaphysical and scientific modes of though should be reinterpreted in terms of phases—not always clearly separated—within the third type.

Notwithstanding the effort to define all three types at a trans-cultural level, the privileged role of Western pioneers is obvious. But a closer look at the Western background reveals another side to its history, crucial to the long-term outcomes yet not fully integrated into Nelson's model. The twelfth-century transformation is described as dependent on 'the underlying universality of Greek logic and dialectic' (ibid.: 98). More generally speaking, Nelson claims that Weber had implicitly identified Greek and Roman rationalism as fundamental to the whole development of Western civilization. Although there is no further discussion of Weber's work from this point of view, it is easy to imagine a line that Nelson might have taken: he would have tried to show that the institutional innovations analyzed by Weber—from medieval urban communities to modern territorial and monarchic states—involved a gradual implementation of rationalizing patterns drawing on Greek and Roman sources, and that this process laid the necessary foundations for more spectacular breakthroughs of rationalizing forces backed by religious visions. But Nelson's own interest in the Greco-Roman background is—as we have noted—most closely connected to an episode which was not at all central to Weber's interpretive project: an intellectual revolution within the religious framework of the High Middle Ages. The role of a reactivated classical legacy was decisive; it is impossible to explain the change—or interpret the results—as a matter of self-sustaining progress from the second to the third of the types mentioned above. A further factor, rooted in the specific genealogy of the culture in question, intervenes in the course of events and affects the outcome. There is no obvious way to fit the original Greek breakthrough into Nelson's typology. It is clearly not a case of the second type; it did not involve the systematic transformation of

religious beliefs that would be needed to locate it within the third;
but although its results coexisted with a religious culture which was
still in many ways reminiscent of the first type, they did represent
a new beginning of another kind.

   The first systematic approach to structural types of consciousness
thus leads to rather inconclusive results: we seem to be dealing with
a combination of different trajectories without any clear picture of
a common framework. As for the other side of Nelson's research
agenda, the intercivilizational encounters, both the cases singled out
and the questions left unasked point to similarly unresolved prob-
lems of interpretation. To begin with the most crucial case, the 'axial
shift' of the twelfth and thirteenth-century Europe—'a watershed in
the international history of civilizations' (ibid.: 183)—is inseparable
from a momentous encounter. The intellectual and institutional inno-
vations which transformed Western Christendom and laid the ground-
work for its later ascendancy owed much to intensified contacts with
other cultural worlds. Nelson's account of this broader context is
somewhat one-sided: he stresses the interaction with Muslims and
Jews, but mentions Byzantium only in passing, as part of a more
remote background. This view must be corrected in light of more
recent historical work on the importance of Byzantium for the West,
and particularly with regard to the reactivation of classical traditions.
But there are further ramifications to be noted. The Greek inheri-
tance that was adapted—Nelson often uses these very terms—to new
experiences and initiatives from the twelfth century onwards—can
also be understood as a response to intercivilizational encounters of
a distinctive kind. At a turning point of their trajectory, the Greeks
came into closer contact with the civilizations of the ancient Near
East; extensive borrowing in areas where the older cultural centres
were more advanced was balanced by a breakthrough of exceptional
originality in one specific field (the political one) and this combina-
tion proved conducive to a more radical reflexive turn than any pre-
vious developments had ever brought about. At a later stage, however,
the exhaustion of distinctively Greek patterns of political life coin-
cided with cultural expansion into the regions which had earlier been
on the more advanced side, and the new cultural model—known as
Hellenism—was central to a civilizational integration of the whole
Mediterranean world under the Roman Empire. In the wake of a
partial collapse of the empire its civilizational framework fragmented
into three separate worlds: Western Christian, Byzantine and Islamic

(and as noted above, a new phase of their interaction was closely linked to a new turn in Western approaches to the classical past). Each of the three successor civilizations drew on a plurality of traditions, but related to them and related them to each other in different ways. In short, a brief glance at this complex background suggests that multi-civilizational syntheses and pluralizing civilizational turns should also be seen as parts of the problematic which Nelson discusses under the heading of intercivilizational encounters.

Nelson's second case—an encounter most noteworthy for its inbuilt self-limiting dynamics—poses another set of problems. The seventeenth-century Jesuit mission in China was a very significant episode in the history of Eurasian cultural exchanges, and it paved the way for successive waves of Western interest in China. But on the Chinese side the encounter with the Jesuits seems to have done more to block than to boost understanding of the most important development then taking place in the West: the scientific revolution. The barrier was all the more effective because the Jesuits were no diehard defenders of unthinking traditionalism: they had worked out a way of presenting different cosmologies as matters of technique and convenience, and as a result, 'the basic character of developing modern science was concealed from Chinese scientists' (ibid.: 167, quoting N. Sivin). However, Nelson goes on to relativize this analysis and develop an argument which suggests that the Jesuit strategy may only have reinforced preexisting obstacles on the other side. In view of the indisputable Chinese achievements in the field of organization and technology, it seems more pertinent to ask why the Chinese did not pioneer the scientific revolution, than why they failed to follow the Western lead. Nelson compares two comparative analyses of China and the West: Joseph Needham's work did much to establish the Chinese record of inventions and discoveries (widely ignored in the West), and thus to make the absence of a breakthrough to systematic scientific inquiry (especially the failure to elaborate the notion of a law of nature) all the more striking. But Needham's attempt to explain the discrepancy between technological dynamism and intellectual conservatism reflects a lingering influence of Marxist preconceptions: although he moves beyond narrow economy-centred explanations and considers a broader range of factors, he tends to take the continuity of practical and intellectual rationalism for granted, and to see the social position of merchants and artisans as the main key to differences between stagnating and innovative societies. At

this point, Nelson turns to Max Weber, who knew much less than
Needham about Chinese science and technology and was not really
aware of China's original lead over the West, but posed the prob-
lem explicitly in terms of a plurality of interconnected geographical,
social and cultural factors allowing for changing contextual balances
between them. If we follow this lead, early modern relations between
China and the West may be seen as a markedly self-limiting encounter:
the learning processes which might seem a logical outcome of the
closer contact were blocked by insulating factors on both sides, but
the Western obstacles to insight were—at least on the most visible
level—of a strategic nature (linked to intellectual defences of the
Counter-Reformation), whereas the Chinese mode of closure had
more to do with structural barriers.

A closer look would suggest that the whole constellation was more
complex than Nelson thought. His interest in the development and
transmission of scientific outlooks led him to neglect another side of
the problem, analyzed by J. Gernet (1986) in a different context: the
intellectual resistance of Chinese traditions and their inbuilt ontolo-
gies to the core ideas of a monotheistic and other-worldly religion.
The Jesuits' efforts to overcome this barrier by means of diverse
adaptive stratagems were unsuccessful, and it can even be argued
that they did more to accredit a distorted image of China in the
West than to establish a Christian foothold in China: the focus on
Confucianism as a privileged interlocutor—after a brief experiment
with Buddhist connections—reinforced the official Confucian claim
to primacy and had a lasting influence on Western perceptions of
China. On the other hand, the over-Confucianized image of China,
accepted and elaborated in the West, could later be put to polem-
ical uses by Chinese critics aspiring to a radical break with tradition
(Jensen, 1997). Further the aspects of the problem emerge when the
experience of other countries in the East Asian region (and thus
within the same civilizational complex) is taken into account. Both
Japan and Korea were dependent on Chinese cultural models, but
in distinctive ways and with important qualifications, and their
responses to the first portents of Western expansion in the early mod-
ern epoch differed from each other as well as from the Chinese case.
In Japan, initial successes of Christianity—unparalleled by non-
violent Christian missions anywhere else at the time—were followed
by an abrupt and extreme rejection, but the state-enforced ban on
religious ideas from the West did not—in the long run—prevent the

pursuit of knowledge about developments in the West, and outside the intellectual mainstream, significant attempts were made to assimilate some lessons of Western science; nothing comparable was achieved in China before the whole region had to face a new wave of Western expansion from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. In Korea, Christianity met with a more determined official rejection than in China, but in contrast to Japan, it made some headway underground, and at the same time, a reformist branch of the Confucian tradition developed an active interest in Western learning. Finally, a later chapter in the history of Chinese responses to Christianity—at the very point of transition to the advanced modern phase of Western expansion—should be included in the picture: if the failure of the seventeenth-century Christian mission is striking, the explosive impact of an indigenized version of Christianity after the nineteenth-century onset of crisis is no less so. The ideology of the Taiping rebellion (1850–64) was a syncretic construct, but there is no doubt about the particular momentum of the Christian input. This episode does not disprove all claims about distinctive Chinese cultural resistance to Christianity; it should, rather, be seen as an exceptionally instructive—albeit far too little studied—key to the preconditions for an opening, as well as to the cultural framework which continued to limit the extent and impact of conversion.

In brief, the interplay of various Western civilizational factors in the East Asian arena—the region perhaps most profoundly transformed by its encounter with the West, but least affected by the colonial form of Western expansion—is a subject still awaiting systematic comparative analysis. East Asia is also of particular importance with regard to a more recent intercivilizational encounter which Nelson mentions only in passing, although he clearly saw it as crucial to the future course of world history. He predicted—in 1973— that Marxism would continue to play an important part in mediating between Western innovations and non-Western traditions: it 'appears to offer an immensely potent and adaptable mechanism for encouraging modernity and Western rationalized modes, while preserving flexible frames for the pragmatic maintenance of certain collective, non-reflective patterns' (ibid.: 104). In retrospect (after the demise of some self-styled Marxist regimes and the half-acknowledged apostasy of others), this seems a very benign view of the developments in question. But it can at least serve to focus attention on a relatively neglected aspect of twentieth-century history: the role of Marxist

projects and ideologies in various contexts of interaction between Western and non-Western paths to modernity. An intellectual current which began as an internal critique of the Western tradition became a vehicle for different (and often conflicting) combinations of real or imagined Western patterns of modernity with reconstructed legacies from other civilizational sources. Nelson's account is, however, misleading in that it makes no mention of a decisive point: the global ascendancy of Marxist alternatives began with the rebuilding and radical transformation of an empire whose traditional power structures had proved incapable of competing with Western contenders for hegemony (the reinvigorated empire then provided the geopolitical basis for a modernizing strategy aimed at outflanking the West). The Russian pattern was reproduced with variations in China. Here the empire to be restored had a more distinctive civilizational identity, and this counted for something in later attempts to surpass the Soviet model. In both cases, then, the mediating role of Marxist ideas took a turn which proved conducive to hubris: traditional and modern trends converged in visions of an unbounded accumulation of power. The two prime examples stand out against a broader spectrum of more dependent or imitative cases. They include the most massively destructive and irrational of all developmental projects (Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge), but also diverse uses of Marxist reasoning or rhetoric by nationalistic forces which kept their distance at the level of basic ideological premises (one of the most interesting variations on this theme is the recurrent appropriation of Marxist ideas by the mainstream of Japanese nationalism).

To sum up, a brief survey of Nelson's more sustained programmatic statements brings out the unresolved problems of his civilizational theory: the reformulated analytical foundations are incomplete, and the proposed focus on intercivilizational encounters—in itself a significant step beyond the classics and still important as a reminder of themes neglected by theorists of civilizational conflict—falls short of a systematic treatment. But for a more conclusive assessment, some less clearly defined ideas and lines of argument must be taken into account. This will also serve to clarify the background to Nelson's views on the modern transformation and its implications for civilizational analysis.

For Nelson, a 'civilizational complex' is 'a segment of the paradigmatic cultural patterns in the sphere of the expressive and instrumental productions of societies or societal complexes' (ibid.: 236).

His approach is, in other words, guided by strong assumptions about the constitutive role of culture both in the instrumental domains where it may seem subordinate to material constraints and in the 'expressive' ones where its autonomy is more manifest. His explicit reflections on the concept of culture may therefore be expected to throw some light on this background. They begin with a critique of the Parsonian conception of culture as a programming instance, and since such ways of thinking about the role of culture in society and history are still influential in social theory (often without any reference to Parsons), Nelson's objections have a direct bearing on contemporary debates. His strategy is to diversify and problematize the Parsonian notion of culture from within. In the first instance culture can be defined from four different points of view (ibid.: 22–25). As a '*dramatic design*, serving to redeem time from the sense of flux' (ibid.: 23), it is obviously to be analyzed from a Weberian angle, i.e. with an emphasis on the creation of interpretive and evaluative patterns; the 'designing' aspect is distinguished from strict programming by the aesthetic character of cultural forms, and by the interpretive scope inherent in that dimension. Culture as a 'defensive system' would seem to be the obverse of dramatic design: here the task is to cope with the persistent 'stresses', 'perplexities' and 'burdens' of the human condition, rather than to transcend them through patterns of meaning. The idea of culture as a 'directive system' may seem closest to the functionalist view, but in this context, it may be understood as referring to the formal structure of existential configurations, and as we shall see, the directive logic at work is less clear-cut than the term 'system' might suggest. Finally, culture as a 'symbol economy' is a 'value-enterprise-organization' (ibid.: 23) whose resources, operations, outputs and assets are fundamentally different from the more familiar objects of economic inquiry, but can—up to a point left undefined—be analyzed from a generalized economic point of view. This last line of theorizing is not taken further.

Nelson goes on to discuss the directive system in greater detail than the others. With regard to the 'civilization-analytic agenda' which he wanted to legitimize, three main implications of his comments may be noted. First, he prefers to speak of 'cues' rather than rules or norms when dealing with the directive premises; in this way, more weight is given to interpretive responses of groups and individuals, and it seems plausible to envisage varying degrees of conflict potential inherent in different constellations of cues. Second, the plurality

of cues is strongly emphasized. Nelson mentions six categories, without any claim to close the list. His use of Latin terms is perhaps an indication of estrangement from the more conventional language of social theory: the six types are described as percipienda, sentienda, agenda, credenda, miranda and emulanda. It may be convenient to divide them into two sub-groups. The first three are more directly related to experience and behaviour: they have to do with patterns of perception, directions of emotional response and basic rules of conduct. By contrast, the second group suggests an orientative framework: the categories in question refer to beliefs, to objects of 'awe, marvel and wonder' (ibid.: 28), and to what Nelson calls 'the paradigmatic element in all interactive situations' (ibid.: 29), i.e. the models accepted as authoritative but at the same time detached from the ongoing routines of behaviour. Finally, Nelson stresses the structural variety of overall constellations of cues. They differ in regard to consistency or inconsistency; their stability or instability is a matter of widely varying degrees; and the 'congruity with the actor's sense of fitness' (ibid.: 30) can also be more or less perfect. The last point highlights an always latent and potentially acute tension between cultural forms and individual interpretations of them. Here Nelson's original interest in the problem of anomie—and in alternative ways of theorizing it—comes again to the fore.

   The approaches thus outlined contrast strongly with functionalist conceptions of culture. Its programming or regulative role becomes a variable aspect of more complex patterns, and only comparative analyses can show in which settings it is more successfully superimposed on the whole field than in others. It does not seem far-fetched to imagine comparisons dealing with different relations between cultural programming and other aspects of cultural world-making, such as the articulation of value-orientations that do not translate into regulative norms or the opening up of horizons for a self-questioning and self-transformative activity that remains open to dispute between rival projects. But Nelson did not develop his ideas into a systematic framework for civilizational analysis. Only partial and implicit connections can be made between the reflections on culture and the concrete studies of historical cases. For present purposes, the most interesting pointer is a text which deals with the problematics of *eros, logos, nomos* and *polis*, seen as concretizations of the structures of consciousness and as basic components of socio-cultural life. The example chosen is, once again, Western Christendom dur-

ing the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The innovations already mentioned were accompanied by conflicts of such dimensions that Nelson speaks of 'civil wars in the structures of consciousness' (ibid.: 215) and describes the epoch in question as the only one comparable to our own. Conflicts directly expressed in power struggles have been analyzed by historians of the High Middle Ages: urban communities fought for autonomy against feudal and clerical authority, and the papal monarchy had to contend with secular rivals (both in the imperial and proto-national). In the terms quoted above, these clashes involved alternative models of *nomos* and *polis*. But for Nelson, conflict between cultural orientations—and within cultural cores— are of particular interest. As he sees it, Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard represent polar opposites in the intellectual life of the times. Abelard's role in exploring the foundations and possibilities of rational consciousness is uncontested; Bernard is better understood as a no less original interpreter of faith-consciousness, rather than a mere defender of traditions. And since both were—in different ways— concerned with the theology of love, fundamental issues of both *eros* and *logos* were at stake. At the same time, a new emphasis on *conscience* as an attribute of individual actors—and on the need for rules and reflections to guide it—led to demands for the subordination of political life to moral theology, and thus to another conflict over *nomos* and *polis*. Here the efforts to rationalize the political sphere within its own framework proved more effective in the long run (as Nelson puts it (ibid.: 225) ' "prophecy" ' gave way to ' "routine" '), but they had to be defined and justified with reference to other trends activated by the twelfth-century transformation.

Nelson's main point is clear and convincing: alongside—and in connection with—other epoch-making developments, the twelfth-century saw a pronounced polarization of modes of thought at the centre of a dominant religious orthodoxy. This would seem to be a promising opening for comparative analysis: the relative capacity of civilizational pattern to articulate and sustain conflicting interpretations of core meanings—or, conversely, to defuse and contain them— is one of the most salient themes to be explored. But Nelson did not pursue this line of inquiry. The implications of his failure to do so are perhaps most evident in an important essay on Max Weber's ways of distinguishing between East and West. Nelson's emphasis on civilizational contents leads him to spell out the specific cultural meaning of patterns and processes which Weber's overriding interest

in rationalization (and especially in certain versions of it) left unclear, and this makes it easier to move from a dichotomy of Occident and Orient to a triangular comparison of the West with China and India. The argument begins with the thesis that civilizations may differ in their ability to institutionalize the overcoming of 'invidious dualisms', especially those which set the insider against the alien and religious life against the mundane domain (Nelson, 1976: 116–17). In line with Weber's analyses, the universal community of believers and the turn from other worldly to innerworldly asceticism are seen as crucial to the overcoming of both dualisms in the West. But when it comes to more detailed comparison with India and China, Nelson's focus shifts to the two interconnected long-term processes of cultural universalization and social fraternization. Universalization is evidently thought to be in some way dependent on the channelling of religious visions and energies into worldly activities, but the link is left undefined; fraternization is more obviously equated with a progressive inclusion of others, but the connection is—as will be seen—by no means unproblematic.

The elective affinity of the two processes is self-evident: universal modes of thought and regulation aid the progress of fraternization, and the elimination of social barriers transforms the lifeworld in ways favourable to the universalization of cultural horizons. Nevertheless, the distinction is important enough to throw into relief some key differences between the two major non-Western civilizations analyzed by Weber, and the contrasts can be formulated more sharply than Nelson does. Following Weber, blockages to rationalization are more prominent in the Chinese case. Chinese science never took the turn to systematic and universal rational inquiry that began with the scientific revolution in the West. Chinese legal and political culture was incompatible with the juridical rationalism and universality first adumbrated by the Romans; Chinese conceptions of cosmic order left no support to universal codes of innerworldly ascetic conduct. These failures to match specific Western achievements may be linked to the entrenched particularism of a social order centred on a highly rationalized combination of kinship and sacred kingship. On the other hand, the institutional framework of that order was flexible enough to sustain a long process of cultural integration into an expanding imperial power structure, and to extend a symbolic world order beyond the boundaries of the empire. By contrast, the Indian case represents a more clear-cut failure of fraternization: particular-

istic principles of organization obstructed both empire-building and—
a fortiori—paths towards a more inclusive world order. But in the
religious dimension, the Indian tradition of radical rejection of the
world had a universalizing potential for which there is no parallel
in China. The interdependence of the two processes is, however,
confirmed by the whole history of Indian religions. When the spirit
of renouncement gave rise to a universal religion (Buddhism), it was
in the long run unable to resist a counter-offensive backed up by
core institutions of the Indian social order, and the version of renounce-
ment that survived within India was adapted to the imperatives of
particularism.

So far, Nelson's analysis amounts to a reformulation of Weberian
arguments, with some significant shifts of emphasis and clarification
of latent contents. But another glance at the inconclusive comments
on overcoming dualisms may help to outline a more independent
approach which he could have pursued. If one of the exits from
dualism has to do with bringing religious beliefs and principles into
closer contact with this-worldly issues, the twelfth century is undoubt-
edly a major turning-point: an unprecedented effort to articulate and
systematize a Christian world-view—the invention of rational theol-
ogy—responds to an epoch-making upsurge of social dynamism in
various fields and directions. This twofold breakthrough was, as
Nelson shows, conducive to multiple conflict: between rival inter-
pretations of religious sources, but also between different ways of
relating religious ideas to mundane forces. Questions arising out of
this particular constellation can be linked to a more general theme
which emerges at crucial junctures in Weber's work, although it is
never clearly demarcated: the divisions and conflicts that develop out
of the ongoing interaction of the religious sphere with increasingly
autonomous logics of other 'world orders'. The articulation, regula-
tion and institutionalization of conflicts—including those which polar-
ize the core structures of consciousness—thus appears as an important
but under-theorized part of the developments which Weber sub-
sumed under the concept of rationalization. Similar considerations
apply to the other way of transcending dualism. To speak of 'frat-
ernization' in the sense of progress towards universal inclusion is mis-
leading in that it obscures another side of the changes in question:
the interplay of conflict and integration, i.e. the steps towards accept-
ance of division and conflict as constitutive aspects of the social
bond. As Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet have argued, this is a

central and recurrent feature of the modern democratic transformation, and it marks a radical break with traditional forms of social life. But the democratic rupture has a prehistory, and Nelson's 'universal other-hood' is only one of its themes. The overcoming of barriers between insiders and aliens is to be analyzed from long-term comparative perspectives, both aspirations to more inclusive identity and visions or practices of more interactive diversity call for closer examination. One of the more interesting examples of complex relationships between the two trends is the confrontation of monotheism and polytheism in late antiquity (Momigliano, 1987).

In short, Nelson's comments on 'civil wars in the structures of consciousness' are as suggestive and as inconclusive as other ideas adumbrated in his work: the above discussion has noted a series of programmatic openings to new fields of civilizational analysis, but they did not translate into sustained theorizing. To conclude, the implications of this very incomplete project for the three crucial themes mentioned at the outset—the questions of intercivilizational constellations, cultural breakthroughs and modernizing dynamics—should be briefly reconsidered. The most striking peculiarity of Nelson's approach is the close association of all three issues with a particular historical episode: a civilizational mutation—as he saw it—of Western Christendom in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This was not only the intercivilizational encounter par excellence; in describing it as an axial shift, Nelson was also implicitly claiming—without arguing the case at length—that the most fundamental cultural breakthrough in world history was to be located here rather than in the epoch which other writers had called axial. Finally, his reflections on the origins of and paths to modernity—formulated from different angles and at successive junctures of his work—converge in a strong emphasis on the unique importance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There is no doubt that Nelson is one of those who have contributed most effectively to a new understanding and appreciation of this watershed in European history. But to clarify more specific and problematic aspects of Nelson's analysis, affinities and contrasts with the Weberian model (to which he constantly refers) should be noted. Nelson shares Weber's interest in Christian sources of modern cultural orientations, and in the interconnections of the multiple processes that resulted in the civilizational ascendancy of the West; but three main changes in perspective set his line of interpretation apart from the Weberian one. Crucial innovations,

especially in the intellectual sphere, are attributed to an epoch which preceded both Renaissance and Reformation; against this historical background, the early modern bifurcation of Christendom appears in a new light; a more balanced view of religious chance on both sides of the divide also provides new keys to the context of the modern scientific revolution, which Weber had in principle included in his research programme but done very little to analyze in detail.

The emergence of rational theology as a 'prime science' was closely linked to broader developments. It helped to legitimize a framework for rational inquiry, a 'research program within a metaphysical context' (Huff, 1993: 106), which could in the long run be put to more secular uses. At the same time structures of reasoning (rationales as Nelson liked to call them) in response to different tasks and situations spread from the theological context to other areas. But the new currents of theological thought were also reinforced by social and political trends. Most importantly by the 'legal revolution' of the High Middle Ages (the connection between law and theology was particularly effective because both were involved in the consolidation of the Catholic Church as a civilizational nucleus and as a pioneer of state formation). This is one of the few themes on Nelson's agenda that have been extensively explored by later authors, especially by Toby Huff. His main thesis is that legal and theological innovations converged in fashioning a civilizational model of human capacities which gave more weight to rational powers and their autonomous use. Together with other work on the twelfth-century transformation, Huff's analyses have further strengthened the case for regarding it as a turning-point in the history of the West. There is, however, another side to the question of medieval pointers to modernity. If twelfth-century thinkers and reformers can be said to have 'established the principle of the authority and legitimacy of reason over discordant authorities' and developed the idea of constitutionalism in the sense of fundamental 'standards for evaluating the reasonableness of law and legal principles' (Huff, 1993: 129, 146), a Weberian caveat must be added (and distinguished from Weber's more questionable specific assumptions about the European road to modernity). Neither rationalism, nor constitutionalism, nor the separation of sacred and secular authorities underwent a continuous and linear development culminating in modern forms. Late medieval theology radicalized the difference between human and divine realities and re-problematized rational capacities in such a way that the trend could only be reversed

on the basis of new premises (this point is central to Blumenberg's
analysis of the 'legitimacy of modernity' as a more self-contained
reaffirmation of reason). Medieval constitutionalism was counterbal-
anced and in the long run overshadowed by processes which in due
course (although not everywhere to the same degree) gave rise to
absolutist power structures, and the revival of constitutionalist notions
began in a new context; the medieval contest between the papal
monarchy and its secular rivals ended with the fragmentation of
Christendom and the crystallization of a new state system where the
relationship between sacred and secular authority was redefined in
varying ways.

   In its entirety, this historical pattern amply confirms the Weberian
insight that rationalizing processes unfold in divergent and discon-
tinuous ways. Nelson was, of course, well aware of such complica-
tions. For him, one of the most important twelfth-century innovations
was a new emphasis on conscience as the faculty which empowers
individuals to 'opt between alternatives of relative worth or of vary-
ing credibilities' (Nelson, 1981: 223). Further development of this
idea gave rise to the very distinctive tradition and institution of casu-
istry: rules for coping with ambiguity, uncertainty and the growing
complexity of social life had to be elaborated, and efforts in that
direction became a major rationalizing factor. The Reformation took
a new turn, but its reaction against the late medieval forms of spir-
itual direction was double-edged. The enhanced authority of inner
conscience was asserted against the institutional controls of the Church
as well as the compromises and concessions due to its involvement
in the spheres of social power. A search for new foundations of faith
and guidance understood and presented itself as a cleansing return
to pristine order. Nelson's emphasis on this point becomes clearer
when he draws a parallel between 'subjective certitude of conscience
and objective certainty of proof' (ibid.: 162): the scientific revolution
that began with Copernicus was also a search for firmer founda-
tions, in explicit disagreement with the fictionalist and probabilist
trends of late medieval thought and with clear reference to the high
medieval notions of a revealed but at the same time rational order.
the 'foundationalist' aspects of early modern innovations in religion,
science and philosophy are, for Nelson, a prime example of civi-
lizational patterns in a self-transformative mode: frames of reference
inherited from the theological universe of discourse of the High
Middle Ages are reinterpreted in a new context and developed into

operative premises for new rationalizing processes. The history of the scientific revolution, which began in Catholic culture areas although it was to have more momentous effects on the Protestant world, highlights the need to compare developments within the two mutually estranged domains of Christendom. Nelson suggests that the philosophical role of scientific pioneers in the Catholic world may to some extent be understood—in Weberian terms—as a prophetic response to priestly authority: fundamental truths were reaffirmed against elaborate and variously accommodated doctrines.

As in other fields, Nelson's comments on the early modern transformations of faith and thought open up a vast problematic which has only been explored in fragmentary and one-sided ways. But they also reflect the incomplete character of a theoretical project that was still taking shape along multiple lines.[1]

3.3   *S.N. Eisenstadt: Civilizational breakthroughs and dynamics*

Nelson's approach to civilizational theory was, as shown above, very closely linked to the rediscovery of Max Weber, although there were also important connections to contemporary debates. S.N. Eisenstadt's much more extensive and systematic work on civilizations and their historical destinies is more directly associated with the critique of functionalism, and hence comparable to some other major projects in that vein. Eisenstadt often stresses the need to theorize activities, orientations and institutions which go beyond the social division of labour; this may be seen as a realignment of functionalist models with their original frame of reference (the division of labour is the historical and experiential source of ideas which often seek expression in a more abstract language), with the aim of clarifying both the limits of their validity and the tasks of a theory proposing to transcend them. Durkheim's reference to society as 'more than a system of organs and functions' is an early indication of such intentions. More recently, Castoriadis's critique of the Marxist version of functionalism takes a similar line. But as I will argue, the civilizational perspective has a specific and decisive bearing on the never-ending debate with functionalism. It may in particular prove superior to

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[1] For a recent elaboration of Nelsonian themes, see Nielsen (2001).

some other anti-functionalist paradigms in developing an alternative
approach to macro-social formations and dynamics. For present pur-
poses, the conceptual framework that grew out of Eisenstadt's his-
torical and comparative studies is more important than the paths
explored in the course of a long intellectual journey; but since the
most recent—and most innovative—phase is still in progress (Eisenstadt
has been markedly reluctant to synthesize his various angles on the
civilizational dimension), the theoretical project cannot be assessed
without some reference to its genesis.

The discussion must, however, begin with a brief outline of Eisen-
stadt's main reasons for advocating a civilizational turn in social theory:
only a preview of theoretical implications will provide a key to
the exploratory and preparatory moves made along the way. For
Eisenstadt, the 'central analytical core' of the concept of civilizations
in the plural 'is the combination of ontological or cosmological
visions . . . with the definition, construction and regulation of the
major arenas of social life and interaction'; an even more condensed
formulation 'stresses the interweaving of structural aspects of social
life with its regulatory and interpretive context' (Eisenstadt, 2000b: 1).
This programmatic statement is perhaps best understood with ref-
erence to a well-known and persistent divide in social theory. Against
all versions of the basis-superstructure model (not only the Marxian
one), Parsons argued that social systems should be theorized as com-
binations of two hierarchies, with the culture-centred hierarchy of
control becoming—as a result of a evolutionary dynamics—pro-
gressively more important than the economy-centred hierarchy of
conditions. Habermas reformulated the Parsonian scheme and tried
to show that a theory of evolution, grounded in a conception of cul-
ture as a controlling and programming instance, could be brought
closer to a less reductionist version of historical materialism. Eisenstadt's
approach represents an attempt to relativize the dichotomy of cul-
tural and structural determination, not by seeking a compromise
between the two sides, but rather by bringing a stronger element
of indeterminacy into their relationship, and thus allowing for the
possibility of more contingent and variegated connections between
them than the structural-functional view (be it of the Marxian or the
Parsonian kind) could admit.

To clarify this point (in anticipation of some arguments to be
developed below), it seems convenient to begin at the level of the
most direct interaction between cultural and structural factors. When

Eisenstadt refers to the 'interweaving' of structural aspects and regulatory contexts, he is summing up a line of analysis which stresses the openness and ambiguity of historical constellations, rather than the givenness of norms on one side and conditions on the other. The regulatory frameworks imposed on structural settings can be more or less marked by a logic of their own, extending beyond—and sometimes at odds with—the imperatives of the division of labour; a broader scope for autonomy in the construction and imposition of regulatory patterns must, by the same token, bring various forms and mechanisms of social power into play; but the formation of rival regulatory projects, drawing on diverse resources, also involves a conflict of interpretations which activate a shared but contested set of premises. At this juncture, the hermeneutical background mentioned above—the unfolding contest of sociological theories—becomes crucial to the emerging model. To stress the interpretive dimensions of culture—in other words: its world-disclosing and world-articulating role—is, first and foremost, to go beyond views which split the cultural field into cognitive and normative aspect and treated both primarily as components of a system or an evolutionary logic of action. This expanded and reunified concept of culture serves to avoid conflation with social structures: the meta-social dimension of culture—the articulation of world-horizons prior to the prescriptive patterning of knowledge and conduct—may open up a space for interpretive divisions and conflicts which add new meaning to the interplay of social forces (the development of dissent and heterodoxy in different civilizational complexes is, as will be seen, a major theme in Eisenstadt's comparative studies). The cultural surplus of meaning and the counter-traditions which draw on it can have long-term and indirect historical effects which go far beyond their original context.

It remains to be seen how the civilizational turn helps to concretize these theoretical perspectives and—in particular—whether it diversifies the cultural side to the constitution of society in the ways indicated above, without dissolving it into arbitrarily adaptable inputs for strategic use. Eisenstadt's specific road to the rediscovery of civilizations reflects the insights derived from three particular areas of research. One of the most prominent and persistent themes in his work is the diversity of modern societies, both as important in its own right and as a reason for questioning the conventional distinction between tradition and modernity. The varying paths to and patterns of modernity are to a large degree shaped by historical

backgrounds and situations, including the cultural legacies of societies drawn into the global modernizing process at different points in time; social formations first seen as transitional can perpetuate themselves on the basis of sustainable combinations of traditional and modern elements; traditional sources can be reactivated at advanced stages of modern transformations. Although these issues are at first not approached from an explicitly civilizational angle, the blurring of boundaries between tradition and modernity suggests conclusions of that kind: If traditions are reinterpreted as formative frameworks which can adapt to and have an impact on social transformations, including modern ones, the result is reminiscent of the Durkheimian definition of civilizations. The trans-societal cultural frameworks, identified by Durkheim and Mauss as a new frontier of sociological analysis, preserve some defining features across historical divides. The civilizational point of view would thus be of crucial importance to a new understanding of the relationship between tradition and modernity; and conversely, the reductionist view of traditions is related to a more general failure to theorize the civilizational dimension.

Another opening to civilizational analysis resulted from the comparative study of empires. In contrast to the abiding and growing interest in modernity, this was a particular research project with a pre-defined agenda, undertaken before Eisenstadt began to question the basic concepts of structural-functional theory. He was, nevertheless, breaking new ground by focussing on social and political formations which did not fit easily into the established frame of reference. Empires (more specifically the 'historical bureaucratic empires', such as Byzantium, China and the various Islamic powers) were, in many ways, too innovative and actively goal-oriented, but also too exposed to historical twists and turns to be subsumed under the stereotype of traditional society; on the other hand, imperial traditions were too strong and diverse for their structural dynamics to be uniformly aligned with a prehistory of modernity. Even more important than the structural specificity of empires was their historical contingency: they emerge, develop and decline as a result of strategic initiatives in changing situations, rather than of any inherent evolutionary trends, and the factors which come to the fore when a more theoretical analysis is attempted—elites and coalitions in pursuit of varying goals, and in command of widely varying sets of resources—are markedly different from the standard repertoire of structural-functional accounts. But in spite of these departures from the mainstream, Eisenstadt's

approach was still—when it came to general guidelines and conclusions—strongly influenced by the functionalist tradition. This is most evident in a long discussion of the 'conditions of perpetuation'. Historical bureaucratic empires are treated as systems whose maintenance calls for specific inputs, arrangements and policies. The result is perhaps best described as a deviant version of functionalism, uncharacteristically sensitive to contradictions, crises and contingencies but disinclined to break with the most basic assumptions of a dominant paradigm.

It was, however, impossible to study empires without rediscovering historical realities which were bound to affect—and in the long run to subvert—the theoretical model. Imperial formations and traditions emerged in regions with more or less distinctive cultural profiles, and it is tempting to raise the question of connections between the cultural contexts and the imperial constructions (as we have seen, this was one of the issues foreshadowed by Durkheim and Mauss). The first signs of a problematic which was to become much more central to Eisenstadt's work can be detected in the discussion of cultural orientations and their impact on imperial strategies (Eisenstadt, 1963: 223–38). The first point to be noted is that cultural orientations are, in general, of some importance to the imperial pursuit of power: they serve to define goals, set on the premises for ideological constructs, and may impose restrictions. A closer examination shows that the logic and the effects of cultural orientations can vary in fundamental ways, without the differences being definable or explicable in the usual functional-evolutionary terms: in particular, there is a stark contrast between empires committed to the maintenance and supremacy of a particular cultural tradition (China is obviously the prime example), and those which identify with a universal religion or ideological blueprint (Christian and Islamic empires are the most striking cases). This does not mean that the more universalistic orientations are ipso facto more autonomous, more effective or indicative of a higher level of differentiation: rather, the two types represent divergent historical constellations, irreducible to evolutionary sequences.

This analysis appears, in retrospect, as a first step towards a sustained reconceptualization of culture and power. But the explicit turn to civilizational theory was most directly linked to Eisenstadt's third field of comparative research: an inquiry into the sources and underlying motive powers of the great revolutions that played a decisive

role in modern history. Two manifestly inadequate approaches to
that issue must—as Eisenstadt sees it—be rejected. On the one hand,
Marxist theories over-generalized and ideologized a class- and state-
centred notion of revolution which is in fact only applicable to a
few exceptional (albeit historically crucial) cases; on the other hand,
some modernization theorists—especially Parsons—dissolved revolu-
tionary episodes into long-term revolutionary processes. Eisenstadt's
line of interpretation differs from both these oversimplifying views in
that he stresses the distinctive features of the 'great revolutions' (the
English, French and American ones, as well as a few other less
prominent cases) without conflating them with a more fundamental
revolutionary dynamic on which they draw, but which can also find
expression in other forms. The aspiration to build a new social order
on the basis of an ideological vision and a strategy of popular mobi-
lization is a particularly radical and revealing, but neither uniform
nor omnipresent variation on a more general theme. When Eisenstadt
(1987) refers to the revolutionary foundations of modernity, the focus
is on unprecedented changes to the cultural premises of order and
legitimacy: the self-constitution of society now entails a permanent
presence of alternatives and an openness to change. To rephrase it
in terms more reminiscent of Castoriadis than of Eisenstadt, social-
historical being becomes explicitly self-transformative.

   The full articulation of the new cultural premises is obviously a
long-term process linked to equally basic re-definitions of other con-
stitutive meanings, most importantly those which relate to the human
condition and its cosmic context. Both the new self-image of soci-
ety and the more comprehensive cultural ontology give rise to ten-
sions, conflicts and antinomies; Eisenstadt's later writings have explored
this problematic in greater detail and from different angles. But it
was clear from the outset that he saw the revolutionary change in
cultural orientations as a good reason for speaking of a new civi-
lization: the civilization of modernity (ibid.). The research programme
implicit in that thesis was, moreover, linked to a restatement of
Weber's case for Protestantism as a privileged path to modernity,
and thus given a clearer direction. Eisenstadt takes the ongoing debate
on Weber's *Protestant Ethic* to have shown that a fundamental con-
nection between the religious innovations of the Reformation and
the transformative dynamic of modernity could be claimed, even if
doubt had been cast on the specific causal mechanisms singled out
by Weber. On this view, the overall impact of religious heterodoxy

mutating into socio-cultural subversion and change is more important than any particular guidelines for conduct. The prima facie evidence for modernity's religious roots ranges from the impact of religious wars on the European state system to the role of religious controversies in opening up new space for rational inquiry.

On the basis of these successive and mutually reinforcing ventures into different fields, Eisenstadt moved to thematize the civilizational dimension more directly in relation to privileged cases. His reason for singling out the Axial civilizations, i.e. the Eurasian cultural regions which underwent major changes during a few centuries around the middle of the last millennium BC, is that they exemplify the innovative and diversifying potential, but also the ambiguities and uncertainties of civilizational patterns in formation: a set of epoch-making breakthroughs, similar in character despite their evidently-separate paths, can thus be seen as the first major self-discovery of the social-historical reality which civilizational theory has set out to analyze. Rather than an exodus of history from civilizations (as Voegelin had suggested), the Axial turning-point might be described as a break-out of civilizational creativity from the combined constraints due to cultural and structural factors. For present purposes, it is enough to summarize the core ideas of Eisenstadt's various statements on the common framework of Axial transformations (Eisenstadt, 1986a, 1986b, 1996: 396–427), with particular reference to the points of connection with more general theoretical issues.

The most distinctive common characteristic of Axial civilizations is a new way of distinguishing between levels of reality: 'the conception that there is a chasm between the transcendental and the mundane' (Eisenstadt, 1986a: 6–7). An innovation at the very core of cultural ontology is thus singled out as a starting-point for the analysis of multi-dimensional social dynamics. To understand the transformative potential which Eisenstadt ascribes to the Axial dichotomy, the specific meaning of 'transcendental' and 'mundane' must be defined in contrast to other notions of a similarly polarizing cast. The distinction at issue here is clearly not to be identified with the divide between this-worldly and other-worldly domains: for Eisenstadt, it is one of the more important sources of variety among Axial civilizations that some of them articulate the transcendental dimension in more other-worldly terms than others. It would be equally misleading to equate the two levels with the sacred and the profane. Even if we take our cue from the broader and more explicitly

ontological definitions of the sacred (as formulated, for example, by
Mircea Eliade), it remains too closely linked to religious beliefs to
be easily applicable to all the cases in question. The boundary between
religious and philosophical speculation may be a matter of permanent
debate, but Eisenstadt clearly wants to use the concept of the tran-
scendental in a sense that would be left unaffected by varying ways
of demarcation. Moreover, the notion of the sacred has an obvious
affinity with conceptions of divine reality, but a more questionable
bearing on visions of cosmic order or of being beyond determinacy.

  Although Eisenstadt's accounts of the key distinction between tran-
scendental and mundane leave something to be desired, the gist of
the matter may be summed up in three points. First, a radical onto-
logical difference, unknown to earlier modes of thought, is constructed
between a higher or more fundamental and a lower or less authen-
tic level of reality. A de-valuation of the empirical world encoun-
tered in everyday practices is inherent in this new frame of reference,
but it may take different directions and it would be misleading to
describe them all as religious rejections of the world. Second, the
distance between the two levels does not diminish the constitutive
role of the higher one in relation to the lower: mundane reality has
a derivative status, even if it is perceived as more or less estranged
from its ontological source. Third, the subordination of the mun-
dane to the transcendental has normative implications. Axial visions
of the world are more or less explicitly associated with demands for
reform or renewal; the imperfections of existing mundane reality are
to some extent seen as contingent—due to a degeneration that goes
beyond the constraints of a subaltern being—and therefore redeemable.
The need to derive normative principles from a transcendental source
highlights the encompassing horizon which makes it possible to artic-
ulate a relationship between the two levels. In addition to the overt
and operative tension inherent in the distinction between transcen-
dental and mundane, a more implicit tension may thus develop
between the duality postulated by that distinction and the unity
required for the formative and regulative relationship between the
two levels to be conceivable.

  The new cultural horizons opened up by the Axial breakthroughs
gave greater scope to interpretive activity and rivalry. The very dis-
tinction between the transcendental and the mundane may be under-
stood as a rupture or problematization of order: the relationship of
social order to cosmic or divine paradigms became more complex,

questionable and amenable to human intervention, and the two lev-
els could no longer be fused in a supposedly immutable archetype.
By the same token, a more distant and less directly involved foun-
dation of order lent itself to more mutually contestable constructions.
This enhanced variety of interpretations could be channelled into
more or less durable divisions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy,
but Axial civilizations vary significantly in regard to the degree and
direction of such developments. Most notably, the monotheistic tra-
ditions imposed clearer criteria of correctness and deviation than do
the modes of thought which centred on an impersonal cosmic or
trans-cosmic order (it is still a matter of debate whether the idea of
orthodoxy is fully applicable to the latter case).

Growing diversity and unfolding conflicts in the cultural dimen-
sions affected the structures of social power. The impact on the most
privileged and visible centres of power was ambiguous. For Eisenstadt,
the accountability of rulers—the possibility of judging their conduct
and record with reference to models grounded in a higher order—
was one of the most important Axial innovations. On the other hand,
the availability of more elaborate interpretive frameworks also enabled
ruling elites to construct more emphatic and ambitious patterns of
legitimation. The enriched visions of order were, in short, conducive
to critical distance as well as to extravagant aspirations. But the new
relationship between culture and power also transformed the field of
social action and brought new forces into play. Axial civilizations
were characterized by the growing importance of intellectuals of a
new type—priests, prophets or thinkers without a clear-cut religious
identity, but with a strong claim to redemptive insight. These emerg-
ing intellectual elites could play different roles in different contexts,
but as Eisenstadt sees it, they made their most decisive mark in
alliance with rulers in search of new legitimizing sources to match
their evolving strategies. Such coalitions—exemplified in different
ways by the imperial—Confucian nexus in China and the monothe-
istic empires in western parts of Eurasia—created institutional pat-
terns of exceptional strength and influence. At the same time, alliances
of a different kind could give rise to sectarian movements and more
or less overt articulations of protest. Marginal or dissenting fractions
of the new intellectual strata transmitted the critical potential of Axial
traditions to a broader audience.

As the above reference to imperial formations suggests, Eisenstadt's
argument reaches beyond the Axial turning-points as such and involves

claims about their long-term consequences: 'secondary breakthroughs', such as the Christian and Islamic reinterpretations of monotheism, lead to a more systematic realization of the potential inherent in the first creative phase and give rise to more structured combinations of cultural and political frameworks. From a broad historical perspective, then, secondary breakthroughs are integral parts of the Axial transformation.

Although Eisenstadt's account of the Axial breakthrough has not been discussed as extensively as it merits, some of the questions raised by critics may serve to single out themes for further discussion. The following remarks will not aim at a detailed coverage of the historical fields, or of the objections that can be or have been raised on the basics of more detailed case studies; rather, the main emphasis will be on problems which highlight the need to rethink Eisenstadt's basic concepts. But to question a specific and seminal interpretive model is not to doubt the unique importance of the epoch in question. The traditions that began to take shape during the Axial Age stand out as pre-eminent examples of cultural frameworks compatible with a high degree of internal differentiation, capable of maintaining an identity of constitutive meanings across social and political boundaries, and characterized by a significant degree of continuity throughout successive historical epochs. Most importantly, Axial origins are crucial to the demarcation of geocultural domains which may be seen as obligatory foci for civilizational theory: however complex and controversial the linkages may be, interpretive frameworks of Axial ancestry continue to play a formative role. This applies perhaps most directly to the Chinese world (the relative weight of Confucianism within the Chinese tradition may be a matter of debate, but scholars agree on the long-term impact of early interactions between Confucian ideas and other approaches to a shared problematic); much less straightforward but no less important pedigrees can be constructed for the cultural posterity of monotheistic traditions which drew on both Greek and Jewish sources. The Indian case would seem to fall somewhere between these two opposite patterns. In short, the reference to Axial backgrounds is inseparable from the primary agenda of civilizational theory.

The first question to be raised has to do with the specific nature of the Axial departure from archaic traditions. As Eisenstadt sees it, the Axial breakthroughs exemplify a change to the relationship between cultural premises and social processes, in such a way that

the rationale for a civilizational perspective is brought out into the open. The new cultural horizons must therefore be in contrast to the historical discontinuity is based on an interpretive one: the Axial reformulations of ontological frameworks break with archaic notions a continuum encompassing between different levels of reality and this incoupling of worlds enables actors and thinkers to claim more autonomy for their rival models of reordering. Although Eisenstadt does not go beyond brief descriptions of the pre-Axial condition, his conception of it seems to be in line with views (e.g. Lévêque, 1997) defended by some historians of archaic religion. The world-view characteristic of neolithic societies and further elaborated by early civilizations is reconstructed in terms of basic categories: hierarchy, analogy and continuity. The mundane or profane life world was, on this view, anchored in sacred realities of a higher order but fundamentally similar in character and directly involved in the constitution and maintenance of natural and social order.

This line of argument rests on inevitably speculative accounts of implicit meanings. A more empirically grounded—but also more nuanced—approach to the question of continuity might begin with the symbolic framework of early state formation: the institution of sacred kingship. As various authors (most importantly Gauchet, 1997) have argued, this phenomenon represents a new cultural definition of power and at the same time an ambiguous move beyond the primitive fusion of religious and social life. The emergence of the state as a separate power centre releases forces and opens up strategic possibilities which had been excluded by the anti-statist order of primitive societies, but the sacred status of the ruler serves to maintain the mutual embedment of social and cosmic order. Sacred kingship is, in other words, a pivot of cosmological continuity, as well as a first step towards an explicit—and therefore variable—articulation of the relationship between religious and political dimensions of social life. Its modalities differ from case to case: the ruler may be divinized, as in Ancient Egypt, or legitimized through a privileged relationship to divine authority but the distinction is sometimes blurred, and the latter alternative is open to varying interpretations which may entail a more or less activistic conception of kingly rule. The destinies of sacred kingship in later historical epochs—after the Axial break—vary even more widely. It could give way to other visions of the relationship between religion and politics, survive in more or less sublimated or rationalized forms, or re-emerge in new contexts after

long-term transformations along different lines. The cases in question range from Chinese and Japanese models of imperial rule to the Christian empire of late antiquity and its Byzantine successor state. This vast but relatively neglected field has yet to be explored with reference to the problematic of Axial civilizations; the crucial importance of changing relations between religion and politics has been noted (Dumont, 1975), but not given its due by comparative analysts.

A second set of problems arises in connection with the overall directions of Axial re-interpretations of the world. Contrary to the assumption of a general trend towards separation of the transcendental and the mundane, Stefan Breuer (1998: 98–105) has argued that the break with pre-Axial modes of thought must be analyzed in more differentiated terms. It may be justified to speak of the archaic world-view as a continuum, but then it must be added that the ruptures—rightly stressed by those who speak of an Axial Age—are not necessarily all of the same kind. They can, in particular, focus on either the similarities or the connections between the two ontological levels in question. A cosmocentric world-view, exemplified by Chinese and Indian traditions, moves away from anthropomorphic projections and towards conceptions of an impersonal order, but this rejection of archaic analogies does not disrupt the essential interconnection of individual, collective and cosmic phenomena. Conversely, Near Eastern religions envisage 'a voluntaristic relationship between two subjects of a different type of being' (Breuer, 1998: 101); there is, in other words, an increasing emphasis on command and obedience across the distance between divine and human beings, rather than on organic unity. But divine actors are still imagined as human ones writ large. Similarity thus persists despite the growing gap between very unequal partners. Breuer argues, however, that this pattern emerges in Mesopotamian traditions long before the epoch usually described as Axial, and that this fact casts doubt on Eisenstadt's model. The religion of ancient Israel was at first little more than a variant of this inherited pattern. The turn towards a more radically transcendent—and by the same token less anthropomorphic—idea of god began during the Babylonian Exile, but in such restrictive circumstances that it had virtually no impact on the broader historical environment. As for comparable developments in Archaic and Classical Greece, the initial (Homeric) unity of human and divine worlds was questioned by the pioneers of philosophical

thought; their critique of anthropomorphic analogies gave rise to more abstract conceptions of order, but did not pose a serious challenge to the social power of polytheistic religion. A more complete break with archaic beliefs was only achieved by the Sophists, whose thoroughgoing scepticism undermined all notions of objective norms for human actions and conventions. Breuer seems to accept the Hegelian view of the sophistic movement as a discovery of radical but not yet properly self-objectivating subjectivity. But this exceptionally innovative branch of Greek philosophy must be seen as a historical sideshow: the main currents of cultural change (from the fourth century BC onwards) favoured the reaffirmation of religion in a more pronouncedly irrational form.

The details of Breuer's historical analyses cannot be discussed here. His way of problematizing the Axial paradigm may, however, serve as an opening to further criticism. If the idea of a uniform transcendental breakthrough is to be contested in the name of historical diversity, specific foci of conflict with archaic world-views (analogy or continuity, as outlined above) are not the only aspects to be considered. The directions taken by the new capacity for intellectual detachment, as well as the cultural spheres in which it finds expression, can also vary from case to case. Tensions between ultimate principles and existing models of order appear in different contexts (in this regard, significant parallels can indeed—as Eisenstadt has argued against the older Weberian view—be drawn between monotheistic civilizations and the cosmocentric Chinese tradition). But in other cases, the cultural ontology of higher order was overshadowed or at least relativized by other forms of transcendence. The most distinctive achievement of Greek thought was the creation of a new space for reflexivity, argument and discourse, within which new conceptions of the relationship between cosmic and social order could confront each other; a recent interpretation (Brague, 1999) argues that the Greeks first articulated the idea of the world as an ultimate frame of reference, unknown to ancient Near Eastern thought, but this is not synonymous with a cosmocentric vision of order: a sense of underlying chaos and an under-determined relationship between impersonal and pluri-personal forces are characteristic of the Greek conception of the world. The Indian version of the Axial breakthrough poses more difficult interpretive problems, but if early Buddhism is seen as an essential part of the picture, the effort to relativize mundane reality and escape from its constraints seems more

pronounced than any quest for a superior paradigm of order. An intellectual strategy of escape from the world took precedence over projects of reconstruction, and a connection with order-building ambitions—centred on a new vision of kingship—was only formed at a later stage.

As for the cultural spheres involved in Axial transformations, varying relationships between philosophy and religion are crucial to the character and style of different civilizations. In the Greek case, the importance of an ongoing and many-sided 'dialogue between religion and philosophy' has been noted (Humphreys, 1986); it may be possible to generalize this point of view and treat all Axial transformations as different versions of—or approximations to—such a dialogue. The Greek trajectory would then represent the most autonomous (not ipso facto most socially effective) development of philosophy. As for the monotheistic turn in Ancient Israel, we can only speak of a sublimating process with an implicit philosophical content; there was no accompanying current of philosophical reflection. China and India may perhaps be seen as intermediate cases: In China, the main trends of philosophical thought focused on (and disputed) cultural premises of religious origin, but already rationalized in a way that reflected the ascendancy of political authorities over religious ones; the notion of the Way (*dao*) was central to this legacy and continued to shape the course of interpretive conflicts. By contrast, the Indian turn to philosophical reflection took place against a background marked by strong religious elites and traditions: a sustained cultural elaboration of religious themes, obviously linked to an early ascendancy of priests vis-à-vis kingly authority, set the agenda for subsequent philosophical projects of liberation, culminating in early Buddhism.

Finally, the comparative study of Axial transformations—with a view to defining their common denominator—must deal with their social effects and implications. In this regard, Breuer's criticism casts doubt on radical claims: a more realistic assessment would have to admit that compromises with archaic traditions and popular religions are more typical of the Axial age than any comprehensive reforms of the socio-cultural order. As Breuer notes, the Chinese and Indian religions which settled for such adjustments had a broader impact than the self-isolating innovations of sophists and prophets in the Greek and Judaic traditions. This line of argument is not necessarily incompatible with Eisenstadt's model: to speak of a transforma-

tive logic of Axial breakthroughs is not to suggest that it is fully real-
ized in short-term mutations or at the same pace in all fields of
social life. But to tackle this problem in earnest would involve more
systematic work on an underdeveloped part of Eisenstadt's theory.
The secondary breakthroughs mentioned above have so far not been
analyzed at length, and the boundary between them and the origi-
nal Axial transformations is not always clearly drawn (Islam is some-
times mentioned in the same breath as Axial civilizations, and it is
not always clear whether Eisenstadt wants to define Buddhism as a
primary or secondary breakthrough). A clearer conceptual demar-
cation of the two types should be combined with a closer analysis
of the historical relationship between them: to cut a long story short,
secondary breakthroughs articulate and implement the long-term
potential of the primary ones in a different fashion but with more
concentrated effects. If Axial transformations are characterized by
far-reaching but ambiguous changes of cultural orientation and bursts
of intellectual creativity far in advance of existing social outlets, the
secondary ones represent more systematic (but by the same token
more selective and more power-oriented) elaborations of the original
cultural innovations. In that capacity they take decisive steps beyond
the compromises and blockages of earlier phases. As noted above,
the Christian and Islamic transformations of the Judaic legacy are
prime cases in point: through them, the previously isolated idea of
monotheism was translated into large-scale civilizational and world-
historical dynamics. It seems clear that Eisenstadt's idea of a sec-
ondary breakthrough is most directly derived from these sources. A
more detailed typology would have to combine several key distinc-
tions. Some secondary breakthroughs, such as Islam and the syn-
cretic Confucianism that emerged under the early Han dynasty, are
directly linked to imperial projects; others are at first indirectly depend-
ent on and then institutionally fused with existing imperial forma-
tions (Christianity); others are adaptable to a variety of imperial or
more limited state-building projects, but not identified with any one
of them (this applies most obviously to Buddhism after its transfor-
mation into a missionary religion). Intercivilizational secondary break-
throughs can also be distinguished from intracivilizational ones. In
the first case (exemplified by Christianity and Islam), a synthesis
across civilizational boundaries gives rise to a new great tradition
with a more global reach. In the latter case, the changes in ques-
tion take place within a given civilizational context, and they tend

to result in a series of partial secondary breakthroughs rather than a single decisive one. Such relatively self-contained processes are characteristic of Chinese civilization: both the original formation of imperial Confucianism and the emergence of Daoism as an organized religion in the second century AD belong to the intra-civilizational category, and although the rise of Song Neo-Confucianism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries had an intercivilizational background in that it responded to a prolonged impact of Buddhism on Chinese culture and society, the self-image of the protagonists stressed the return to intra-civilizational sources as well as the restoration of civilizational continuity, and the effects did not extend beyond the limits of a pre-existing civilizational domain. Some secondary breakthroughs claim to be based on a new revelation (again, Christianity and Islam are the obvious examples), where others on rediscovery or a better understanding of classical sources (the Confucian tradition follows this pattern, whereas the institutionalization of Daoism seems to have involved an admixture of the first type). Finally, secondary breakthroughs may differ in regard to their ways of drawing on the primary ones: if some of them are, at least in some respects, capable of radicalizing the Axial visions (Christianity and Islam did so in different ways), whereas others achieve a broader diffusion by neutralizing the more challenging implications of the Axial legacy and making it adaptable to a wider range of conditions (Hellenism would seem to fit this description).

In short, Eisenstadt's analyses of Axial civilizations and their historical destinies open up wide-ranging perspectives for further exploration. It remains to consider the implications of his approach for the problematic of modernity; as we have seen, this is one of the key questions to be tackled by any version of civilizational theory. Eisenstadt's reflections on the subject of civilizations and modernities are illuminating, but somewhat inconclusive with regard to the main point at issue: the precise civilizational status of modernity. On the whole, they indicate—but do not explicitly develop—a line of argument which we have already encountered in other contexts. Modernity appears as both more and less than a civilization in its own right: more because of a unique capacity to undermine the cultural premises and overwhelm the power structures of other civilizations across the globe, less because of its dependence on older civilizational legacies whose enduring effects and formative roles of gave rise to varying patterns of modernity. But when it comes to

specifics, both the original formation of modernity in a particular civilizational setting and its subsequent imposition on broad spectrum of other geo-cultural regions raise questions which call for closer examination.

In the most general sense, modernity should—according to Eisenstadt—be understood as a transformation of Axial cultural premises. The tension between transcendental and mundane levels of order is redirected towards a radical vision of human autonomy, in the double sense of ability to construct and construct social order as well as to acquire ever more knowledge of and control over the natural world. These perspectives are grounded in the transcendental turn of Axial predecessors, but they give a thoroughly this-wordly, anthropocentric and activist turn to traditional frames of meaning. The multiple projects of autonomy—from the idea of scientific inquiry to the incorporation of protest as a permanent aspect of political order, and from the principle of subjective rights to the paradigm of self-expression through artistic creation—take the place of ontological models. But alongside this overall view of the relationship between Axial and modern ruptures, Eisenstadt seems to accept a more specific genealogy of the 'cultural programme' which transformed Western Christendom into a global spearhead of modernity: the roots of radical innovation are to be found in the heretic currents which accompanied and intermittently challenged the orthodox mainstream of monotheism. This line of interpretation goes back to the very beginnings of the Christian tradition and underlines the particular importance of Gnostic doctrines for all subsequent ideologies of dissent, including the revolutionary versions which came to characterize the modern age. The Gnostic connection has been invoked by various critics of modernity (most emphatically by Voegelin), but claims in that vein have yet to be reassessed in light of the increasingly complex picture of Gnosticism which is emerging from recent research; only a thorough rethinking of this problematic would enable us to link it to the analysis of Axial transformations and their sequels.

The ambiguous stance on the origins of modernity—a premature coupling of the Axial perspective with shortcut assumptions about the logic of religious dissent—affects other parts of the argument. Is 'the original modern Western civilization' (Eisenstadt, 2000a: 15) a mutant offshoot of the older Western civilizational stem, capable of enlarging its ancestral domain and imposing the dynamic of direct

or indirect Westernization on the rest of the world? Or is the new
'civilization of modernity' (Eisenstadt, 2000a: 7) a trans-traditional
pattern (in the double sense of transcending historical limits and cul-
tural borders), whose first version reflects the exceptional and many-
sided innovative capacity of Western (more precisely Western European)
civilization, but is also marked by tensions between the Western con-
text and the modern dynamic? Some of Eisenstadt's formulations
suggest the first view, but others are closer to the second. The rel-
evance of the distinction becomes obvious if we relate it to the ques-
tion of new modernities emerging outside the West. On the first
view, this process is reducible to more or less inventive appropria-
tions and modifications of Western patterns—envisaged as models—
in other historical and civilizational contexts. The second approach
brings a further aspect into focus: if Western modernity embodies
trends and opens up horizons which transcend its established frame-
works, other paths of development may—in varying degrees—involve
perceptions of this difference and aspirations to overcome or bypass
Western limits to a trans-cultural logic of modernity. Ambitions to
outdo the West in the quest for modernity could centre on strate-
gies of expanding rational control or visions of liberation from con-
straints on autonomy; the most fateful project of alternative modernity
(the Communist model) drew on both these branches of the mod-
ern imaginary, but more or less developed variations on the same
themes often emerged when the 'advantages of backwardness' seemed
to hold out the promise of shortcut to higher modernity. The illu-
sory character of such efforts is not a reason to disregard their impact
on history.

   If Axial sources are crucial to the constitution of Western moder-
nity, the Axial legacies of other civilizations should be reflected in
their respective ways of coping with the Western challenge and chart-
ing or imagining their own paths to modernity. Eisenstadt has not
undertaken a systematic comparison of such connections; his most
extensive work in this field deals with the phenomenon of funda-
mentalism and shows that it represents an important and recurrent
combination of Axial and modern elements (Eisenstadt, 1999). The
modern nature of fundamentalisms is evident in their demands for
a comprehensive reconstruction of the social order on the basis of
doctrinal principles (as Eisenstadt argues, this shows their affinity
with the Jacobin conception of politics as a vehicle for total social
reconstruction), but they remain dependent on religious traditions of

Axial origin for the ideas and value-orientations which they express in new ideological terms. Comparative analyses show that monotheistic traditions are particularly conducive to fundamentalist perceptions of modern crises and conceptions of ways to deal with them. This does not mean that other religious cultures are less relevant to the formation of modern ideological discourses, or immune to Jacobin influences. But as the exemplary case of Hindu nationalism shows, the specific characteristics of a non-monotheistic tradition may affect ideology-building in ways which make the concept of fundamentalism less applicable than in the Western or Islamic worlds.

In spite of Eisenstadt's strong emphasis on Axial legacies and their long-term effects, his most detailed study of a non-Western connection between civilization and modernity deals with a non-Axial tradition which has proved uniquely capable of adapting and reinventing the cultural, institutional and organizational forms first developed in the West. The detailed analysis of Japanese civilization (Eisenstadt, 1996) is beyond the scope of the present inquiry, but some implications for broader comparative perspectives may be noted. For Eisenstadt, the non-Axial character of Japanese cultural patterns is most evident in their unvarying stress on continuity and particularity. The two themes are closely interrelated: the ontological continuity of natural and cultural worlds serves to sustain the continuity of Japanese historical experience—centred on an institutional core which embodies the fusion of social order with a sacred and cosmic one—as well as the self-contained identity of the collective throughout historical stages. This interpretive framework did not rule out extensive borrowing of ideas and cultural techniques from Axial civilizations but the imported elements (mainly of Buddhist and Confucian origin) were 'de-Axialized', i.e. disconnected from the transcendental universalistic perspectives which Eisenstadt sees as the defining features of Axial civilizations. In the modern context, the enduring non-Axial foundations have helped to construct specific variants of institutions originally created in a different setting. In particular, the embeddedness of social relations in the symbolism of kinship—characteristic of a non-Axial continuum—is reflected in the network structures of Japanese capitalism, the 'family state' first built around the imperial institution but to some extent capable of surviving a change of political regime, and the totalizing claims of Japanese nationalism. Eisenstadt's analyses of these phenomena link up with the arguments of those who have stressed the particular importance of

integrative structures for the Japanese version of modernity. A long history of particularistic adaptation and avoidance of radical breaks has left a legacy which furthers strategies of self containment.

Eisenstadt's account of the Japanese paradox—a non-Axial tradition transformed into the most notable non-Western matrix of modernity, and thus proving more responsive to a long-term outcome of Axial dynamics than other civilizations with an Axial background of their own—might be taken as a starting-point for further comparisons. The Japanese record of appropriating Axial ideas and institutions without accepting their most far-reaching consequences is the most striking case of its kind, but parables and contrasts with other developments on the periphery of Axial centres would be worth considering. For example, the importance of the Inner Asian civilizational complex and its interaction with China is now increasingly recognized by comparative historians. A less obvious affinity with internal counter-currents of Axial civilizations may be suggested: if the impact of Axial breakthroughs—within their own domains—was always more or less limited by compromises, amalgamations and downgrading interpretations, this side of the picture will to some extent be comparable to external patterns of borrowing without complete assimilation. In short, the singular case of a surviving and modernizing non-Axial civilization could serve to open up a broader field of inquiry, complementary to the analysis of Axial transformations.

To conclude, some basic conceptual issues implicit in Eisenstadt's substantive arguments should be noted. As shown in the introductory chapter, his approach to civilizational theory raises meta-theoretical questions of the most challenging kind. In light of the above comments on his interpretations of Axial breakthroughs and their consequences, it may be added that both the model which he proposes and the criticisms which it invites bring the critical points into clearer focus. For present purposes, the main merit of Eisenstadt's work is that it indicates paths to be explored and problems to be tackled, even if further pursuit of the themes in question may cast doubt on the specific constructs first used to define them. The unfinished tasks are, above all, related to the project of a civilizational theory trying to clarify the constitutive role of culture without reproducing on a larger scale the cultural determinism of the sociological theories which it set out to refute.

This aim entails, in the most general terms, a twofold theoretical shift: On the one hand, the meta-social aspects of culture—ways of

articulating the world and providing interpretive horizons for all
domains of human activity—are now thematized in a more sustained
fashion. In contrast to the more or less mutually reductionistic con-
ceptions of the relationship between culture and structure, the onto-
logical contents of cultural premises are given their due and seen as
defining characteristics of differential civilizational complexes. On the
other hand, allowance is made for more diversity, ambiguity and his-
toricity in the interrelations of cultural and social patterns. Eisenstadt's
anti-functionalist turn to civilizational analysis was, as we have seen,
inspired by such considerations, and he singled out Axial civiliza-
tions for closer attention because they seemed to exemplify a his-
torical shift in the very direction highlighted by the new theoretical
approach: towards more complex and mutually transformative con-
nections between interpretive horizons and institutionalized practices.
Axial world-views break new ground in the cultural articulation of
the social world as well as of its being in a cosmic context, but they
also enhance the role of ideological strategies and rivalries animated
by social forces; the more elaborate and demanding frameworks of
meaning provide intellectual resources for rationalizing processes
which render various domains of social life more autonomous with
regard to integrative cultural forms. But the most pertinent objec-
tions to Eisenstadt's account suggest that this line of argument might
be taken one step further. Although the proposed general model of
Axial transformations goes far beyond functionalist notions of cul-
tural programming (especially in its emphasis on the order-subverting
as well as the order-building potential of culture, and on the irre-
ducibility of both sides to structural imperatives), it still assumes
a uniform and unilateral impact of new cultural premises on the
forms of social life. The critical responses discussed above stress the
diversity of cultural horizons as well as the complexity of their inter-
connections with social and political dynamics.

The long-term implications and consequences of Axial break-
throughs suggest further reflections in the same vein. As has been
noted above, the relationship between primary and secondary break-
throughs has yet to be analyzed in detail and with due regard to
variations from case to case, but it seems clear that reinterpretations
and rediscoveries—often accompanied by redefinitions of the bound-
aries between orthodoxy and dissent—are integral parts of the dynam-
ics of Axial traditions. The patterns of such developments reveal the
potential of cultural premises which cannot find adequate expression

in short-term transformations. On the other hand, the interplay of
formative ideas and interested forces brings out all the ambiguities
of the underlying constellation. The openness of traditions to new
interpretations presupposes a surplus of meaning irreducible to social
factors or functions; and even if the ways of reactivating unexhausted
sources are inseparable from projects and aspirations of changing
sets of social actors, the internal logic of cultural legacies never col-
lapses into arbitrary choices of strategic action. In short, the his-
toricity of traditions—in the double sense of ability to shape history
and exposure to his historical change—is an important and still
under-theorized aspect of the problematic at issue.

Finally, the connections between civilizational backgrounds and
modern innovations raise further questions about the transformative
capacity of culture. On the one hand, Eisenstadt links the European
genesis of modernity to the particular strength and persistence of
heterodox currents in Western Christendom. Their cumulative effects
result—at a critical juncture—in a cultural upgrading of protest and
a decisive shift towards more activistic visions of order. On the other
hand, he argues—in greater detail—that the most distinctive and
effective repatterning of institutional inventions pioneered in Europe
took place in a civilizational setting marked by long experience of
limited borrowing from Axial sources, without ever taking a full-
fledged Axial turn. An atypical offshoot of Axial transformations and
an exceptional case of non-Axial continuity are thus singled out as
the most productive generators of modernity. By contrast, the civi-
lizations which achieved a closer and more lasting union of re-
elaborated Axial traditions with integrative political structures—such
as the Byzantine and Chinese empires, or the more unstable imperial
formations of the Islamic world—seem to have become more resis-
tant to radical changes of the kind that culminated in the break-
through to modernity. Modernity is, on this view, much less directly
related to Axial origins than are the secondary breakthroughs, and
it may be seen as a fundamentally different mode of socio-cultural
change. If Axial and modern experiences of radical innovation are
nevertheless to be theorized within a common framework, the task
thus set takes the whole project further: In both cases, cultural re-
orientations are central to more comprehensive changes, but the pat-
terns of interconnections between cultural sources and social dynamics
are not of the same kind (the modern transformation leases both
political and economic forces of a far more momentous nature than

any traditional precedents), and closer comparative study of the differences could do much to clarify the changing role of world-views in the self-constitution of society.

3.4 *Jaroslav Krejčí: Civilizations as paradigms of the human condition*

To conclude this selective survey of trends and themes in civilizational analysis, a brief mention should be made of the most explicit attempt to review the agenda of the metahistorical tradition from a more sociological perspective. Jaroslav Krejčí's work draws inspiration from the metahistorians—especially Toynbee—and accepts some of their core ideas as essential correctives to one-sided approaches of the sociological tradition, but this constructive response is combined with a critique of conceptual shortcomings and inconclusive arguments. Two fundamental flaws in Toynbee's theory are, on this view, particularly suggestive of problems to be tackled. In the course of his introductory reflections on the comparative history of civilizations, Toynbee considers the role of 'creative minorities' in demarcating civilized societies from primitive ones (and thus establishing the general framework within which civilizations in the plural can be distinguished from each other), but breaks off the discussion before it reaches a critical point: there is no attempt to compare the projects and achievements—intentional and unintentional—of different elites, as reflected in corresponding civilizational patterns. At a much later stage of the argument, Toynbee abandons the idea of universal churches as recurrent phases of civilizational dynamics (which had been one of the keystones of his conceptual framework) and recognizes the universalistic potential of higher religions. The loosening of links between civilizational frameworks and religious visions now appears as a move towards higher forms of social life, but the case for this very major change of mind remains unclear in many respects. The two issues are interconnected (the religious innovations which transcend civilizational boundaries are obviously the work of creative minorities of a particularly pioneering kind), and they point to an underlying problem: Toynbee's failure to thematize the cultural premises of civilizational formations. His civilizations are more aptly described as self-contained societies than as separate cultural worlds. But neither the new horizons opened up by creative minorities nor the varying roles of religious beliefs in social life can be understood

without reference to cultural contexts. The articulation of new mean-
ings—including those that might be seen as bridges across civiliza-
tional boundaries—always relates to established frames of meaning
in both positive and negative ways.

The questions taken up where Toynbee left them can easily be
linked to long-standing themes of sociological inquiry: elites and reli-
gions figured prominently in the writings of the classics and remained
important for later work in their wake. But for Krejčí, the main
advantage to be expected from this detour through another tradi-
tion is a balancing of perspectives. As he sees it, sociology has on
the whole been overly concerned with structural determinants of
institutional patterns and processes; Marx's emphasis on economic
structures as core components of social formations was an extreme
case, but it reflects a much more general trend. The corrective which
Krejčí seeks to extract from the metahistorical tradition—a sustained
analysis of the formative role of ideas, as well as of the agencies and
institutions in which they are embodied—is not wholly alien to the
sociological one. In particular, Max Weber's allusions to cultural
interpretations of the world and to the interaction of ideas and inter-
ests may be seen as pointers to the same problematic, but Weber
left this part of his programme in a very underdeveloped state, and
Krejčí does not engage with it.

Krejčí's guidelines for civilizational analysis are obviously geared
to further testing and development through confrontation with soci-
ological problems. The most succinct summary (Krejčí, 1982: 32–34)
begins with a reference to world-views and value-orientations inti-
mately linked to each other, and to the more or less distinctive modes
of thought which accompany them; with regard to the last-men-
tioned aspect, empiricist, speculative and fideistic styles of intellec-
tual life are obvious sources of variation, and the same can presumably
be said of choices made in the conceptual articulation of experience.
These cultural factors operate in conjunction with more visible social
forces. Krejčí refers to 'protagonist groups' which play 'the decisive
role in shaping the spiritual profile of the respective civilization' (ibid.:
33). There is nothing in his argument that would exclude a more
flexible approach: it may be useful to focus on changing clusters or
alliances of elites, and to treat the hegemony of a single protagonist
group as an extreme case. The enduring dominance of the Chinese
literati was exceptional, but even there, the relationship between the
literati and a broader stratum known to historians as the gentry is

controversial; in India, the relationship between brahmins and kshatriyas was—despite the higher status of the former—marked by a division of roles which has no parallel in China; as for Western civilization, especially in its modern phase, the most important collective actors were those often subsumed under the category of the 'bourgeoisie' and sometimes mistaken for a single class.

The cultural premises of a particular civilization are enshrined in normative texts. This is most evident in the case of the traditions based on supposedly revealed texts, i.e. those of the monotheistic religions, but other examples include the Homeric epics in Ancient Greece and the Confucian classics in China. The ideas and values formulated in the 'standard normative literature' may be more or less closely related to the legal order: law is sometimes directly derived from sacred texts, in other cases loosely affiliated with the ethical paradigms of exemplary texts, and in the modern West, legal and quasi-legal documents—constitutional preambles and declarations—seem to come closest to the status of normative writings. Finally, the legal order depends on integrative institutions of various kinds: empires and nation-states are the most obvious examples, but churches and other specific forms of religious communities—such as the Islamic *umma* or the Buddhist *sangha*—have also been of crucial importance.

This inventory of civilizational features should be taken in a phenomenological rather than a systematic sense. It draws attention to factors and phenomena which recur in different settings but vary in detail and in their relations to historical contexts; their variety has been obscured by oversimplifying theories of cultural and social integration. But before going on to discuss Krejčí's more theoretical arguments, a brief glance at the historical background to his ideas may be useful. Although the connection was only made explicit in a later text (Krejčí, 1998), it seems clear that direct experience of the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia had a decisive effect on Krejčí's understanding of civilizations. The Czechoslovak road to Communist rule was easier to interpret in civilizational terms than most other cases of the kind. This was the most advanced society that came under undivided Communist rule, and memories of the most stable liberal democratic regime in the region were still strongly present; here the most ambitious alternative version of modernity came closest to challenging the West on the latter's own ground. Paradoxically, the Communist party that seized power under these exceptional circumstances enjoyed much broader popular support

than those of other East European countries, and the takeover was less openly unconstitutional than elsewhere. There was neither civil war nor direct foreign intervention, and the absence of an all-out power struggle made the ideological contrast—the conflict between incompatible visions of human society and its proper order—stand out all the more sharply. Moreover, the victorious side had all the civilizational attributes listed above: a tightly organized protagonist group (the Communist movement), a self-contained world-view (the Marxist-Leninist doctrine), a corpus of normative literature (the classics of Marxism-Leninism) and an integrative institution (the party-state established after the takeover). This was, in short, a constellation which threw the civilizational pretensions of the Soviet model into full relief.

But if the original impulse came from contemporary history, Krejčí's conceptual framework reflects an effort to detach the problems at issue from particular cases. The idea of civilizations as paradigms of the human condition—or the human predicament—underlines the importance of world-views, but focuses on a level which allows us to compare traditional religious with the secular ones of recent times, and to include traditions of a more reflexive and rationalizing bent. The different paradigms are defined, in the most general sense, as ways of making sense of life and coping with death (Krejčí, 1993: 1). They are seen as modes of creative interpretation, i.e. of constructing and conferring meaning; from that point of view, a certain affinity with Weber's underdeveloped concept of culture is obvious, but here the emphasis is on lending meaning to life, rather than to the world. The implications of this difference will become clearer if we consider the most dominant and distinctive paradigms. As Krejčí argues, a historical survey shows that there are not many clear-cut and representative examples. The Sumerian pioneers of ancient Mesopotamian civilization invented a 'god-centred or theocentric' paradigm (Krejčí, 1993: 12) which was to prove extraordinarily capable of diffusion beyond its original homeland, but also open to modifications of various kinds. In its original version, this world-view stresses the absolute supremacy of the gods, the subordination of human beings to their commands, and the arbitrary side of divine authority. The gulf between gods and human beings is too great to be bridged by any binding order; but at the same time, the use of human models to represent the divine realm sets limits to the perfection of the gods. A very different vision of human goals and des-

tinies emerged in the second major civilization of the Ancient Near East. The Egyptian outlook on life was fundamentally more optimistic than the Sumerian, but it was so strongly focused on the optimization of life after death—in other words on an imaginary triumph over death—that 'thanatocentrism' seems the most appropriate term.

Other paradigms took shape in cultural regions at a greater distance from the first civilizations. Archaic Greece borrowed ideas and techniques from its more advanced Near Eastern neighbours, but as Greek civilization developed a more autonomous ethos, 'an exceptionally strong emphasis on men's self-realization in this world' (Krejčí, 1993: 19) set it apart from all older traditions. This anthropocentric stance was evident in diverse domains of Greek life, from an unprecedentedly anthropomorphic version of polytheism to the affirmation of rationality through philosophical reflection. By contrast, the Indian cultural area—known to have interacted with the Near East, but too remote for a clearer view of influences and responses to be possible—gave rise to the most markedly other-worldly of all paradigms. Its most distinctive feature was the quest for liberation from mundane life, to be achieved through reunification with a transcendent fountainhead of being; in more or less significantly modified versions, this conception of ultimate human ends continued to inspire variants of the Indian tradition. Because of its emphasis on the human soul in search of higher knowledge and ultimate enlightenment, Krejčí describes this paradigm as psychocentric. Finally, the Chinese world was, although not wholly isolated from Near Eastern centres of innovation, so little affected by external factors that we can speak of an endogenous cultural formation. Here the most characteristic and enduring component is a 'cratocentric' or state-centred world-view: the individual is—more emphatically than elsewhere—seen as a member of hierarchically ordered collectives (from family and village to state and empire), and an exceptionally durable model of sacred kingship was central to collective life. The cratocentric paradigm which emerged victorious from a period of political fragmentation and philosophical pluralism dominated cultural life in the early Chinese empire.

There is no doubt that a comparison of different perspectives on the human condition can serve to clarify both contrasts and affinities between civilizations. But the above reference to Weber may help us to relativize Krejčí's approach. If the idea of an interpretive patterning of world-horizons is taken as a starting-point, it would

seem more appropriate to treat the meanings lent to life and death
as variables within a broader context of cultural world-making. The
prominence given to the problem of meaning in life, the consistency
of proposed solutions with other parts of the cultural framework, and
the level of reflexivity with regard to the problematic at issue would
differ from case to case and depend on the overall constellation. On
this view, the notion of a paradigm of the human condition is ambigu-
ous: it refers to ways of locating and demarcating the human world
within an ontological framework of larger dimensions, but also to
more specific patterns of meaning internal to—or imposed on—the
human world as such. As I will try to show, Krejčí's list of para-
digms tends to conflate these two analytical levels. Although only
one of five paradigms is defined as anthropocentric, a more general
latent anthropocentrism is reflected in the whole scheme and the
interpretation of each particular case.

This is perhaps least evident in the analysis of theocentrism: here
the main theme is the self-denial of human autonomy and the pro-
jection of enlarged human images onto superhuman actors. But if
the focus is—almost exclusively—on the relationship between human
and divine beings, with particular emphasis on the inherent disso-
nances between divine command and human conduct (due to divine
mystery as well as human weakness), other aspects of the problem-
atic are by the same token obscured. The ontological division of
reality into divine and human realms, the changes brought about by
more radical conceptions of the contrast (such as the Axial innova-
tions analyzed by Eisenstadt), and the corresponding shifts in para-
digms of order become less important than a supposedly enduring
anthropo-theological core. Recent work in the field seems to support
Krejčí's view of the Sumerian pantheon as a notably original and
eminently transferable invention, but the history of its later meta-
morphoses is more multi-dimensional than the definition of the theo-
centric paradigm would suggest. The treatment of the Egyptian
world-view is more obviously selective: to call it thanatocentric is to
stress the human interest in techniques and beliefs designed to cope
with mortality, but this does not tell us much about the background
and context of the attitudes to death and afterlife. A more compre-
hensive interpretation of ancient Egypt (Assmann, 1990) suggests that
its uniqueness among early civilizations might be better understood
in light of a distinctive conception of socio-cosmic harmony, encap-
sulated in the notion of *Maat*. A just and stable order, encompass-
ing men and gods, was more easily conceivable within the Egyptian

frame of reference than the Mesopotamian one, and the unfolding of this idea influenced the death-centred ideas and practices: they became more responsive to the demands of broader social strata. But although Krejčí refers to this aspect of Egyptian culture, it does not enter into his definition of the paradigm. Closer attention to it could have brought the Egyptian case out of its apparent isolation and prompted comparison with cosmocentric views in other civilizations. But cosmocentrism as a mode of interpretation seems to be absent from Krejčí's typology.

More basic objections may be raised in connection with the Greek case. The stress on anthropocentrism is in line with time-honoured conceptions of the classical legacy, but the traditional predilection for this theme is largely due to its role in disengaging European culture from a theocentric framework, and a more nuanced understanding of Greek attitudes has brought other aspects to the fore. In the first place, the notion of anthropocentrism is ambiguous in that it conceals tensions between individual and collective projects. In Archaic Greek culture, aristocratic value-orientations geared to individual excellence coexisted with more egalitarian and *polis*-centred ones; and although the primacy of the *polis* during the classical period was so pervasive that it would seem more justified to speak of a civic paradigm than at any other time in history, individualistic trends were reinforced in the Hellenistic phase. But there was another side to Greek ways of thought. The notion of the cosmos as an ordered whole was elaborated in a more sustained fashion than elsewhere; it can even be argued that the idea of the world, in the sense of an all-encompassing framework of being, was first articulated by the Greeks (Brague, 1999). A strong and distinctive cosmocentric trend, conducive to bleak views of the human condition, was very much in evidence, and it was crucial to the first steps of philosophical reflection. Finally, Greek transformations of the theocentric paradigm were important in their own right. They resulted in a very durable version of polytheism, closely intertwined with the institutional structure of the *polis*, and at the same time exceptionally open to creative use in a variety of cultural genres. For all these reasons, it seems appropriate to describe the Greek constellation as an interplay of paradigms, much less reducible to a dominant theme or direction than the older civilizations of the Near East had been.

A closer look at Indian and Chinese traditions also suggests that they are best understood in terms of contested problematics, rather than coherent paradigms. If the quest for liberation through meditative

practices and spiritual discipline became a defining theme of Indian thought, its meaning was by the same token open to dispute between alternative currents. To cut a long story very short, the world-renouncing mind may plot its progress and define its goals in different ways, some of which involve stronger or more explicit aspirations to autonomy than others. Early Buddhist visions of disengagement from the self-perpetuating cycle of life shifted the emphasis towards autonomy, whereas a more heteronomous notion of renouncement as the road to reunification with ultimate reality—linked to the later Hindu revival—paved the way for a thoroughgoing reintegration of theo-centric traditions. On the historical level, Krejčí is obviously aware of these differences: he sees the Buddhist ascendancy in India as an incomplete civilizational formation, followed first by a synthesis of diverse traditions and then by Hinduist assimilation under more adverse geopolitical conditions. But the theoretical implications of this sequence are not explored. The first step in that direction would be a redefinition of the underlying problematic or paradigm in more flexible terms. Allowing that theories anchored in Western tradi-tions (such as those of the present writer and all the authors discussed in this book) should proceed with caution when it comes to cross-civilizational understanding, enough is known for a tentative solution to be suggested. Indian ways of thought seem, in an unusual degree, to have grounded the interpretation of the world in a negation or relativization of mundane reality (to identify this stance with a reli-gious rejection of the world, as Max Weber did, is to beg the ques-tion of contacts and contrasts between philosophical and religious articulations). This framework was, however, adaptable to different uses. When the focus is on autonomous human effort to escape from the world of the senses, the result can be described as negative anthropocentrism (and here the reference to psychocentrism is appro-priate, if it is taken to mean a search for ways of freeing the soul from the constraints of embodied existence). But when visions of an ultimate trans-empirical reality are elaborated in a more ontological vein and with more direct bearing on the legitimacy of the social order, the notion of negative cosmocentrism would be closer to the mark.

As for the Chinese tradition, the concept of cratocentrism seems inadequate. There is, of course, no denying the centrality and con-tinuity of sacred kingship and of the images of order constructed around it. But this does not mean that rulership or statehood were

uniformly idealized as such and for their own sake. The original framework for the legitimation—and progressive rationalization—of sacred kingship was an imaginary fusion of cosmic and socio-political order (among major cultural traditions, the Chinese version of cosmocentrism stands out as the most emphatic and durable). At a later stage, the fragmentation of an archaic political order and the rise of less traditionalist power centres on a local scale led to the development of an intellectual current which stressed the primacy of state-building and the need for rational power-maximizing strategies. This branch of Chinese thought—known as the Legalist school—is the only one that can be described as cratocentric in the strict sense of the word: it thematized the state as a human construct and as the principal concern of human activity. On the other hand, the most seminal response to the new experience of competitive state-building—the Confucian school—gave a humanistic turn to the cosmocentric paradigm, which thus became the mainstay of a civilizing project. The cosmocentric imaginary was too entrenched for a separate Legalist tradition to be viable, but the practical results of state-building and imperial reunification had taken Legalist ideas far enough to make them an indispensable component of the orthodoxy which took shape under Confucian guidance after the consolidation of the empire. In short, the privileged role of rulership in Chinese thought and culture did not *ipso facto* ensure consensus on its proper meaning; rival interpretations developed during a phase of pronounced ideological pluralism (the Chinese version of the Axial Age) and gave way to a more stable and structured combination of traditions after the transition to imperial rule, but the official synthesis could still be questioned and modified from various angles. The emphasis on cratocentrism is misleading in that it obscures the enduring presence and adaptive capacity of a cosmocentric tradition.

In brief, a closer examination of the five primary paradigms shows—albeit not in equal measure—the need for more pluralistic models. Krejčí's approaches to the comparative history of civilizations and their interactions should be seen in light of this conclusion: they open up fields of inquiry which merit further exploration within an expanded frame of reference. The following discussion will be limited to questions concerning the three issues singled out above as major challenges to civilizational theory: the dynamics of intercivilizational encounters and their mutually integrative effects, the transformations brought about by breakthroughs of the kind most commonly ascribed

to the Axial age, and the particular civilizational status of modernity. On all these matters, Krejčí's position differs markedly from the other theorists considered in this chapter, and his reasons to dissent are of some interest.

Although Krejčí does not use the concept of intercivilizational encounters, it is possible to extract a typology of such phenomena from his work. Unilateral encounters, characterized by the diffusion of a dominant paradigm beyond its original borders, have often been associated with military conquest, but the connection is neither universal nor unequivocal: conquerors may undergo cultural assimilation, and diffusion can occur without military expansion. The spread of universal religions, especially Islam and Christianity, is perhaps the most familiar example of conversion frequently yet not invariably linked to conquest, but the same applies to earlier cases of cultural diffusion, such as the Hellenization of the Near East and the Indianization of Southeast Asia (in the latter context, the role of military expansion seems to have been minimal). Buddhism can perhaps be seen as an intermediate case between the two types: it was brought to Southeast Asia as a part of a broader Indian cultural model, whereas its propagation in East Asia had a more missionary character.

A very different kind of encounter—not explicitly identified as such by Krejčí—might be called reflexive. It is more conventionally known as a renaissance; the reason for calling it an encounter and comparing it with other kinds is that this serves to underline both the importance of reactivated traditions and the active role of social and cultural forces which reclaim historical legacies for new purposes. Historians have often applied the idea of the renaissance to episodes in European history, prior to the paradigmatic case, but Krejčí proposes a cross-cultural definition which includes only major examples. As he sees it, there are six world-historical cases in point: the Zoroastrian renaissance in Iran during the first centuries of our era, the Sanskrit (and to some extent Brahmin) renaissance in India during the first millennium AD, the revival of Pali Buddhism in Ceylon and continental Southeast Asia in the first centuries of the second millennium, the Confucian renaissance in China at roughly the same time, the rediscovery of Greco-Roman antiquity in late medieval Western Europe, and the revival of Islam in response to the inroads of Western civilization (Krejčí, 1993: 91–2).

The last case on this list is perhaps the least convincing: Islamic activism is clearly in retreat from its original political projects (Roy,

1994), and although it is too early to assess its historical record, there are no reasons to credit it with cultural promise on a par with the renaissances of the past. But the five other cases are worth further consideration. Three of them—the Zoroastrian, the Buddhist and the Confucian—seem to fall under Eisenstadt's category of secondary breakthroughs: reconstructed traditions and reinforced claims to orthodoxy are intertwined with visions of imperial resurrection, attempts to reform existing imperial structures, or at least to new state-building strategies. The relative importance of renaissance projects (always based on a mixture of rediscovery and re-imagination) in the context of secondary breakthroughs is a matter for comparative study.

The two remaining examples raise more intriguing questions. South and Southeast Asian cultural developments in the first centuries of our era were so innovative that the notion of a renaissance may seem doubtful (Pollock, 1998a: 10). A case can still be made for it, inasmuch as the privileged status of Sanskrit was reasserted in connection with the re-emergence of the Brahmins as a socio-cultural force (together with the supporting caste system) and the revived cults of formerly minor but now more and more dominant deities. On the other hand, the new Sanskrit culture gave pride of place to the aesthetic representation and imaginary universalization of power, and this focus became a defining feature of the vastly and rapidly enlarged cultural region which Krejčí describes as a 'Pan-Indic civilization' and Pollock as a 'Sanskrit cosmopolis'. As Pollock shows, this was a very peculiar civilizational formation: its striking unity on the level of literary culture was not backed up by any religious or ideological orthodoxy, organized political power, or in-depth and long-term cultural assimilation of its local components. The Pan-Indic context accommodated religious and philosophical traditions with common roots but varying priorities and directions, a plurality of states with more or less pronounced imperial pretensions but no prospects of all-inclusive domination, and local cultures resilient enough to impose their versions of literary community at a later stage. Here the renaissance obviously served to reactivate a framework capable of stabilizing an exceptional level of political and cultural pluralism.

In the European context, medieval historians have spoken of minor renaissances on a limited scale, but the case at issue here is the more familiar Renaissance that unfolded from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Here the cultural reorientation was—in contrast to

India—not dependent on the revival of a sacred language in a cosmopolitan guise. Rather, it was part and parcel of the move towards a vernacular differentiation of the cosmopolitan culture that had flourished during the preceding historical phase, and this distinctive feature was linked to a more fundamental difference. As Krejčí puts it, the European renaissance was 'open-ended'; several meanings of this term may be distinguished. A transformation of the relationship to Greco-Roman sources, however radical, was inevitably limited in that it did not preclude—and was in some degree conducive to—a parallel but antagonistic attempt to reactivate key aspects of the monotheistic legacy. The bifurcation of Western Christendom, known as the Reformation, had even more far-reaching effects than the Renaissance. But the latter was also open-ended in the sense that its renewed emphasis on human self-realization could be interpreted and implemented in different ways; the implications of this ambiguity will become clearer when we move on to consider Krejčí's views of the modern West. Finally, it is worth noting a third opening left unmentioned in Krejčí's account but of some importance to his discussion of the anthropological paradigms: the new relationship to the ancient world was, in the long run, conducive to more diverse and mutually critical ways of reappropriating classical sources. This emerging pluralism of interpretations can only be understood in relation to the abovementioned plurality of paradigms within the Greek tradition.

For Krejčí, however, the most significant outcomes of intercivilizational encounters are to be found at another level. Cultural contacts and interactions can result in combinations or mixtures of paradigms, capable of reorienting traditions and sustaining long-term developments. Three outstanding cases of this kind have left their marks on history: the Christian fusion of theocentrism and anthropocentrism, the incorporation of theocentric themes into the Mahayana branch of the Buddhist tradition, and the more diffuse influence of sacred kingship as a partial opening to cratocentrism, most clearly manifest in the imperial versions of Christian civilization (Late Roman, Byzantine and Russian), as well as in the Islamic adjustments to an old model of monarchy. There is no doubt that these encounters exemplify patterns which were not given their due in Nelson's pioneering survey of the field. Intercivilizational blendings of basic cultural premises, however partial and problematic, give rise to new formations with cultural logics of their own. Such developments are often very difficult to analyze in detail, because of the elusive and

intricate factors at work. It seems, for example, very likely that there
was some mutually formative contact between Indian and Near
Eastern religious cultures in the first centuries of our era, but virtually
impossible to reconstruct the channels of influence. It is much eas-
ier to trace the impact of Buddhism and Christianity on the cultural
regions into which they expanded—East Asia and the Mediterra-
nean world—than to locate the cross-regional currents which may
have been involved in their early history.

But although Krejčí's discussion of this problematic—the inter-
civilizational fusions of existential and ontological frameworks—broad-
ens the horizons of comparative study, the questions raised should
be reconsidered in light of Nelson's approaches. As we have seen,
Nelson was particularly interested in situations where the internal
conflicts and divergences of one civilization were activated by con-
tacts with others. As he saw it, the rivalries built into basic struc-
tures of consciousness are no less important than the efforts to
maintain unity and identity, and intercivilizational encounters can
affect the balance between the two sides in more or less momen-
tous ways. On this view, the above-mentioned combinations or syn-
theses are at the same time sources of new tensions and polarizing
trends which may escalate in response to later changes from within
or without. A partial compromise between theocentrism and anthro-
pocentrism was central to the multi-traditional mixture which became
a seedbed for successive European civilizations, but there is another
side to the picture: the Christian synthesis of Greek and Jewish
sources laid the foundations for later revivals of dispute over the
relationships between faith and reason, religion and politics, or—at
a later stage—between rival secular claimants to the European her-
itage. As for Krejčí's other main example, the adaptation of Buddhism
to a more theocentric outlook aided its expansion across large parts
of the Asian continent, but the broader religious and geographical
basis was also the starting-point for further processes of differentiation,
with results ranging from the Lamaist civilization of Tibet to the
various offshoots of Japanese Buddhism. In short, the more trans-
formative encounters—those which result in cross-civilizational inte-
gration of cultural premises—can also pave the way for new divisions
and dissonances. But the connections between these two aspects have
yet to be explored at length.

The diffusion and acculturation of theocentrism, more than any other
case of expanding paradigms, is also central to Krejčí's interpretation

of the Axial epoch; although he has not dealt with this question
in extensive detail, a clear and distinctive view emerges from com-
ments in various contexts. The Axial breakthroughs—or the devel-
opments thus labeled by other theorists—are primarily characterized
by a newfound capacity for and interest in rational reflection, even
if the directions and implications of this burn vary in ways which
reflect the logics of different paradigms. Rationalizing efforts were
common to early philosophical thought in Greece, India and China,
but the results vary in both kind and degree. Ancient Judaism was
an isolated and outstanding exception to this pattern, but its radi-
calization—or internal rationalization—of the theocentric pattern
profigured later developments on a much larger scale. The widely
dispersed long-term effects of the three main philosophical traditions
are difficult to assess, but the rationalizing wave which they embod-
ied was in due course—during the first centuries of our era—over-
taken by a 'religionizing' one. From the rise of Christianity and its
less successful rivals in the Roman Empire to the crystallization of
Daoist religion in China, a marked turn towards more emphatically
religious outlooks and attitudes seems to have taken place through-
out the Eurasian spectrum of civilizations; this could lead to the
revival of older beliefs in more orthodox form (as in Sasanian Iran)
or to a shift from the quest for liberation to devotional worship as
in the most influential currents of Mahayana Buddhism). And although
the factors conducive to a religious turn were clearly at work in all
major civilizational regions, the most spectacular and long-lasting
developments originated within the Near Eastern cradle of theocen-
trism. The trend culminated in the rise of Islam.

The Axial innovations are thus overshadowed by later changes of
a more ambiguous kind; the result is best understood as a readjust-
ment within established frameworks, of meaning. Krejčí's account of
the transition to modernity begins in a similar vein but the conclu-
sions are less clear-cut. The 'open-ended' resurgence of anthro-
pocentrism, after a long confinement within theocentric horizons,
opened up several possibilities of reorientation. Krejčí's comments
on modern Western civilization suggest three different definitions,
and it remains unclear whether they are to be fitted together in a
more complex model. The first centres on the notion of human
rights as a new form of anthropocentrism; if this idea represents the
'basic principle of organized societies in Euroamerican civilization as
a whole' (Krejčí, 1993: 127), it is by the same token open to refor-

mulations and rival interpretations. 'Human rights' in this broad sense—not to be confused with the more specific versions central to recent debates—are, in other words, synonymous with the core ideas of the democratic revolutions (and grounded in the older notion of natural law). But Krejčí also notes a fundamental cognitive reorientation, the shift from fideism to empiricism (ibid.: 107–10), and sees it as a defining feature of the whole civilizational complex in question. The recognition—and the controlled use—of experience as the ultimate source and criterion of knowledge changes the ground rules in all areas of social life. Finally, the utilitarian ethic, translatable into different visions of social welfare, is so pervasive that the spirit of Euro American civilization may be described as Benthamite (Krejčí, 1982: 39).

The unclear relationship between three civilizational premises—natural law, empiricism and utilitarianism—can perhaps be seen as a matter of inherent ambiguity, rather than incomplete analysis: it characterizes a 'society that was not able to embrace wholeheartedly any specific transcendental paradigm of the human predicament' (Krejčí, 1993: 110). A mostly tacit compromise with theocentric elements aggravates the problem. All the above-mentioned cultural orientations of the modern West coexist with a weakened but often actively resistant Christian tradition, without accepted or institutionalized rules of demarcation. This fundamental indeterminacy provokes attempts to construct a more monolithic version of modernity. In particular, the main challenge to Western models came from a revolutionary regime with totalizing ambitions and global succession claims. Its ideological charter redefined modern projects—the liberation of humanity, the scientific pursuit of knowledge, and the rationalization of social life on the basis of utilitarian rules—in uncompromisingly exclusive ways and integrated them into a system which precluded any compromise with religion. But the very radicalism of this new orthodoxy gave rise to attitudes and practices which stamp it as a secular religion. On the other hand, the civilizational pretensions inherent in its alternative vision of modernity were grafted onto a particularly composite and shifting civilizational background. The Russian experience of peripheral belonging to the Byzantine world, conquest by Inner Asian imperial nomads and independent empire-building with Westernizing ventures left a very problematic legacy: a fertile ground for illusions of revolutionary shortcuts to a new identity but also a cumulative dynamic of power structures

drawing on different sources and capable of revival behind the new civilizational facade. Although Krejčí does not discuss this side of the picture, it has an obvious bearing on his problematic.

On this view, the failure of the Communist alternative heralds a return rather than an end of history: the open-ended pattern of modernity prevails over attempted closure and unfolds on a more global scale. The victory of the West does not determine once and for all the range of responses to or reinventions of Western models within the extant non-Western civilizations. But in the present context, theoretical perspectives on modernity in progress are less important than the metatheoretical questions raised by this line of analysis. Is the multi-paradigmatic character of modernity—the civilization which does not lend itself to full identification with a specific view of the human condition—a deviation from all earlier patterns, or a more explicit and sustained development of trends already at work in less openly pluralistic traditions? Krejčí's comments on the cross-civilizational fusions of paradigms lend some support to the latter alternative—the combinations of theocentric notions with anthropo-, crato- or psychocentric ones can also be seen as sources of tensions between the irreducibly diverse components. The above reflections on disunities at a more basic level, within the cultural complexes which Krejčí equates with primary paradigms (most clearly visible in the Greek case), suggest that the question goes to the heart of civilizational theory. Unifying paradigms might be analyzed as partial integrations of underlying and diverging currents, more complete in some cases than others but never capable of forming mutually closed worlds. Further exploration of this theme will, however, require prior work on basic concepts.[2]

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[2] For a representative summary of Krejčí's work, combining civilizational approaches with concrete historical-sociological analyses see Krejcí (2002), published after the present work was completed and at the moment still unavailable in translation.

MEANING, POWER AND WEALTH: CHANGING CONSTELLATIONS

Our survey of classical and contemporary approaches to civilizational theory has not brought out any clear trends towards overall convergence: rather, the shared but loosely demarcated themes remain open to widely different and unequally developed interpretations, each of which raises questions and suggests perspectives for further debate. Both the internal problematics and the mutual dissonances of competing paradigms are, as we have repeatedly seen, linked to the most central issues in social theory. The frameworks applied by civilizational analysts are grounded in basic assumptions about the structure of the social world, and clearer awareness of choices at that level may help to gain a more detached view of the field in dispute. This chapter will sketch a conceptual scheme which entails specific guidelines for civilizational theory; given the limits of the present discussion, the aim is neither to synthesize the insights of existing theories nor to develop a full-fledged alternative to them, but as I will try to show, the proposed model can throw new light on some particularly important problems and link up with ongoing controversies at strategic points. It is, of course, not being suggested that the conceptual distinctions in question are the only relevant way to map the social-historical realm, or that they can serve as foundations for a general and definitive theory. For present purposes, it is enough to justify them in more contextual terms. They reflect a widespread but so far weakly articulated trend in contemporary social theory and extend it to a field which should provide clues to more precise definitions.

4.1   *Domains and dimensions of socio-cultural analysis*

Peter Wagner (1994: 20) notes a recent convergence of otherwise different theories on a 'basic social ontology' which distinguishes three main types of human activity and social practices. His own version of this conceptual scheme focuses on the practices of material allocation,

authoritative power and symbolic representation. But other varia-
tions on the same theme have been proposed from various quarters.
Marxist attempts to mitigate the blanket reductionism of the basis-
superstructure model led to a tripartite distinction between economic,
political and ideological structures; the ultimate primacy of economic
forces was redefined in ways meant to be more compatible with a
genuine autonomy of the two other factors. At the same time, Anthony
Giddens developed the idea of a three-level social ontology into a
model less encumbered with Marxian assumptions. As he saw it,
allocation (command over material resources), authorization (com-
mand over persons) and signification (coding of signs) were the basic
components of social systems; but his preference for a theory of dom-
ination as a unifying framework reflects a strong tendency to put
power ahead of other basic concepts. Ernest Gellner based his inter-
pretation of world history—sharply critical of the Marxist tradition
but undeniably akin to it in important respects—on a very distinc-
tive conception of the changing interrelations between economic,
political and cultural aspects of social life. The master key to social
change and diversity was to be found in 'the transformation and
interrelation of production, coercion and cognition' (Gellner, 1989:
21). It can even be argued that tripartite perspectives are implicit in
some paradigms of an ostensibly different type. For instance, Michael
Mann's well-known theory of social power distinguishes four main
forms; but if the separation of military from political power is ques-
tionable, a revised version might retain the focus on economic, polit-
ical and ideological sources and organizations. The reference to power
as a common denominator would, however, once again highlight a
more general problem: the differentiating logic of tripartite models
may be undermined by more or less sustained use of a unitary cat-
egory. In the present context, we can do without a more extensive
survey. The above examples should suffice to drive a key point home:
although the widespread shift towards a tripartite vision of the social
world does not, as such and by itself, result in a new shared para-
digm, it can be seen as an indication of 'family resemblances' and
a general guideline for further theorizing of themes beyond the more
familiar domains of social inquiry. The particular issue to be explored
here is its relevance to civilizational analysis. But before tackling that
question, it may be useful to spell out some conceptual implications
of the approach which is being tested. Briefly, it will be suggested
that the three-dimensional view which underlies various theoretical

models calls for a more complex articulation than has so far been attempted. The following outline of an interpretive framework lays no claim to exhaustive coverage of its field, and the main focus is on tasks directly related to the project of civilizational theory; but substantive aspects of the civilizational problematic will also, in a more indirect fashion, be analyzed with a view to their metatheoretical bearings.

It seems appropriate to begin with perspectives on action and its role in the constitution of the social world. The new 'basic social ontology' is often associated with a renewed effort to theorize action or agency (this aim is implicit in the reference to 'practices') without repeating the errors that led mainstream theories of action to take a doubly reductionist line: a narrowly teleological conception of action, centred on the categories of ends and means, was combined with an equally inadequate image of society as an aggregate of individual actors. Hans Joas (1996) describes the various projects of a revised action theory—cleansed of its reductionistic legacy—as 'constitution theories of society'. They differ in details and specific directions, but they invariably stress the creativity and contextuality of action, and hence also the plurality of frameworks (or practices) which link the diverse meanings and orientations of action to corresponding aspects of social reality. A distinction between economic, political and cultural practices is an obvious way to concretize this view. At a more abstract level, however, we can distinguish dimensions of action without collapsing them into specific institutional domains. The concept of production, defined as the transformation of the natural world in accordance with socially conditioned human needs and goals, is a useful starting-point: as it developed within the Marxian tradition, it came to denote a model of action attuned to the economic sphere, yet capable of extension to other fields, and thus conducive to productivistic interpretations of social action in general. An economistic bias of indeterminate scope is also inherent in the more formalized teleological models of action (currently represented by rational choice theory), but the complexity and ambiguity of the paradigm of production made it more vulnerable to permanent controversy. The concept of praxis was reactivated (and given a meaning different but not altogether alien from its classical use) to theorize the creation of a distinctively human or socio-cultural world which could not plausibly be subsumed under productivist models. Similar considerations led Hannah Arendt to reserve an emphatic concept

of action for the ongoing self-constitution of a public sphere, seen in contrast to the less salient forms of social life; within her frame of reference, labour and work may be regarded as two sides of the field which others subsumed under the concept of production. Finally, the efforts to lend an overall meaning to the social world and to locate it within a broader world reflect the autonomous activity of interpretation, rooted in but also reaching beyond contexts of practice. The multiple and potentially divergent meanings of practices are linked to more comprehensive articulations of the horizons of experience.

At this point, a tentative connection to civilizational theory may be suggested. Different civilizational patterns could be compared with regard to their capacity to separate and articulate the different dimensions of action, including interpretation as an action-related but also action-transcending formation and transformation of meaning. In the final instance the questions to be raised would involve a theory of subjectivity and its changing historical forms. This has, to say the least, not been a major concern of civilizational analysts. Hannah Arendt's account of the Greek *polis*—adjusted in the light of other attempts to grasp the originality of the Greek world—can, however, be read from a civilizational angle: the development of the *polis* then appears as a radical rearticulation of the patterns of human activity. Not only the unprecedented autonomy and primacy of the political sphere (the privileged domain of action in the Arendtian sense), but also the emergence and pluralization of new interpretive patterns mark a major reorientation of socio-cultural life. This would not ipso facto rule out other paths of differentiation in other civilizations. Rather, the question of parallels or alternatives would be a matter for further comparative study.

The largely unexplored points of contact between action theory and civilizational analysis are worth noting in passing, but they will not be central to the following argument. The preferred strategy aims at a restructuring of the civilizational problematic from within, and the choice of conceptual clues must be adapted to this project. As I will argue, the categories of wealth, power and meaning can serve to construct a framework both theoretical synthesis and comparative inquiry; they refer to shared core characteristics of civilizational complexes and to sources of contrasts and dissonances between them. The three concepts are, at first sight, complementary to the tripartite division of social processes into economic, political and cul-

tural ones and—more specifically—designed to theorize the operative media as well as the goal-orientations of the respective practices. A stronger emphasis on wealth, power and meaning as interconnected but to some extent alternative foci of institution-building opens up comparative perspectives; Gellner's above-mentioned theory of history exemplifies this approach, but his comparative analyses deal with successive forms of social life, rather than the patterns which set coexisting civilizations apart from each other.

For the purposes of civilizational theory, it may be useful to interpret wealth, power and meaning as 'ways of worldmaking', to borrow a philosophical notion otherwise used in very different contexts (Goodman, 1978). The socio-cultural fields denoted by the three concepts can, in other words, be analyzed in terms of specific ways of appropriating, experiencing and interpreting the world, and different configurations within each field, as well as different overall combinations of them, can—as I will try to show—provide keys to the understanding of civilizational patterns. The concept of wealth may be the least obvious candidate for such a role: if it refers only to an aggregate of resources involved in the ongoing reproduction of societies, there is no meaningful link with patterns of world-disclosure or world-constitution, or with the social practices more clearly conducive to such effects. Nor are the attempts to shift the meaning of wealth towards its subjective sources or potentialities of much use in the present context. A familiar line of argument stresses the role of technical progress as the main 'lever of riches' (Mokyr, 1990), and the dependence of this creative factor on cognitive learning processes; Marx's critique of existing forms and understandings of wealth was based on the idea of freely developing human needs and capacities as the only authentic measure. In both cases, the theoretical connotations are closer to unilinear views of history than to the perspectives of civilizational pluralism.

Civilizational connections may be more visible from another angle. Economic history and anthropology have become increasingly aware of the surplus product as a recurrent but also diversifying feature of human societies, including the supposedly primitive ones: a surplus that can be mobilized and utilized in different ways, with divergent unintended consequences, is central to the dynamics, ramifications and transitions of world history at every stage. This insight is a major correction to earlier views of traditional societies, not least to Marxian conceptions of pre-capitalist economies as confined within a uniform

quasi-natural circle of reproduction guided by given needs. Some
neo-Marxist theorists have tried to defuse the problem by redraw-
ing the historical boundaries of capitalism. At its most sweeping, that
line of argument abandons the notion of a capitalist mode of pro-
duction, replaces it with the construct of a trade-based world system
geared to the accumulation of capital, and traces the origins of the
latter back to the beginnings of civilization (Frank, 1998). The result
is an a priori extension of inconclusively revised Marxian concepts.
A comparative civilizational perspective could, by contrast, distin-
guish 'modes of accumulation' (in a sense corresponding to Alain
Touraine's use of that term), i.e. ways of harnessing the surplus to
specific cultural models and culturally defined power structures; accu-
mulation in the Marxian sense of permanent reabsorption into an
expanding productive apparatus would then appear as a specific,
exceptional and never exclusive form. But the new interest in long-
term dynamics of accumulation has also extended to long-distance
trade, now seen as a more significant part of premodern socio-eco-
nomic processes than the traditional visions of history would have
it. This has—rightly—been stressed by the theorists of a unitary and
continuous world-system, but the question lends itself to more plu-
ralistic and comparative treatment: the different historical experiences
of civilizational complexes suggest varying capacities to develop com-
mercial networks and expand them beyond the respective civiliza-
tional boundaries. This problematic is, however, inseparable from a
further issue, particularly important for the present debate. Commercial
relations, within or between civilizational areas, cannot develop with-
out a monetary nexus. The institutionalization of money as a gen-
eral symbol of wealth is therefore essential to the constitution of a
separate economic sphere with a dynamic of its own. Marx's account
of this phenomenon may, once again, serve to illustrate the pitfalls
of reductionism and the reasons for trying a different approach.
Although Marx refers to money as a general symbol of wealth, it
is—when it comes to more systematic treatment—the general rather
than the symbolic aspect that holds his attention: money appears as
the embodiment of abstract labour, and hence a vehicle of the eco-
nomic rationality inherent in (and circumscribed by) the commodity
form imposed on labour and its products. Another classical source
suggests a way of reopening the question of the symbolic dimension.
Durkheim's well known footnote to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious
Life* admits that the constitutive role of religion is less manifest in

the economic sphere than elsewhere, but singles out the category of economic value as the most plausible link to the sacred. A reexamination of this connection in light of the plurality of religions (and their civilizational contexts), rather than within the restrictive framework of Durkheim's prematurely closed general theory, would highlight hitherto neglected aspects of the relationship between religious traditions and economic transformations. Christoph Deutschmann's analysis of 'capitalism as a religion' (Deutschmann, 1999), is a convincing introduction to the field in question. As Deutschmann argues, the spirit of capitalism has a permanent religious content, rather than a transient religious background for the subordination of economic life to the accumulation of monetary wealth to be sustainable, the inbuilt utopia of absolute wealth, or unending accumulation must remain operative, and it has the character of a secular religion. In that capacity, it also fosters the generalized utilitarian stance which some critics have seen as a civilizational feature of modernity (Caillé, 1989; Marx spoke of a transformation of the world into a 'system of general utility'), the apparent triumph of economic man and economic reason thus presupposes a mutation rather than a negation of the sacred. This line of interpretation has a strong case, but it invites further comparison with other visions of wealth.

The proposed amendments to the concept of wealth would enhance its analytical potential; on the other hand, they have already brought it into closer contact with the two other central categories mentioned above, power and meaning, and the problematics thus touched upon must now be examined more directly. In the case of power, the present argument can link up with well-known but still incomplete critiques of traditional views. Although Max Weber's definition of power lags behind the understanding which he showed in concrete analyses, it sums up a widely shared and prime facie plausible way of thinking, and can therefore be seen as a logical starting-point for any reconsideration or questioning of basic premises. The subject-centred and bi-polar conception of power, defined in terms of the control of one actor over another and the ability to overcome resistance, is obviously rooted in pre-theoretical notions which by the same token became obstacles to more critical theorizing. Michel Foucault's work is commonly credited with the most innovative contributions to the theory of power, but earlier writers—most notably Norbert Elias—had anticipated some of the principal points. For present purposes, it is enough to summarize the main lines of criticism

without any discussion of historical details. Attempts to re-theorize power tend to converge on keynote ideas, directed against a common target—the view most clearly conveyed in Weber's terms—but open to disagreement on issues arising from various different contexts of debate.

The most fundamental change of perspective is a shift towards relational conceptions of power: the focus is now on structures, constellations or apparatuses rather than subjective capacities or dispositions. Power is—on this view—embodied in, exercised through and reproduced by the patterns of interconnected social fields. Elias' analysis of social figurations was the first explicit and sustained argument in this vein; Foucault's work on the mechanisms of power may be the most familiar example, but Castoriadis' conception of implicit power (the power of unquestioned institutions over socially constituted individuals) also reflects the relational turn. Another recurrent and closely related theme is the productivity of power. Although this idea is often loosely formulated and left undeveloped beyond a sweeping contrast to notions of repressive power, it can be understood as a reflexive twist to the Weberian model: the reference to action and its field of alternatives remains in place, but the inventive capacity of power structures—their ability to generate new patterns of conduct and corresponding modes of thought, rather than merely imposing choices within a given range—is now given its due. The involvement of power in the constitution of subjectivity can thus be acknowledged, without reducing subjectivity to an epiphenomenon of power. But the obverse of such formative effects is a self-disguising dynamic. Power is sedimented in and conflated with forms of interpretation and cognition; its hidden presence within ostensibly autonomous cultural spheres is a favourite topic of theorists in search of more critical understanding. Finally, the themes so far noted—complexity, creativity and latency—are more or less overtly associated with new insights into the multiple sources, patterns and logics of power. Its ability to structure, innovate and transfigure is more easily understood as an interplay of the specific capacities grounded in—and constitutive of—different social domains. Since this view allows for economic and cultural sources of power alongside the political ones, the treatment of wealth and meaning as separate categories might seem problematic. A clearer picture of interconnections and distinctions will emerge at the next level of conceptual analysis, but the most basic point should be noted now. The concepts of

wealth and meaning refer to ways of appropriating and articulating the world, intertwined with but irreducible to the exercise of control over it; power is, by contrast, defined as a more strictly social category, tied to the field of interconnected actions, and although its social dynamics also translate into control and conquest of the natural environment, this extra-social side can be theorized without making power synonymous with the very capacity to intervene in the course of events.

The above considerations strengthen the case for power as a central theme of social analysis, and some of the authors in question have set it above all other concerns. But the amplifying perspectives must be confronted with relativizing ones, even if the latter approach is much less visibly represented in contemporary social thought. The widely invoked yet controversial notion of political culture may provide a clue. Its foundations are often left unexamined; one of the most authoritative scholars in the field has, however, pointed out that analyses of political cultures presuppose a plasticity of the very medium of political life: power appears as 'something that differs profoundly from culture to culture', and—among social phenomena—'one of the most sensitive to cultural nuances' (Pye, 1985: VIII). But the same author then goes on to compare political cultures from conventional Weberian points of view: the most significant contrasts and variations have to do with relations between superiors and subordinates, and with the perceptions of power as status or as decision-making (the shift from a status-oriented to a task-oriented vision is taken to be the last step in a rationalizing process which began with archaic conceptions of sacred power). The main input from other sources is a body of psychological findings on family authority and its links to paternalistic forms of power and dependency. In the upshot, the original insight into the cultural plasticity and sensitivity of power thus fails to translate into an adequately balanced analysis. More generally speaking, there has—to the best of my knowledge—been no attempt to relate the problematic of cultural diversity to the above-mentioned innovations in the theory of power. As will be seen below, the civilizational framework opens up new perspectives on this neglected field of inquiry. The meanings attributed to or imposed on power can—depending on the levels of articulation and elaboration—be described as images, definitions or interpretations; in light of the ideas sketched above, the analyses of specific patterns would centre on the varying roles of power in the

self-constitution and self-representation of the social world. Far from being a uniform characteristic of archaic cultures, notions of sacred rulership differ in significant ways—above all in regard to the kind and degree of continuity which they posit between divine and human worlds—and with long-term consequences for the respective civilizational complexes. Later developments give rise to different forms and trajectories of divisions between sacred and secular power. Culturally embedded paradigms of power are also more or less conducive or resistant to visions of exclusive authority (the concept of sovereignty is most appropriate in this context), of imperial expansion (within or beyond civilizational boundaries), or of ways to unify the diverse domains of social power. All these aspects are relevant to the question of premodern sources of totalitarian projects. Finally, the interpretive patterns entwined with social power can—infrequently but importantly—take a de-centring and problematizing turn, and thus serve to affirm not only the autonomy of multiple actors within a field, but also the presence of alternative models for an overarching order.

As the brief analyses of wealth and power have shown, cores or clusters of meaning are central to the dynamics of both spheres. Contextual meaning is, in other words, ipso facto involved in demarcations of socio-cultured fields or domains; but in a more fundamental and comprehensive sense, meaning must—to conclude this part of the introductory discussion—be considered as a key to the constitution self-articulation and internal differentiation of historical being. Although the role of meaning as a universal medium of social life is a recurrent theme in twentieth-century thought, it has not become a commonplace: the 'meaning of meaning' is, if anything, even more controversial on this level than in the context of philosophical semantics. The social theories that set out to take meaning seriously face challenges from more reductionist approaches, based on increasingly refined analytical techniques and therefore capable of annexing the problematic of meaning on restrictive terms, rather than ignoring it. At the same time debates within social theory are neither insulated from the philosophical discussion nor equally receptive to all its offshoots, and divergences between the two universes of discourse continue to raise new questions. No overview of these controversies can be attempted here. The following reflections will only deal with issues of direct and obvious interest to civilizational theory; the most convenient entry to the field is a brief survey of

interrelated themes which have emerged as the main correctives to
rival but mutually sustaining reductionisms.

On the one hand, the reduction of meaning to the intentions or
performances of constituting subjects has been a prominent part of
phenomenological projects (and open to variations in a less reflective
vein); an opposite strategy of reduction, provoked by the manifest
shortcomings of subject-centred theory, found its most militant expres-
sion in Lévi-Strauss' definition of meaning as a surface effect expe-
rienced by consciousness but due to unconscious combinations of
elements. The claim that 'meaning exists only as a meaning of the
operations which make use of it' (Luhmann, 1997: 44) can perhaps
be understood as an attempted fusion of subjective and structural
paradigms. But the responses to be discussed here are of a different
kind; although there is no need to trace them to specific sources, it
may be suggested that the most seminal ideas of this kind are to be
found in the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Cornelius Casto-
riadis. To begin with an elementary but far-reaching point, the cre-
ative imagination—a strikingly neglected but occasionally rediscovered
theme of the philosophical tradition—is recognized as the prime
source of meaning. It gives rise to interpretive foci and frameworks
which are irreducible to experiential contents, functional imperatives
or rational principles. When applied, more specifically, to the his-
torical metamorphoses of human societies, this idea entails a radical
critique of all kinds of functionalism, Marxist or non-Marxist: social
reproduction is always tied to cultural orientations which lend for-
mative meaning to its goals, frameworks and conditions. Castoriadis
coined the concept of imaginary significations to refer to these trans-
functional horizons of social life. If the argument is taken one step
further and extended to civilizational patterns, it suggests—as a work-
ing hypothesis to be tested through comparative studies—that their
diversity might be due to imaginary significations of a particularly
complex, durable and distinctive kind.

The new interest in imaginary dimensions of meaning goes together
with other ways of highlighting openness and indeterminacy. Imaginary
significations constitute a background or a substratum to more struc-
tural and definite modes of interpretation, and a varying range of
such modes may emerge against a shared background. The distinc-
tion between underlying constellations and explicit articulations of
meaning is crucial to the project of civilizational theory: on this
basis—as will be seen—we can analyze long-term cultural dynamics

as an interplay of constitutive problematics, dominant paradigms and alternative interpretations. Merleau-Ponty's reflections are perhaps the most promising philosophical guidelines for this approach: as he saw it, the difference between figure and background is the ultimate matrix of meaning. But his revised version of phenomenology also brought to the fore another theme of major importance to the present argument. The multi-layered and multi-directional formations of meaning relate to the world as a 'horizon of horizons', an omnipresent but irreducibly enigmatic context of experience, understanding and questioning. 'Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: XIX); the 'meaning of meaning' is to be deciphered in relation to the being of the world. But access to and articulation of the world is dependent on 'total parts', sub-worlds which concretize the shared horizon in specific and mutually irreducible ways: 'the world is this whole where each "part", when one takes it for itself, suddenly opens unlimited dimensions—becomes a total part' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 218). The parts in question presuppose the world as a background, refract its being through different media of meaning, and relate to each other within its framework. Merleau-Ponty applies this idea to the senses as well as to cultural spheres (such as art, philosophy and science) and—more tentatively—to macro-cultural patterns. The affinity with Weber's undeveloped conception of culture was noted above. In the context of the following discussion, civilizational patterns will be seen both as alternative overall articulations of the world and as different combinations of more circumscribed universes of meaning.

A further tripartite division—building on the categories of wealth, power and meaning—suggests itself when we move from the 'ways of worldmaking' to the internal structure of societies and civilizations. But distinctions on this level relate more closely to power than to the other two aspects of our framework. Although the social ontology that underpins the present argument does not affirm the primacy of power by equating it with the very capacity to act and initiate changes, the networks of mutually but unequally determine practices are seen as—ipso facto—constellations of power. In that sense, the central role of power in the contribution of society—variously posited rather than argued by Elias, Foucault and Mann—is undeniable, and the only way to relativize it is to show that formations of power presuppose—in a more indirect fashion—the involvement of other socio-cultural determinants. The different domains or

arenas of social life can therefore be analyzed with reference to corresponding forms of social power and their specific modes of interaction with other factors in the field. On this basis, it seems appropriate to distinguish between economic, political and ideological spheres of the social world. The task of civilizational analysis would then be to show that the constitution, differentiation and interaction of these recurrent clusters of social practices take a specific turn at the civilizational level.

Marx's analysis of the economic sphere in terms of relations of production, i.e. the social distribution of access to and control over the means and results of production, is still a plausible starting-point for further theorizing, but it calls for a series of corrections. As argued above the focus should be on the production and accumulation of wealth, rather than the mere material reproduction of society; the power component of economic structures has to be thematized more explicitly and in relation to other types of social power; the varying orientations of economic life—hinted at in Marx's incomplete analyses of the 'goals of production'—can be more adequately understood as inbuilt patterns of meaning embedded in broader cultural configurations. These considerations suggest a way of analyzing the intrinsic dynamics of the economic sphere without losing sight of its dependence on other domains of the social world. Debates on this subject have tended to lapse into oversimplifications of opposite kind. Karl Polanyi's well-known account of the 'great transformation' explained the breakthrough to capitalist development as a result of fundamental changes to the relationship between economy and society: 'embedded' forms of economic life, shaped by socio-cultural controls and orientations, gave way to the unrestrained and self-contained dynamism of a market economy geared to infinite growth (Marx's comments on the revolutionary character of modern capitalism anticipated this view, although their impact was limited by the more evolutionistic vision of history which prevailed in the Marxian tradition). Critics of this thesis have objected that all economies are embedded, and that the idea of a great transformation confuses the self-image of capitalism with its much less streamlined historical reality. On the other hand, the rise of modern capitalism is not the only historical transition which may be seen as an effect of disembedding processes. Critics and apologists of globalization often argue that its recent progress marks the real beginning of a self-regulating economic order, as distinct from the utopian projections of capitalist principles; but

some reassessments of economic history—more particularly those in search of a premodern world system—claim to detect global patterns of commerce and accumulation which have for several millennia been more adaptive to their own internal logic than to any institutional frameworks (Frank, 1998). All these arguments raise complex issues of differentiation and integration. The conceptual framework proposed here would suggest that the cases in question represent changing balances between closure and contextuality: the economic sphere becomes more self-contained—in both practical and interpretive terms—as it acquired more autonomous internal patterns of power and meaning but it remains dependent—in varying ways—on overall socio-cultural constellations.

A brief outline of basic factors crucial to this interplay will clarify the points at issue. The level of autonomy achieved by the economic sphere depends, most obviously, on the independent exercise of economic power, and the degree of dynamism varies with the capacity of multiple actors to pursue cooperative as well as competitive strategies (some models of economic analysis subsume these problems under the question of property rights, but a comparative view should avoid a priori fixations on particular institutional forms). Another dimension of economic power has been stressed by those who argue that capitalism cannot be understood as a multi-actor market economy writ large. Schumpeter and Braudel are perhaps the most important analysts in this vein; as they see it, the specific impact of capital accumulation on economic life has to do with the effort to transcend competition and re-establish monopolies or at least privileged positions. The directions taken by this quest for surplus power to gather or generate profit range from attempts to instrumentalize state structures (central to Braudel's account of early modern capitalism) to the 'creative destruction' brought about by technological innovation, as described by Schumpeter. In both cases, however, the dynamizing effect presupposes counter-trends which reactivate competitive pressures.

But if the rise of modern capitalism is the prime example of a breakthrough to autonomous change in the economic sphere (and therefore the most convenient starting-point for theoretical reflections with a broader scope), it also illustrates the shifts that involve meaning rather than power. This aspect is most evident in the emerging patterns of economic rationality, seen as frameworks for criteria and priorities to be imposed not only within the domain of economic

institutions, but also—inasmuch as the 'disembedded' economy tends to become a dominant factor in social life—on other fields of meaning and activity. An inbuilt rationalizing drive was, as Max Weber argued, central to the modern version of capitalism and the most compelling reason to distinguish it from earlier ones. But the modern capitalist mode of rationalization presupposes a thoroughgoing monetarization of economic and social life (Simmel analyzed this aspect much more extensively than Weber), and as noted above, the institution of money embodies a set of formative meanings. Earlier speculations about a link between money and the sacred, including those of classical sociology, did not lead to conclusive results; but as Christoph Deutschmann (1999) has shown, the affinities and connections are important enough to characterize capitalism as a secular religion *sui generis*. In short, the high profile and transformative potential of the economic sphere in modern societies can be shown to depend on constellations of meaning as well as power, and both these factors lend themselves to analysis from comparative points of view.

As for the political sphere, it is not reducible to state power. Such a perspective—as applied e.g. in Mann's theory of social power—bypasses the problems which have prompted various thinkers to re-theorize 'the political' as a crucially important but commonly misrepresented domain of social life. Much of this debate (perhaps most often inspired by the works of Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort) is immaterial to our purposes, but some reasons for singling out the political forms of social power will also prove pertinent to comparative studies. To start with, a tension between two poles is constitutive of political power: the ultimate recourse to violence is no less essential than the quest for transfiguring or justifying meaning (the idea of legitimation may not be equally applicable to all interpretations of power, and a comparison of civilizational frameworks would be the most effective trans-cultural test of its limits). A familiar definition of the state stresses the monopoly of legitimate violence, but this suggests a static and uniform relationship between the two sides, whereas a more historical approach allows for changing balances and combinations of meaning and violence. The concept of 'sanctioned violence', used in a particularly insightful analysis of early China (Lewis, 1990), lends itself to more extensive comparative use: it refers to the foundational and instrumental as well as the symbolic and imaginary roles of violence, and underlines their multiple links to cultural contexts. But dynamics of disconnection

can also prevail to such an extent that processes of state formation are reversed: the separation of organized violence from superior authority paves the way for fragmentation, while the exemplary symbolic centre is stripped of all political power. The medieval Japanese state is a classic example of this trend.

   Another ambiguity of the political has to do with visions of unity and plurality. Compared to other forms of social power, political centres are more capable of constructing bounded units and projecting visions of them beyond the levels achieved in practice; on this basis, the political sphere becomes a privileged site of totalizing projects. Claims to higher authority over multiple social fields can develop into phantasms of perfect unity and its embodiment in supreme rulership. In the context of state formation, the unifying imaginary and its practical logics express themselves in imperial ambitions which often outstrip and overload the infrastructures of statehood. But when taken to its ultimate conclusion, this push to transcend plurality results in a paradoxical fusion of individual and social power: the imaginary institution of an absolute ruler effaces other claimants to a share in sovereignty. Moves in that direction (never more than partially effective, but often backed up by compensating fictions) may be described as approximations to despotism (in the sense of a general pattern subject to historical and civilizational variations, rather than a specific tradition of the kind once ascribed to 'Oriental' societies). On the other hand, the political dynamics of historical societies are always to some degree shaped by struggles for control and authority over centres of decision-making, and this latent pluralism can develop into an explicit institutionalization of powers shared by multiple actors. The city-states of classical antiquity and the feudal polities of the medieval West exemplify the different paths which such processes can take. In both cases, strategies of state formation had to contend with exceptionally vigorous centrifugal forces. But these two prototypical patterns suggest yet another reason to relativize the role of the state. Processes of state formation vary—among other things—with regard to the presence and importance of a political community, associated but not identical with the state; and when a sustained effort is made to minimize the distance between power centre and political community; we can speak of a self-limiting turn in state formation. The Greek *polis* is the most obvious and momentous case in point, but in a more qualified sense, the same applies

to the forms of aristocratic co-determination which developed into more or less adaptable structures of state government.

If an ideological sphere is—as suggested above—to be distinguished from the political and economic ones, the concept of ideology must by the same token be defined in very broad terms—closer to Louis Dumont's understanding of it than to the Marxian one. Ideologies are, on this view, institutionalized patterns of ideas and values, involved in the structuring of social practices but more directly operative at the level of interpretive frameworks. The relative weight of their constitutive, representative and legitimizing roles is a matter for comparative analyses. Within the redefined framework, the restrictive assumptions of Marxist theory are no longer tenable: the equation of ideology with false consciousness is misleading if it presupposes a non-ideological alternative with claims to direct and definitive knowledge of social reality, and distorting in that it singles out the obstructive side of a more complex relationship between social and ideological structures. Nor should the concept of ideology be reserved for discursive formations which appeal to universalist principles and thereby invite critique. This intrinsic connection between ideology and critique is a distinctively modern (but not the only modern) twist to a broader spectrum of possible patterns. Ideology in the present sense is not a modern invention; rather, the term refers to a general trait of human societies, at least within the boundaries drawn by the two concepts of civilization (whether it should be applied to primitive societies is a question that need not be settled here). From this non-modernist point of view, religious traditions stand out as the most salient formations of the ideological field. In that regard, codified doctrines and orthodoxies are not the only aspects to be considered: the broad concept of ideology encompasses changing balances of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, as well as the more diffuse and therefore less polarizing forms of religious belief. On the other hand, there is no reason to maintain a strict demarcation line between ideology and science. To the extent that scientific activities and developments are embedded in world-views or interpretive paradigms which in turn relate to broader constellations of ideas, it seems justifiable to speak of an ideological background to the scientific pursuit of knowledge.

To complete this survey of basic concepts, one more variant of the tripartite model must be noted. Here the discussion can link up

with current trends in civilizational theory. Eisenstadt's distinction between organizational, institutional and cultural levels of social life is, as shown above, directly linked to his critique of functionalist views: the three categories serve to chart a course for sociological theory beyond the problematic of the division of labour (both in the traditional sense and the more elaborate system-theoretical guise). The organizational perspective corresponds to the structuring dynamic of the division of labour, whereas the institutional and cultural ones represent steps toward a more direct grasp of social creativity. Institutional frameworks reflect a self-constitutive capacity which contextualizes and relativizes the imperatives of the division of labour; cultural patterns (or programmes, as Eisenstadt often calls them) give a broader and stronger expression to this underlying creative potential. Alain Touraine's alternative to functionalism, formulated earlier than Eisenstadt's but more dependent on the language of systems theory and not linked to civilizational perspectives, is also relevant to this question. For Touraine, the level of historicity—structured around cultural self-images of society and the historical systems of action into which they are translated—is more fundamental than those of institutions and organizations; within the parameters set by the culture-centred structure of social action, the institutional or political system (clearly distinguished from the state) functions as a framework for the construction of rules and an arena for conflicts between rival forces involved in that activity, whereas the organizational system implements rules and ensures the reproduction of society.

These lines of reasoning converge with the present one, but our particular angle on them will reflect the general thrust of the conceptual guidelines proposed above. If the move from anthropological premises to units of social analysis leads to a focus on economic, political and ideological structures as specific determinations of social-historical being, a complementary set of categories is needed to thematize the relationship between determinacy and creativity at different levels of articulation. In view of the turn already taken by the distinction between cultural, institutional and organizational aspects, it seems well suited to this purpose. Since the concept of culture (unavoidably involved in some of the above arguments) refers most directly to creativity, it is the most convenient starting-point, and the creative or transformative potential covered by the two other categories will be seen to depend on cultural inputs at work in the respective contexts.

The early Weberian idea of culture is still a solid basis to build on: ways of lending meaning and significance to the world, while at the same time providing frames of reference for the construction and transformation of the social world, are central to comparative history in general and civilizational analyses in particular. This interpretation of culture links it to the problematics of meaning and ideology, but does not lead to conflation. Cultures may be seen as selective configurations of meaning, involved in the formation of structures defined above as ideological but neither confined to that field nor in sole control of it. On the one hand, ideologies are always embodied in institutional and organizational forms (this was the rational core of the theory of 'ideological apparatuses'); on the other hand, the internal dynamics of culture subvert and transcend ideological frameworks. The latter point applies most obviously to the cultural domains of art, philosophy and science: not that they represent culture in a pristine non-ideological state, but their innovative and exploratory aspects exemplify the surplus meaning that resists closure. Eisenstadt distinguishes between order-maintaining and order-transforming dynamics of culture, but it may be useful to treat the order-questioning and order-transcending ones as separate trends which do not *ipso facto* result in transformative programmes or processes. Historical breakthroughs to higher levels of creativity or reflexivity are not invariably conducive to long term restructuring of social life. In short, the proposed approach to culture insists on the difference between cultural programmes, more or less explicitly translated into ideologies, and underlying cultural constellations, more or less amenable to articulation in programmatic terms.

If the cultural level of analysis relates most directly to the self-constitutive, innovative and transformative sides of social life, the two remaining categories should be defined with a more limited reference to the same context. We must, in other words, account for cultural components internal to the institutional and organizational levels, in contradistinction to the cultural level as such and in full, and in both cases crucial to the patterns of change. As for institutional perspectives, the line taken here may be summed up in three steps. To start with a point stressed by both Eisenstadt and Castoriadis, institutional frameworks are patterns of ongoing mediation between functional and transfunctional principles: the imperatives of social reproduction intertwine with socio-cultural premises and orientations in ways which leave room for adaptive change as well as for efforts

to channel and contain it. Institutions are, in short, changing combinations of self-constitutive and self-reproductive logics of social life. But this contrast, most starkly visible when social creativity confronts the bounds of inner and outer nature, is reproduced within the social dimension. A second distinction is therefore crucial to the analysis of institutions. Its currency in social theory can be traced back to Durkheim and Mauss. As they came to think (although the insight was not properly theorized), institutions gave the most adequate expression to an ambiguity characteristic of social phenomena in general: they are arbitrary constructs, inasmuch as they reflect collective choices among multiple options, and at the same time constraining realities for those who think and act within their horizons. Mauss later referred to civilizations—the most comprehensive institutional complexes—as the consummate paradigms of this dual status. With regard to institutions in general, the binding force of given frameworks is maintained over time and against change; this self-reproductive and self-assertive dynamic of institutions may be treated as a constant feature, but the results are best understood from a comparative angle. The levels of closure, perceived conformity with natural order, and self-legitimizing logic will be seen to vary from one civilizational context to another. Such comparisons must also draw on a third distinction, first outlined in Castoriadis's critique of functionalism. The instituting and the instituted side of society—in other words: the capacity to create or transform institutions and the tendency to perpetuate them—presuppose each other, but their interrelations allow for varying degrees of overt tension. This dichotomy is not synonymous with the one derived from Durkheim and Mauss; rather, a specific relationship between instituting and instituted aspects is built into each of the relatively self-contained ways of ordering the social world. The range of variations on that theme is broader than Castoriadis' vision of a stark contrast between autonomous and heteronomous societies would suggest. This political philosophy prompted him to single out the exceptional cases where fully articulated aspirations to authentic self-government came to the fore, but a comparative analysis of civilizations must consider other ways to activate the instituting potential of human societies.

Each of the three abovementioned spheres—ideological, political and economic—has its specific institutional structures. But the institutional perspective has a particular bearing on power and its configurations in the three different domains. The concept of the

institution, as defined here, is not applicable to all regularities of human behaviour. Rather, the institutional aspect has to do with regularized control or direction of conduct, and with the involvement of multiple actors in established patterns to that effect. This qualified use of the term has obvious affinities with our relational concept of power, and thus also with the broadly defined problematic of political culture. Types and traditions of the latter can be analyzed and compared with regard to their impact on institutions. Significant variations can affect the importance of institutional rules and institution-building in social life, the relative autonomy of institutions in different spheres, and the ability of societies to maintain a creative tension between instituted forms and instituting capacities.

Finally, the organizational level of analysis will—for our purposes—be defined in a way which would also allow us to refer to it as infrastructural (there is, of course, no suggestion of any parallels to the basis-superstructure model). The primary reference is to the social division of labour, its demands and its dynamics, but not in the sense that this aspect of social life would be reducible to the mechanisms of reproduction. The field to be considered includes the technological apparatuses of societies and civilizations, including their cultural techniques (such as writing). Within that domain, the technical and organizational strategies of survival have the most direct impact on the natural environment, and if civilizations are to be compared on the basis of 'their programmes for the systematic refashioning of nature' (Fernandez-Armesto, 2000: 18), this is where the analysis has to start, even if a more comprehensive account of ecological connections would need to take note of institutional and cultural backgrounds. But to speak of 'refashioning' is to stress the role of invention, at least as an intermittent upgrading of resources and capacities, and this applies to the infrastructural level as a whole. The open-ended dynamic of invention transcends and redefines the framework of reproduction. More specific variants of this effect are a matter for comparative analysis; the markedly uneven pace of invention reflects different technological and economic cultures, and the institutionalization of invention is an exceptional achievement.

The conceptual framework which I have outlined makes no claims to exclusive or definitive validity. It is neither the only possible nor invariably the most adequate way to interpret the social world. It should, in other words, not be mistaken for a model of the same kind as the Parsonian four-function scheme. The reasons for regarding

it as a viable approach are of a more tentative sort, and they should be briefly recapitulated before moving on to substantive issues. As I have tried to show, the social ontology shared by otherwise different projects is easily adopted to macro-historical perspectives. Its underlying tripartite logic is translatable into a set of interconnected set of conceptual distinctions geared to different levels of analysis. The expanded model can, as suggested at the beginning, be grounded in an anthropological perspective (not to be mistaken for a complete paradigm) which also highlights three dimensions of the human condition: the productive transformation of inner and outer nature, the creation of a socio-cultural world, and the interpretive articulation of a wider world. More or less explicit models in this vein have already proved useful in various contexts. The question to be pursued here is whether a more complex version of the same approach can serve to theorize civilizations.

4.2   *Theorizing civilizations*

The above sketch of basic concepts will serve as a backdrop to reflections on civilizational theory. No systematic application of the whole set can be attempted, but some key aspects are easily linked to more substantive issues. On that basis, the following sections will outline a framework for the interpretation and comparison of civilizations. This line of reasoning should not be mistaken for a project of general theory in the style preferred by Parsons and his rivals: the relativizing implications of the civilizational turn are too clear for theory-building in that vein to be a plausible option. The aim is to provide reference points for comparative history, and the recognition of diversity—on the level of enduring meanings as well as unfolding trajectories—sets limits to cross-cultural theorizing. From the present point of view, civilizational theory must depend on hermeneutical perspectives, most importantly in the sense that it draws on intercultural understanding and remains open to fundamental questions posed in that context. As we shall see, this means that the comparative analysis of civilizations is bound to come into contact with comparative philosophy. But there are other sides to the hermeneutical approach. The interpretive model to be developed below should be seen as a synthesizing resumption of themes, ideas and questions previously mooted—more or less articulately—in differ-

ent versions of civilizational theory. An integrative paradigm in the making can thus draw together fragmented traditions and link up with inconclusive results of earlier work. On the other hand, the problematic of civilizations is implicitly at issue in otherwise disparate recent projects of historical and comparative inquiry; this wide-ranging but so far under-utilized body of research will be relevant to various aspects of the argument.

As I will argue, the agenda of civilizational theory can be organized around six main thematic foci. This is not to suggest that the list is closed and definitive, nor that the arrangement is deducible from basic concepts. But it seems a convenient way to integrate past and present contributions to the debate, and there is an internal logic to the sequence. Loosely put, it makes obvious sense to start with the cultural premises of civilizational formations: distinctive traits at this level stand out as markers of identity and difference, even if we try to avoid strong culturalist assumptions and allow for an interactive relationship between cultural and social patterns. The next step is a more precise definition of the social context. Institutional structures and dynamics channel the potential of cultural meanings in specific directions. But in light of lessons from the history of civilizational theory and on the basis of ideas developed—as noted above—by Benjamin Nelson, intercivilizational connections and encounters must be given their due. This third focus of analysis is an essential corrective to the more traditional view of civilizations as self-contained worlds; and since the point is to theorize them as interactive units capable of mutually formative contact, the involvement in a multi-civilizational field should be seen as one of the basic defining features.

If the first three points have to do with the constitutive structures of civilizations, the remaining three refer to their more concrete historical manifestations. The sociological classics first discovered civilizations from this angle and failed to develop a more analytical model. In particular, Durkheim and Mauss saw civilizations as multi-societal groupings; they vary in size, complexity and level of uniformity, but in principle, their integrative capacities transcend those of single societies. The same applies to the temporal dimension. To extend a metaphor used by Durkheim and Mauss: civilizations are families of societies, and as such they also encompass generations of societies, in the sense that they retain their unifying features throughout successive historical phases. Finally, the civilizational paradigm

would be incomplete without a reference to the geopolitical and geo-cultural setting. Seen as historical formations with more or less clear-cut boundaries in space and time, civilizations are inseparable from regional configurations. Regions are not necessarily coextensive with civilizational domains (some cases come much closer to that than others), but civilizational constellations take shape and encounter each other in regional contexts. Further analysis of this aspect would, among other things, call for a comparative environmental history of civilizations; significant ventures in that direction are few and far between, and the present project will not enter into the debate, but it is worth noting that the ecological frontier of civilizational studies converges with their cultural-hermeneutical premises. If the environmental context is to be treated as a component of the civilizational one, rather than a given external determinant, this approach will ultimately raise questions about modes of being in and interacting with the world; anthropological implications of environmental history can thus be linked to the interpretation of cultures as ways of worldmaking and world disclosure.

It will not be suggested that all six points apply in equal measure to every case of civilizational dynamics. They add up to an ideal-typical framework, and some familiar examples stand out as the closest approximations. But comparative analysis must also deal with formations of a kind where it may be appropriate to speak of civilizational characteristics in some respects but not in others. A typology of unequally developed variants would therefore be more useful than a list of supposedly uniform civilizations. The 'civilizational dimension of social and historical inquiry', as Eisenstadt (2000b) calls it in a programmatic statement, has to do with a whole spectrum of constellations, variously linked through 'family resemblances', rather than a clear and distinct category of social or cultural units.

The next step is to review the above preliminaries in light of the analytical scheme set out at the beginning. Most importantly, the two first aspects of the civilizational paradigm must be defined in more precise and reasoned terms. The cultural premises or interpretive orientations, seen as fundamental to all other components of the model, will be analyzed more closely as configurations of world-articulating meaning. Various schools of thought have agreed on the constitutive role of meaning in the social world, theorized it from different points of view and traced its ramifications throughout the domains of action and experience; the task of the following discus-

sion is to clarify the specific turn which this problematic takes in the civilizational context. As will be seen, the civilizational perspective highlights the meta-social horizons—linked to its world-constitutive capacities—as well as its involvement in the broadest frameworks of social-historical life. By the same token, civilizational theory can throw new light on the enabling and constraining, structuring and problematizing aspects of meaning.

If the first level of analysis is limited to the questions of constitutive meaning and its most fundamental dividing lines (those which set the domains of distinctive civilizations apart from each other), the second one is concerned with the multiple contexts of social and situated meanings. From their point of view, the key components of civilizational complexes correspond to the above-mentioned categories of social ontology. Different images or interpretations of power and wealth are embedded in structuring patterns of social life, most significantly in those which govern the political and economic domains. At the same time, sources of meaning crystallize into ideological constructions and representations of the social world. Ideological, political and economic structures make up the institutional constellations that tend to figure most prominently in detailed comparative studies of civilizations. But cultural elaboration, in the more specific sense of creations and interpretations which test or transcend the limits of ideological frameworks, is also an integral part of civilizational dynamics. The traditions often invoked as elements of civilizational identity can thus be analyzed in terms of interrelated layers: underlying orientations, ideological constructs and reflexive explorations.

For those who question the reality—or at least the importance—of civilizations in the plural, cross-cultural transmission of skills and techniques is more fundamental than any separate socio-cultural world (William McNeill has moved towards this position). Increasingly global networks of interaction are thus cited in evidence of the primacy of civilization in the singular. They relate to the organizational dimension as defined above; developments at that level seem to relativize the autonomy and diversity of civilizations. A more balanced picture may emerge if the borrowings, exchanges and learning processes in question are analyzed in the broader context of intercivilizational encounters. The dynamics of the latter vary from case to case, but they can involve all components of a civilizational pattern. The transmission of ideologies (most importantly universal religions) across civilizational borders must be distinguished from the appropriation

of cultural models and resources for more or less autonomous use. And at the most fundamental level of meaning, Nelson's analysis of encounters which affect the core structures of consciousness points to a further set of problems: confrontation between different ways of articulating the world can lead to both defensive and innovative developments. Other types or aspects of intercivilizational encounters are linked to institutional factors.

The more tangible shapes of civilizational formations—the families, generations, and regional clusters of societies—are based on varying combinations of the elements we have already distinguished in relation to internal structures. If cultural orientations are the logical starting-point for civilizational analysis in general, that also applies to the particular problem of civilizational unity in space and time, but not invariably in the same way: affinities at the level of implicit meanings do not necessarily translate into unifying ideologies or shared frameworks of cultural articulation. As will be seen, the role and relative importance of political bonds—shared models of state formation, more or less stabilized state systems, or imperial traditions—differ from one civilizational complex to another. The dynamic of economic networks, within and across civilizational boundaries, is a further factor to be taken into account. Finally, the forces involved in the constitution, diffusion and perpetuation of civilizational patterns can also be seen at work in the processes which determine the mono- or multi-civilizational character of geographical regions.

4.3   *Configurations of meaning, I: Cultural articulations of the world*

Two classic but cryptic formulations may serve to foreshadow the line of reasoning to be developed here. On the one hand, Emile Durkheim observes in passing (at the end of his most important work) that 'each civilization has its own ordered system of concepts which characterizes it' (Durkheim, 1995: 437). No further clarification is offered, but the implicit links to Durkheim's more sustained reflections on the notion of civilization are obvious. If we take the quoted statement as a reference to Durkheim's problematic of collective representations, the emphasis is on the need to situate them in civilizational contexts, and the basic concepts in question should be understood in a very broad sense: as interpretive orientations of the kind and scope that define the contours of a whole cultural universe. On the

other hand, Merleau-Ponty's brief description of civilizations as ways of articulating the world and the human condition in it (noted above in connection with Weber's work) brings a specific philosophical perspective to bear on our problem. The world as a 'horizon of horizons', omnipresent, indeterminate and enigmatic, calls for interpretation and provides space for a plurality of interpretations; the 'basic concepts' invoked by Durkheim can then be seen as foundations of interpretive frameworks. In a similar vein Eisenstadt speaks of 'cultural ontologies', without any further reflection on the philosophical status of that concept, but with unmistakably Durkheimian connotations.

The present purpose of returning to this problematic has to do with the very idea of civilizational theory. A strong focus on cultural premises, more precisely on core patterns and constitutive horizons of meaning, must be reconciled with the critique of cultural determinism and the rejection of functionalist conceptions of culture as a code or a programme. A clear sense of this direction emerges from the works of the theorists discussed in the preceding chapter. Further progress would seem to depend less on radically new approaches to cultural theory than on a synthesizing use of ideas which have been adumbrated in various contexts, often without any explicit interest in civilizations. Some of the most promising clues will be discussed below. In general terms, the aim is to theorize the defining and formative patterns of meaning in a way that would neither reduce them to parts of a social whole nor posit them as models of social order. The object of inquiry may be provisionally defined as a semantic field embedded and involved in the social one, but also oriented towards broader horizons of world-interpretation. Ambiguity and indeterminacy of basic components do not preclude a distinctive style or profile that sets one pattern apart from others and channels its social dynamic in specific directions. The notion of culture as a coherent and self-contained totality is no more salvageable at this level than at any other, but tensions and dissonances may be structured in characteristic ways.

A useful indication of the points at issue can be found in one of the most ambitious attempts to reconstruct intellectual history across civilizational boundaries. Benjamin Schwartz's study of ancient Chinese thought stresses the role of shared cultural assumptions or orientations, underlying the explicit principles, arguments and discourses of philosophical traditions. These orientations are summed up as follows 'the idea of a universal, all-embracing socio-political order centering

on the concept of a cosmically based universal kingship; the more
general idea of the primacy of order in both the cosmic and human
spheres; and the dominant tendency toward a holistic "immanentist"
view of order' (Schwartz, 1985: 413). They do not add up to a fixed
and unequivocal model; as Schwartz puts it, 'Chinese holistic thought
as a shared cultural assumption—like shared cultural assumptions
elsewhere—creates not finished solutions but a vast problematique'
(ibid.: 418). The idea of an underlying problematic (this spelling will
be used here) is crucial, and a closer look at some of its implica-
tions will highlight its importance for civilizational theory in general.

   The first point to note is the loosely textured plurality of themes:
although the key 'ideas' mentioned by Schwartz connote each other,
the links are uncertain enough to allow for considerable variety of
emphasis and direction. A central and enduring current of Chinese
thought insisted on close connections between cosmic and social
order, and on the essential role of rulership as an embodiment of
their unity. Even within this restricted horizon, major divergences
could develop: with regard to the interest in and understanding of
the cosmic dimension, the relative importance of the ruler as such
or the prescribed framework of rule, and the importance of social
concerns. On the other hand, the shared problematic left open the
possibility of aspirations to unity with the cosmic order, in ways often
detached from or dismissive of the social and political one. Some
representatives of the Daoist tradition took this line to extreme lengths;
but the underlying ambiguity of Daoist trends is evident in their
recurrent adaptations to statism. A more unorthodox and short-lived
school of thought (Mohism), whose legacy was very thoroughly neu-
tralized, reinterpreted the primacy of the political in a utilitarian
spirit which amounted to a 'radical deviation' from otherwise 'widely
shared orientations of the elite culture' (ibid.: 171). The record of
these deviations from the mainstream shows that dominant orienta-
tions should not be understood as absolute obstacles to dissent. Rather,
their 'initial power' (ibid.: 172) manifests itself in a capacity to cir-
cumscribe the cultural space for disagreement, to marginalize or
coopt the countercurrents, and—in extreme cases—to bar the most
subversive alternatives from membership in a shared tradition.

   A problematic is, in other words, characterized by shifting bal-
ances of interrelated but variously accentuated themes, both on the
level of core traditions and in the context of more or less dissertive
offshoots. The ambiguity of the thematic foci is reflected in inter-

pretive conflicts of varying intensity; in that sense, an 'inner conflict of tradition' (Heesterman, 1985, with particular reference to India) would seem to constitute a common trait of major cultural formations, even if well-defined contrasts between orthodoxy and heterodoxy are more evident in some cases than others. The implications and preconditions of such polarizing trends will be discussed in connection with institutional patterns. At this point, it is enough to note that the idea of an underlying and encompassing problematic is inseparable from the hermeneutics of conflict.

The civilizational focus of Schwartz's analysis is very explicit: he is dealing with the most seminal intellectual articulations of premises which continued to shape the self-understanding of the Chinese world. In a more general sense, it can be argued that his notion of an interpretive problematic has some intrinsic affinity with the pluralistic concept of civilization. Orientations of the kind that he discusses lend themselves to diverse developments within a distinctive framework and changing perspectives of successive historical junctures, but without a loss of continuity. A shared but also disputed and underdetermined set of cultural assumptions—interpretive orientations, to use a term more attuned to the present project—is a plausible basis for civilizational unity, even if further analytical and comparative work is needed to substantiate the claim. Moreover, Schwartz's formulation of this idea is designed to avoid any suggestions of a closed cultural universe: his account of ancient Chinese thought and its legacy draws parallels and contrasts with comparable developments elsewhere, especially in ancient Greece, and stresses the points of contact between reflexive turns in different cultural settings. But transcultural issues and visions can be filtered and refracted through distinctive cultural premises, and there is no a priori answer to the question of limits to translation.

Schwartz goes on to consider objections which have an obvious bearing on the most general problems of civilizational theory. If philosophical texts and traditions are analyzed as keys to more widely shared and deeply embedded assumptions, the inherent bias of the sources might lead to an over-intellectualization of the supposedly broader perspectives. More specifically, it seems likely that the questioning and reflective stance of a creative minority will set its culture apart from the ruling elite with which they are to some extent allied, let alone from popular strata (ibid.: 406–13). Schwartz's comments on the first question are rather inconclusive, but his concrete

analysis of the Chinese case suggests a more general line of argument. Although the identity of intellectuals and power elites was not as complete as some traditional accounts of the Chinese literati would have it, there is no doubt that the salient role of political power in the Chinese vision of socio-cosmic order was exceptionally conducive to a close relationship. The shared frame of reference made the reflective minority particularly sensitive to problems and practices of the ruling one (without ensuring a harmonious relationship or a uniform level of commitment), and at the same time, the presence of a highly charged problematic was bound to affect the understanding, exercise and staging of power on the part of the rulers. This distinctively Chinese constellation can, however, be seen as a special case of more general interrelations. To the extent that interpretive orientations define—directly or indirectly—the meaning of social power, and to the extent that power centres function in a field permeated by formative meanings, the activities of elites on both sides are essentially interconnected. But this part of our problematic will be revisited in the context of institutional patterns.

As for the second issue, Schwartz casts doubt on the idea that elite culture—including its more reflective versions—and popular culture can be interpreted as variants of the same underlying structure. Such assumptions seem reminiscent of the radical civilizational holism which has already been discussed and found wanting. Schwartz's own approach is more in line with the view to be developed here: elite culture 'diverges in crucial ways from the popular culture', and their relationship is best described not as a 'parallelism', but as a 'constant dynamic interaction involving both mutual influence and mutual tension between two at least partially separate realms' (ibid.: 408). Schwartz adds that this the two divergent trajectories go back to common neolithic beginnings. This observation suggests a link to the distinction between civilization in the singular and civilizations in the plural. If it is—as I have argued—justifiable to speak of civilization in the singular with regard to the rise of states and their socio-cultural frameworks, the processes in question are also at the root of variations which define civilizations in the plural. The break with the neolithic patterns is thus marked by some common directions as well as by new form of diversity, grafted onto the neolithic legacies with more or less transformative results.

The two concepts of civilization can thus help to theorize the relationship between elite culture and popular culture. It involves chang-

ing combinations of unity and diversity on both sides: different civilizational patterns relate to common inheritances and infrastructures in different ways (for example, the forms and directions taken by the polarization of peasants and nomads depend on the broader contexts of historical civilizations), but at the same time, shared features of state-centred and class-divided societies with specialized cultural elites are variously modified by pre-existing local or regional conditions (research on the cultural ecology of peasant societies has underlined divergences which affect the cultural models and power structures superimposed on them). The defining characteristics of civilizations in the plural are closely linked to elite cultures, but this does not mean that they are reducible to upper-class devices of legitimation and representation. As the following discussion will show, they transcend these strategic uses in multiple ways. In the present context, civilizational patterns should be taken to include ways of regulating and transforming the interaction between elite and popular levels of culture. The relationship is by definition asymmetric in that elite cultures are better placed to contain and channel developments on the other side, while at the same time drawing on popular traditions in selective ways; but major differences in both regards are a matter for comparative analysis. To mention only one striking example, the inbuilt reference to popular welfare and opinion in the mainstream versions of Chinese elite culture (sometimes misread as a democratic opening) had far-reaching civilizational implications which stand out with particular clarity when contrasted to India. Another comparative perspective, marginal to the most influential work on civilizations but worth exploring at greater length, has to do with the processes of diffusion impelled by centres of elite culture. Norbert Elias and his followers have analyzed such phenomena in connection with the civilizing impact of central power structures, such as court society and its equivalents (Kuzmics and Axtmann, 2000), but without adopting the explicitly pluralistic view taken, here; a comparison of civilizing processes within different civilizational frameworks would open up new angles on this topic.

The above digression testifies to the broad horizons of Schwartz's work; but to return to our central theme, his analysis of Chinese thought—surely one of the most impressive projects of its kind—is an exemplary introduction to the problematic of constitutive meanings (or cultural orientations, as Schwartz calls them). Further guidance can only come from authors more directly concerned with social

theory and its philosophical horizons. The most emphatic statements
on the autonomy of constitutive meanings (i.e. their irreducibility to
empirical data, functional constraints or rational rules) are to be
found in the writings of Cornelius Castoriadis. His concept of imag-
inary significations suggests lines of interpretation and argument that
will prove highly relevant to our agenda. As the term indicates, the
creative imagination is central to Castoriadis' theory, but this theme
is linked to a specific conception of meaning. Civilizational theory
was not one of Castoriadis' main concerns; he saw the problematic
of imaginary significations primarily as a general framework for the
interpretation of Greek and Western European history, with partic-
ular reference to the uniquely radical visions of autonomy articu-
lated in these two successive historical contexts. By contrast, a broadly
defined notion of heteronomy tends to obscure the specifics of major
non-Western civilizations and obscure the differences between them.
There are, however, hints at civilizational connections and outlines
of theoretical perspectives that may serve to extend the field of inquiry
beyond its initial limits. The concept of imaginary significations can
thus be put to the test of comparative analysis and applied to a
broader spectrum of historical formations.

    The problematic of imaginary significations is central to Castoriadis'
work after the mid-1960s, but for present purposes, it is enough to
recapitulate the main reasons for his first moves in that direction.
Both the effort to re-theorize meaning and the focus on the imagi-
nation are closely linked to a critique which begins with an all-round
attack on orthodox Marxism but moves on to tackle the Marxian
vision of history and the deep-seated functionalist premises which
Marx shares with a broader current of modern social thought. As
Castoriadis sees it, the prime fallacy built into the functionalist view
of institutions is its disregard of the basic fact that socially effective
needs are always co-determined and contextualized by constellations
of meaning. No functional imperatives can account for the variety
and complexity of these interpretive frameworks. Nor can the reduc-
tionist approach be defended at a more general anthropological or
epistemological level. The significations which shape the self-organi-
zation and self-reproduction of human societies are 'neither some-
thing perceived nor something thought (rational)' (Castoriadis, 1987:
140); they are, in other words, irreducible to cumulative learning
from experience, or to the progressive self-articulation of reason.
Inasmuch as social meanings transcend the boundaries of constraint

and cognition, they presuppose the creative imagination, i.e. the 'elementary and irreducible capacity of evoking images' (ibid.: 127). Castoriadis' analysis of the imagination broke new ground in philosophical debate, but here we can only deal with the implications for social theory.

The imaginary significations par excellence are the central and structuring semantic complexes that shape the cultural profile of their respective societies and can be understood as implicit or pre-given answers to questions about the human condition. They are, by definition, distinctive universes of meaning and must be interpreted with due regard to their mutually irreducible contents. But no serious attempt to make sense of unique configurations would be possible without guidelines of a more general kind. Castoriadis' reflections on the imaginary element in the self-constitution of societies (ibid.: 147–56) highlight four recurrent and particularly significant aspects.

At the most fundamental level, social imaginary significations set up an ontological framework: 'every society defines and develops an image of the natural world of the universe in which it lives' (ibid.: 149). The formulation is ambiguous in that it seems to equate the mapping of a non-social, natural world with the vision of a world order which encompasses both nature and society. But even if we distinguish these two aspects, Castoriadis' main point is clear: imaginary elements (in their capacity as the medium of cultural interpretation) enter into the construction of every comprehensive word-view, and although such frames of reference may not be equally salient or constraining in all societies, even the supposedly 'disenchanted' rationalism of modern societies does not eliminate all imaginary components. A self-negating or self-disguising mode of the creative imagination is still at work. A second aspect is similarly omnipresent and open to variation. World-images intertwine with self-images which spell out 'a structure or an articulation of society' (ibid.: 150), although the relationship between the two dimensions of articulation varies widely: from the mutual modelling of nature and society, characteristic of primitive cultures, to the modern rejection of natural paradigms of social order. Castoriadis adds that the self-articulation of society includes changing interpretations and justifications of social division. Irrespective of changing contents and interconnections, world-images and self-images converge in 'the choice of objects and acts, etc., embodying that which . . . has meaning and value' (ibid.: 149). Evaluative orientations project socio-cultural criteria and distinctions

onto the ensemble of things. This third aspect of the self and world-instituting imaginary gives rise to overall cultural patterns of needs and goods, more or less explicitly organized in terms of separate spheres. These evaluative frameworks are in turn linked to a fourth realm of imaginary meaning (the fact that Castoriadis mentions it first is immaterial to my argument): 'the being of the group and the collectivity' (ibid.: 148). Collective identities, always defined in relation to ways and visions of social life and in contrast to other such identities are a major but still relatively neglected field of comparative studies, and Castoriadis identified a key topic well ahead of his time: his brief discussion of the nation as an imaginary formation preceded Benedict Anderson's much more frequently quoted work on 'imagined communities'. The aim of the present discussion is to explore a new side to the problematic of imaginary significations, rather than to trace its development throughout Castoriadis' later work. This change of perspective will entail some conceptual shifts; to clarify the reasons for them, the stated and unstated implications of Castoriadis's programmatic outline should be reconsidered. As noted above, his references to the imaginary articulation of the natural and the social world did not raise the question of the world as a shared horizon. The most sustained reflections on that topic are to be found in the phenomenological tradition, especially in the work of Merleau-Ponty whose ideas influenced Castoriadis' thought in many ways. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the world, best understood as a more radical variation on the phenomenological theme of the lifeworld, highlights the fundamental philosophical problems which emerge when a tacit presupposition of everyday life and its specialized offshoots is brought into focus. The issues are complex, the most seminal text (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) is a torso, and later interpretations leave much to be desired; from the present point of view, three apparent paradoxes may be singled out for more explicit mention.

To begin with the most basic problem, the world is thematized as a trans-subjective context, and in that capacity, it is central to the project of a non-subjectivist phenomenology. But at the same time, this line of reflection opens up new dimensions of subjectivity, related to ways of appropriating and articulating the world. The interplay of exposure to the world, activity in the world and patterning of the world unfolds in ways which reveal the ambiguity of the trans-subjective context as such. On the one hand, the world is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, a 'horizon of horizons', i.e. an ultimate

basis of unity in diversity; on the other hand, the unity thus con-
ferred is indeterminate enough to become a source of pluralism at
its own level, and this openness to multiple perspectives translates
into different forms in different contexts. Merleau-Ponty speaks of
multiple worlds or versions of the world in connection with the ele-
mentary forms of perception, but also with cultural spheres such as
art, science and philosophy, and—as we have seen—with cultural
patterns on a civilizational scale. Finally, the problematic unity and
the latent plurality of the world manifest themselves in complex
entanglements of experience and interpretation: an assumed and
ongoing unity of the world is essential to the very cohesion of expe-
rience, but at the same time, the reference to open-ended horizons
maintains the possibility of divergent and conflicting interpretations.

Closer analysis of imaginary meanings as articulations of the world—
in the phenomenological sense—would add new sources of variety
to those listed by Castoriadis in the text quoted above. Different
relationships between the semantic contexts—nature and culture,
interpretation and evaluation, order and identity—point to divergent
paths and horizons of worldmaking. Although no civilizational the-
orist has made a sustained attempt to thematize this dimension, some
significant glimpses of it should be noted and linked to broader per-
spectives. To begin with the most basic point, the interpretive pat-
terns and formative traditions of different civilizations may vary in
regard to the very presence or absence of explicit concern with the
world. As Rémi Brague (1999) has shown, the ancient Greek notion
of the *kosmos* marks a major departure from the older Near Eastern
modes of thought: for the first time, a vision of world order as unity
in plurality—never articulated as such in Egyptian or Mesopotamian
traditions—was combined with reflection on the human situation
within that framework, in a way that allowed for more far-reaching
objectivation of natural order as well as more radical notions of
human autonomy. The Greek innovation was open to rival inter-
pretations, but the versions which had the strongest impact on later
European thought—the Platonic and Aristotelian models of cosmic
order—did so in combination with a monotheistic and revealed reli-
gion, whose ambiguous conception of the world was given a more
affirmative turn by the Greek input. But this synthesis of separate
traditions was challenged by the gnostic countercurrent, unsuccess-
ful as an alternative religion but important for later developments
in European cultural and intellectual history.

Another variable aspect of interpretive and self-understanding cores
is the constitution of socio-cultural spheres as separate worlds. Max
Weber's concept of 'world orders' used in his excursus (*Zwischenbetrach-
tung*) on religious rejections of the world and their directions, refers
to this problematic: the orders in question are not only specific
domains of human activity, but also distinctive ways of being in,
relating to and making sense of the world. Weber's reflections on
world orders mark the passage from China to India, and his analy-
sis of India stresses—among other things—a more advanced differen-
tiation of orders than in the Chinese civilizational zone. Contrary to
the most influential current readings, it is thus clear that the idea
of world orders as frameworks and criteria of differentiation was
meant to be applicable to premodern and non-Western civilizations.
But it must be added that this incipient alternative to models of
functional differentiation also draws on modern developments with-
out a clear demarcation of epochs or traditions. This is evident in
Weber's discussion of the main institutional orders (economic and
political), the more emphatically cultural ones (intellectual, aesthetic
and erotic), and the religious sphere which spans both dimensions.
A reconstruction for comparative purposes would have to begin with
the implicit assumptions of Weber's argument. To speak of an order
giving a specific form and texture to the world is to posit a nucleus
of more or less integrated meanings which set a sociocultural sphere
apart from others and endow it with the interpretive potential needed
to project its logic onto a broader field. From a universalizable eco-
nomic calculus to the construction of strategies for an unlimited
growth of knowledge, the orders analyzed by Weber include their
respective modes of worldmaking. At the same time, each sphere
tends to articulate and impose its distinctive value-orientations as
prior to those of others. Finally, institutional aspects—in the broad
sense of ground rules or defining conventions—are an integral part
of every sphere, even if some of Weber's cases in point are more
strongly centred on institutional cores than others. If the 'world
orders' are analyzed along these lines, it becomes easier to treat their
dynamics and levels of differentiation as subject matters for civiliza-
tional studies, in contrast to the prevalent focus on exclusively mod-
ern contexts.

A third issue, more genuinely grounded in modern experiences
but also suggestive of broader horizons, may serve to round off our
sample of unexplored themes. The multi-faceted and mutually for-

mative conflict between Enlightenment and Romanticism, central to the transformations of modern culture, can be seen as a case of fundamental divergences in world interpretation within a shared semantic field. Projections of a levelled and disenchanted world, devoid of all intrinsic meaning, are part and parcel of the cultural dynamic of the Enlightenment; on the other hand, the most plausible common denominator of Romantic currents is resistance to this perceived destruction of meaning, combined with a search for ways to re-enchant the world. Both sides to the conflict are key constituents of modernity, and Romantic trends cannot be written off as defensive reactions to cognitive progress: the unending debate on organicist conceptions of nature and the possibility of salvaging at least a part of their legacy shows that the controversy remains alive at the level of ontological premises. In that context, the main points in dispute concern the role of creativity and self-organization in the natural world. But irrespective of strictly philosophical debates, the broader polarization of world-perspectives—articulated in multiple variants of the divide between Enlightenment and Romanticism—is crucial both for the question of modernity's civilizational status and for comparison with premodern traditions. As we have seen, the present approach to civilizational theory allows for internal cultural conflict (it would seem to be the rule rather than the exception), but the question of cross-civilizational parallels or affinities with the specific conflict between Enlightenment and Romanticism can only be settled by comparative analysis.

The above indications should suffice to chart the course for an extension of Castoriadis' reflections on the imaginary. Although civilizational theory as such was marginal to his programme, he sometimes refers to cultural paradigms of the kind commonly invoked by civilizational analysts: such cases are the most conclusive signs of the creative imagination as a social and historical force. In particular, ancient Judaism and ancient Greece are cited as examples of innovative breakthroughs which go far beyond any reflections of circumstances or responses to needs. One of these two epoch-making achievements centred on the monotheistic vision of God as a creator and legislator, whereas the other began with the notion of a supreme impersonal law and culminated in the invention of philosophical inquiry and democratic politics (Castoriadis, 1987: 128–29). Changing combinations of Greek and Jewish legacies left their mark on multiple societies and successive historical epochs. The civilizational

impact of the two cultural turning-points is thus of particular impor-
tance, all the more so since it also exemplifies the dynamic of encoun-
ters and syntheses. A more general affinity to civilizational perspectives
is evident in the very idea of an imaginary signification, as summa-
rized above. The imaginary substratum of meaning is less determi-
nate and therefore also more malleable than the interpretive frameworks
superimposed on it; it is, in other words, a shared and disputed field
rather than a definite paradigm, and hence compatible with the inter-
nal divergences and tensions which have already been noted as recur-
rent characteristics of cultural patterns. If the diversity of alternative
and successive formations—internal pluralism writ large—is a defining
feature of civilizational complexes, the problematic of imaginary
significations seems particularly attuned to our present purposes. But
there is also a more specific connection with the theme of world
horizons and articulations. The indeterminate, ambiguous and enig-
matic character of the world—highlighted by phenomenological
reflection—is reproduced in more specific but also more limiting
terms at the level of imaginary significations.

In short, the idea of imaginary significations opens up promising
ways of theorizing the patterns of meaning on a civilizational scale.
But since there are next to no concrete comparative studies in this
vein to draw on, we must—at this stage—opt for a more indirect
approach with provisional results. The following discussion will focus
on typical—and often tacit—assumptions about structures of mean-
ing or consciousness, trace the main directions of rethinking in more
recent contributions to civilizational studies, and single out some
significant points of contact with the above line of argument. In this
way, the present project can be tied to an unfolding debate, with-
out any premature finalizing of themes or categories.

4.4   *Configurations of meaning, II:*
Religious traditions and civilizational trajectories

A strong tendency to associate or identify civilizational patterns with
religious traditions is—as we have seen—evident in many otherwise
different approaches. Even a writer as concerned with material real-
ities as Fernand Braudel remarks in passing that religion is the civ-
ilizational phenomenon par excellence (Braudel, 1979, 2: 495). This
trend has been reinforced by prevalent readings of Max Weber's

work, perhaps the most influential source of implicit civilizational presuppositions in the broader field of social theory. Oversimplifications of Weber's ideas on this subject have been easier to defend because of fundamental internal imbalances in his argument. There is no doubt that a path-breaking analysis of the religious pre-conditions for the Western breakthrough to modernity (developed in the *Protestant Ethic*) kindled and guided his interest in non-Western civilizations: the main questions to be asked had to do with different religious backgrounds to social dynamics, and the overall perspective laid a strong emphasis on traditions indisposed to Western-style transformative turns. As Weber's work progressed, both parts of his problematic became more complex and conducive to further questions. On the Western side, additional factors involved in a distinctive long-term trajectory came to the fore, but were never theorized in a comprehensive and integrated fashion; as the divergent characteristics and destinies of the two main non-Western worlds—the Indian and the Chinese—had to be analyzed in greater detail, each case stood out as a specific combination of cultural and institutional patterns of containment, rather than outright stagnation. Although it is grossly misleading to describe Weber's studies of China and India as mere counter-examples to the *Protestant Ethic*, the inconclusive results of an expanding project did not lead to an explicit redefinition of the relationship between religion and the broader socio-cultural framework. Religious cores still appeared as the most constitutive elements of whole civilizations, and the most important macro-historical distinctions were drawn on that basis.

The first result of Weber's comparative analysis is an overview of the contrasts between Chinese religious traditions and those of the West, with particular reference to the Protestant phase of Western Christendom (the frame of reference is broad enough to justify the inclusion of Confucianism among 'world religions'). Here the key claim is that Chinese beliefs and orientations excluded the very idea of a religious rejection of the world and therefore lacked the transformative potential which such attitudes brought to bear on Western societies. More specific conclusions were then drawn from a comparison of India with both China and the West: the most distinctive Indian religions, orthodox as well as heterodox, had rejected the world in ultra-radical terms, but in such a way that the energies and aspirations generated by conflict with the world were channeled into strategies of escape from it. A more activist ethic of rejection, manifested

in efforts to master and transform the world, could only develop within monotheistic traditions and came to full fruition in the reformed version of Western Christendom. Finally, monotheistic traditions outside the Western mainstream appear as restricted or downgraded versions of the cultural dynamic which culminated in the Western breakthrough; this applies to Weber's underdeveloped but unambiguous interpretation of Islam, and by implication also to the projected analysis of Eastern Christendom.

With regard to the interpretive dimensions discussed above, it is of major importance that Weber's emphatic focus on world-transcending religions—and on the understanding of transcendence as rejection—leaves no room for a more positive account of world perspectives. The world appears only as a conditioning and limiting background, external to the cultural choices of adaptation, escape or mastery. By the same token, the question of order, more precisely of the ordering imagination intrinsic to all ways of articulating the worlds but open to contextual variation, is overshadowed by the polarizing constructs of inner-worldly and other-worldly orientations: the modalities of order become less important than the alternatives of integrative closure or transformative tension. The order-maintaining and the order-transforming sides of culture (to use Eisenstadt's distinction) tend to split up and crystallize into specific features of different traditions, rather than complementary aspects whose interplay could be theorized in relation to changing modes of ordering the world (as we have seen, Brague's work on the latter topic suggests an agenda for comparative inquiry). Weber's analysis thus takes a direction which detracts from the force of his most fundamental insights. Some later attempts to streamline the framework have, if anything, aggravated the problem. The distinction between theocentric and cosmocentric world-views (Breuer, 1998: 101) is one-sided and unrewarding: to subsume Chinese and Indian traditions under the common label of cosmocentrism is to disregard their respective characteristics and impose a purely negative unity derived from the contrast with clear-cut monotheisms. Another variation on the same theme (Gauchet, 1997) singles out the Christian—and more particularly Western Christian—combination of monotheism with a world-rejecting vision of salvation: only this type of religion can generate an 'investment in the other world as *opposed* to this one' (ibid.: 74) and thus, in the long run, link transcendence to transformation. Non-Western religions—from Islam to the Far East—lacked one or

the other of these two crucial ingredients. It can, of course, be argued that a search for religious sources of distinctively Western innovations must draw attention to equally distinctive traditions. But a contextual emphasis on Western Christian uniqueness does not justify the dismissal of all other world religions as versions of an ultimately identical effort 'to recapture the difference' (ibid.: 76) between transcendence and immanence. The view from within one tradition is not an adequate key to the internal meaning of the others.

In contrast to these ultra-Weberian views (in the sense that they lead to more levelling versions of the distinction between Occident and Orient), two post-Weberian lines of argument have done more to clarify the tasks of civilizational theory and seem more compatible with the problematic outlined above (with reference to Castoriadis and Merleau-Ponty). On the one hand, a sustained attempt has been made to re-theorize the field of Eurasian civilizations and world religions, in a way that would avoid Weber's restrictive assumptions without weakening the case for comparative study; on the other hand, the specific cases which Weber analyzed—at length or at least in provisional terms—have been explored from new angles and in ways more conducive to appreciation of their respective universes of meaning. Eisenstadt's account of Axial transformations is the sole systematic project of the former kind. There is no need to revisit the ground covered in an earlier chapter, but some points of contact with out present concerns—the modes of world interpretation and the workings of the imagination—should be noted.

The idea of an Axial breakthrough, occurring more or less simultaneously in several cultural centres and affecting the whole subsequent course of historical change, puts comparative analysis on a more balanced basis than before. Instead of reconstructing universal history from the vantage-point of Western modernity, the frame of reference is re-centred on a set of much older and mutually illuminating cultural mutations, which—ex hypothesi—gave rise to structurally similar but contextually different civilizational dynamics. More detailed comparative studies will be needed to test whether this equalization of major civilizations (an emphatic if selective restatement of what Charles Taylor (1990: 47) calls the 'intuition of equal value') is based on over-homogenizing premises. The presumed common pattern is a new framework for interpreting the world: from the phenomenological point of view, it may be described as a radical bifurcation of levels of reality, relativizing or overshadowing the inbuilt

unity of experience. This ontological division opens up new dimensions of order. Mundane reality is to be aligned with a transcendent paradigm which will always elude perfect realization while retaining unconditional validity. It is tempting to see these enhanced images of order as upgraded imaginary significations, conducive to greater distance and tension between core meanings and current practices. The expanded horizons of meaning provide support but can also pose a challenge to social patterns in general and power structures in particular. A more emphatic idea of higher reality serves to articulate more ambitious visions and strategies of institution-building; at the same time, the gap between ultimate models and empirical constructs tends to devalue the mundane versions of order. It depends on more specific contexts whether this ambiguity should be interpreted in terms of a simultaneously reinforced and relativized legitimacy. At a more fundamental level, the problem has to do with invested meaning rather than reasoned justification: interpretive frameworks of the Axial type add a new layer of meaning, but its more detached character is reflected in a latent deficit of meaning. But the problem of legitimacy reappears in a specific and decisive context. The Axial surplus of meaning lends itself to dissenting or heterodox interpretations; such currents can translate into active contestation of existing orders; and in the most mutable setting (Western Christendom), sub-traditions of protest and heterodoxy took a turn which led to another round of radical change (the modern transformation).

In short, Eisenstadt's conception of Axial civilizations draws on Weberian insights but overcomes Weberian blockages and suggests a more balanced approach to comparative studies. Its generalizing claims—and the question of over-generalization from specific cases—call for closer examination in light of results achieved on the other road beyond Weber: new interpretations of the main civilizational complexes. Here we can only outline the most significant themes and directions that emerge from recent work in the relevant fields; further discussion of implications for the Axial paradigm are beyond the scope of this book. It seems appropriate to begin with the Chinese counterpoint to Western perspectives. In Weber's analysis, Chinese notions of order—more precisely: ways of interpretive ordering of the world—figure only as a background to an 'unconditional affirmation of and adjustment to the world' (Weber, 1951: 229). The above discussion of Schwartz's work gave some indications of the horizons

which open up when this question is taken further. Various authors have explored the same problematic from other angles (for representative examples, see Stover, 1974; Graham, 1989; Billeter, 1991; Cheng, 1997; Geldsetzer and Hong, 1998). One of the salient common themes is the extraordinary continuity and tenacity of an archaic legacy, linked to Bronze Age beginnings of state formation and civilization but persisting in increasingly rationalized and refined forms throughout successive historical phases. Its core content is the above-mentioned intertwining of social and cosmic order; social patterns appear as parts of a cosmic whole and are at the same time invoked as models for the interpretation of cosmic contexts. This substratum of imaginary significations—the term seems apposite—lends itself to elaborations along divergent lines and in ways conducive to an enduring differentiation of traditions. In that regard, Confucian currents now seem less central to Chinese civilization that their adherents claimed and Western analysts (including Weber) tended to assume. If we can speak of a Confucian ascendancy or hegemony, it was less uniform and less continuous than the traditional picture would suggest: it involved overt compromises with other traditions (Daoism) as well as unacknowledged integration of disavowed ones (Legalism) and reassertion of primacy after a long process of adjusting to conditions changed by the successful indigenization of an imported religion (Buddhism). The internal pluralism of the tradition also aided the development of relatively self-contained clusters of ideas overlapping with main currents but in some cases more closely attached to the political centre; that applies most obviously to the school of 'correlative cosmology' whose changing constructs were integral to the transformations of imperial power (Wang, 1999). However, a fundamental ambiguity of the relationship between human activity and world order may be more important than any rivalry of traditions. An uncontested emphasis on the unity of knowledge and action (and on the immersion of both in the world), so opposed to the Western distinction between 'a subject that sees and an object that is seen' (Billeter, 1984: 43) that cross-cultural translation is fraught with difficulties, could still allow for different directions and preferences. Taken as a whole, the Chinese tradition is characterized by oscillations between 'the side of political concerns (in the sense of an arrangement of the world according to human vision) and the aesthetic side (in the sense of human participation in the gestation of the world)' (Cheng, 1997: 33). As for the vision of order which

underpins this problematic (encapsulated in the notion of *dao*), it remains a matter of debate for comparative philosophy. Joseph Needham's well-known attempt to rehabilitate an organic philosophy of nature, supposedly central to the Chinese tradition and crucial to Chinese achievements in scientific fields, seems to have come in for telling criticism (Finlay, 2000): it was grounded in and guided by Western concerns. More even-handed approaches note the multiple nuances of the notion of *dao*, from 'the proper course of human conduct and of the organisation of government' (Graham, 1989: 13) to an undivided cosmic whole which lends itself to 'an unverbalisable knowing how rather than knowing that' (ibid.: 186); the shifts, tensions and cross-references between these facets of meaning can be compared to more or less similar constellations in Western traditions, without denying major differences between the overall patterns. A noteworthy recent interpretation (Hall and Ames, 1987: 131–38) stresses the affinity of *dao* with aesthetic order based on the immanent complementarity of specific components, in contrast to the transcendent principles of rational order. Both types or order are familiar to Chinese as well as Western thought, but stark contrasts are evident when it comes to the question of their relative weight.

Post-Weberian interpretations of Indian civilization have taken a more distinctive turn than those related to China. It is not being suggested that all relevant views fit into the model, but some landmark works may be seen as highlights of a debate which begins with a reformulation of Weber's key idea in more systematic and strictly culturalistic terms, reverts to a stronger emphasis on conflicts and contradictions internal to the tradition, and ends on a note of agreement with Weber from a new angle. Taken together, these lines of argument underscore the role of cultural ontologies and images of order, as well as the complexity of their connections with social factors.

Weber's analysis of India centres on the 'linkage of caste and karma' (Heesterman, 1985: 195), i.e. the nexus between comprehensive institutional framework and an otherworldly idea of salvation and explains it as a mixture of logic and history. A vision of 'absolute salvation (*Erlösung*) from the world' as such and as a whole (Weber, 1958: 167) grew out of the intellectualizing and rationalizing efforts of a priesthood which had to affirm its autonomy through radical separation from the secular power of kings and the social order structured around it. The elaborate intellectual framework

needed to sustain this uniquely radical detachment—a rejection of all transient reality—was then projected onto a caste-dominated institutional pattern of complex and in part obscure historical origins. By virtue of the incorporation into a totalizing doctrine of salvation and retribution, the whole social regime acquired a binding logic beyond all historical contingencies. Louis Dumont's interpretation of Indian society takes this idea one step further. From his self-styled structuralist perspective, the caste system appears as the embodiment of ideological principles and the latter can in turn be derived from 'a single true principle, namely the opposition of the pure and the impure' (Dumont, 1980: 43). These polar contrasts are represented by the brahmins and the untouchables as the extremes of the caste order, but the same dichotomy recurs in muted forms throughout the multiple divisions and subdivisions in between; it is also reflected in a thoroughgoing separation of status and power, more radical than in any other major cultural tradition (purity is a matter of status, whereas power cannot avoid contamination by impurity) as well as in a conjunction of high status with sacred authority and supreme power with secular authority. The institutions of priesthood and kingship are thus set apart and coordinated in a way which ensures the primacy of the first while guaranteeing extensive autonomy to the second. To stress the inbuilt ideological premises of the whole social order is not to claim that society is nothing but a system of ideas and values: various anomalies and inconsistencies of the caste system as well as of any other social pattern, must still be explained on the basis of adaptation to economic or political realities. More importantly, however, the tension between the pure logic of principles and the imperfect practice of institutions gives to a form of life and a corresponding institution which contradicts the caste system (ibid.: 267–86). The renouncer who opts out of the social world becomes a model figure for the sect as a social group *sui generis*, superimposed on and structurally distinct from the society of castes. But the otherworldly ethos of renunciation also reveals the metaphysical dimension of caste ideology: in the last instance, impurity is equated with 'the organic aspect of man' (ibid.: 50), whereas purity points towards transcendence. As Dumont sees it, the Indian civilizational pattern thus rests on a comprehensive cultural logic and a specific set of metaphysical presuppositions which give it an even greater internal coherence than Weber had assumed. But a stronger emphasis on cultural underpinnings does not necessarily lead to an

over-integrated model of society. The cultural dimension can also be
seen as a source of problems, conflicts and enduring dissonances.
J.C. Heesterman's analysis of the 'inner conflict of tradition' applies
this general idea to the Indian case. Although the inner conflict in
question is, in the most elementary sense, common to all traditions
which combine a mirage of unchanging order with the historical
dynamics of reconstruction and adaptation, its distinctive Indian form
is exceptionally acute. Heesterman's account of the Indian constel-
lation begins with 'the broken world of sacrifice' (Heesterman, 1993).
The Vedic sacrificial cult, central to the early formative phase of the
Indian religious imaginary, was—on this view—concerned with the
maintenance or celebration of universal order. At the same time, it
is a highly agonistic social event, and its competitive dynamics come
to centre on a contest between priests and warriors, at first without
a clear demarcation of their respective identities. For present pur-
poses, the details of Heesterman's ambitious and controversial thesis
are less important than his interpretation of the two main landmarks
in the transformation of sacrifice. The first turning-point is the absorp-
tion of sacrifice into a highly formalized system of ritual; this reori-
entation of the cult enables the priests—the ritual specialists—to take
more effective control and separate their proper domain more strictly
from the sphere of rulers and warriors. The emergence of a more
structural conflictual relationship as the apex of the social order was
followed by another mutation on the priestly side (which Heesterman
equates with the Axial breakthrough); ritualism was transfigured into
'the ideal of an absolute transcendent order that is, as a matter of
principle, incapable of worldly realization' (Heesterman, 1985: 157).
At this point, the ontological background to the ethos which Weber
described as a rejection of the world becomes more visible. An
enhanced vision of order takes the paradoxical form of an imagi-
nary obliteration of the world. For Heesterman, the otherworldly
turn separates transcendence from sacrality and—by the same token—
exacerbates the inner conflict of tradition: the ideal of order becomes
as absolute as it is impracticable. A further consequence, perhaps
the final twist to the conflict, is a split identity of the religious elite.
The question of the priority of priest or renouncer becomes insoluble.

If the Brahmin claims to ultimate authority were articulated in a
way which simultaneously weakened their thrust and impact, this
expression of the inner conflict also had an ambiguous effect on the
rival elite. Heesterman refers to the Indian conception of kingship

as a 'conundrum' (ibid.: 108–27) and links its besetting problems to the Brahmin dilemma of detached order. On the one hand, the shift towards transcendence and renunciation made it easier for kings to stake claims to inner-worldly sacred authority, and at its most exalted, royal rule became an alternative or complementary embodiment of universal order. On the other hand, Brahmin autonomy and its cultural interpretations—although neither as consistent nor as uncontested as Dumont argued—detracted from the dignity of kingship and made it vulnerable to de-legitimizing views; this ideological deficit reinforced the centrifugal trends of the power structure. Here the argument links up with recent analyses of the caste system as a political order. Drawing on earlier work by A.M. Hocart, D. Quigley (1993) sees the problematic of kingship and kinship as a key to otherwise intractable problems in the interpretation of caste: 'in traditional India, neither kingship nor kinship has the capacity to organize social life fully. Caste is a means of creating order through their combination where the alternative would be no order at all' (ibid.: 141). Kingship constitutes a power centre outside and above the networks of kinship, but depends on them and delegates power to them for the purposes of a functioning order; the stress on ritual and purity serves both to enhance the status of kingship and to regulate the competition of kinship units within an otherwise fragile framework, and the strategic position of the brahmins—mistaken for an institutional primacy by most analysts—is due to historical circumstances which have put a premium on the competence of ritual specialists.

Quigley's thesis is a forceful reminder of the political side to Indian traditions. But he theorizes the political sphere in terms totally divorced from the question of interpretive frameworks: there is no attempt to relate the dynamics of state formation (marked by the interdependence and rivalry of kingship and kinship) to the emergent visions of order analyzed by Heesterman or to the constraints which this Brahmin-centred cultural context imposes on the structures and transformations of power. At this point, the question of relations and rivalries between priesthood and kingship must be reopened; it takes us back to an important but neglected aspect of Weber's analysis. In summing up the characteristics of the Brahmins as a social stratum, he contrasts the Indian separation of priesthood from kingship with the Chinese fusion of both domains, suggests a broader comparative perspective and argues that although patterns of unity or division in the regard may be due to contingent historical factors,

they are of lasting and all-round importance for later developments. By implication, the Chinese and Indian models were crucial to the divergent long-term dynamics of the two civilizations. It should be noted that Weber does not equate priesthood and kingship with sacred and secular power, and the Indian experience shows particularly clearly that this would be a mistake: it makes more sense to speak of a different mixture of sacralization and secularization on each side. But there is a more fundamental point to be added to Weber's observations. If the various ways to connect and/or separate the two poles of power can be seen as emergent but enduringly formative configurations, the above discussion suggests that they are inseparable from another level of emergent change: the interpretive constellations that crystallize around focal points of social power and endow them with specific meanings. As we have seen, the concept of imaginary signification helps to underline the irreducibility of these contexts. Images of order and power, as well as visions of the world in which they are embedded, link the horizons of meaning to the patterns of the social world.

The third set of questions to be noted has to do with the whole complex of monotheistic civilizations, and traditions which Weber neglected or considered only in passing must be placed alongside his privileged cases; here I can only indicate the most salient aspects of a vast problematic and link them to some landmarks in recent scholarship, even if the authors do not always explicitly relate to Weberian themes. Weber was primarily interested in the transformative impact of a particular monotheistic religion at a critical historical juncture (the Protestant moment) and the original context of the monotheistic turn (ancient Judaism). The disproportionate emphasis on these two breakthroughs tends to shorten the historical perspective: the 'personalization, ethicization and universalization' (Schluchter, 1981b: 36) of divine authority, evident in Judaic traditions from early beginnings, overshadow later innovations on the road to European modernity and seem to prefigure a whole line of development.

If the notion of monotheism as a civilizational nucleus is to be developed in more explicit and general terms than Weber did, four main questions arise. The *background* to the monotheistic reorientation of religious life calls for closer examination: the broader civilizational horizons of ancient Judaism may throw light on its self-demarcating moves as well as on later transformations of its legacy in a re-enlarged historical arena. If detailed analyses must do justice to rival tradi-

tions and multiple trajectories with different outcomes, it is no less necessary to clarify the common denominator, i.e. the *defining content* and distinctive novelty of monotheism as a mode of belief. On that basis, the *main variants* of the monotheistic paradigm, their civilizational implications and their transformative potentials can be seen in a more balanced perspective. Finally, this broadening of the Weberian frame of reference will also provide new keys to developments which Weber singled out for extensive analysis, and—more specifically—draw attention to other *crucial moments* in addition to those familiar from Weber's writings.

The first question relates to the Near Eastern context, from the crisis of the late Bronze Age onwards, and to the peculiar features which set political and religious developments in ancient Israel apart from the rest of the region. Recent work on this subject tends to stress the importance of a self-limiting process of state formation, or even a vision of 'anti-statehood' (Assmann, 2000a: 46), in the sense of an intentional and systematic rejection of known models of state organization. Against the background of a general crisis of state structures at the end of the Bronze Age, the roads taken in Israel and Greece stand out as radical and original alternatives to the dominant traditions of sacred kingship; in both cases, political and religious innovations were interconnected, but the relative weight of the two spheres and the relationship between them differed markedly. The Jewish transformation (more protracted and interrupted than the Greek one, but to some extent in progress even during the phases of more assertive monarchic rule) was—as Assmann puts it—based on a 'transfer of political bonds to God' (ibid.: 50), a direct theologization of political authority, with the result that a divine legislator replaced the royal one.

This thesis is already an answer to the second question. To quote Assmann again, 'creator gods are everywhere in the history of religion. The new and defining feature of Old Testament religion is the legislating god' (ibid.: 68). Max Weber had already noted a widespread tendency to attribute creation to one god, even within otherwise polytheistic frameworks; Brague argues in a similar vein (with a significant twist) when he stresses that the monotheistic god 'manifests himself less through creation than through a more direct intervention: he can either legislate to the world, as in Judaism or in Islam, or enter the world through incarnation, as in Christianity' (Brague, 1999: 75). On these grounds, monotheistic conceptions of

the world may be analyzed as interpretive projections of a political principle. But the political source does not predetermine the constellations of meaning. Rather, the monotheistic turn—as defined above—opened up a field of interrelated but to some extent conflicting viewpoints. The notion of a supreme divine legislator, in direct authority and control over a human community, can easily translate into overriding concern with the social-historical world and a relative indifference to the cosmic context. The distancing of nature from the creator and the subordination of society to the legislator led to a reorientation of religious life, and this shift can culminate in eschatological visions which deny not only the intrinsic worth, but also the permanence of the cosmos. From another point of view, divine legislation appears as a framework for natural order; a cosmological twist to the monotheistic perspective paves the way for a systematic reappropriation of Greek—more precisely Platonic and Aristotelian—cosmologies. As Brague argues, this combination gave rise to the 'standard vision' of Western Christendom, and the modern idea of the self-defining subject (together with corresponding reinterpretations of the world) took shape in formative opposition to that background. But his analysis also shows that the synthesis was never complete or stable. An 'Abrahamic excess' (Brague, 1999: 179–210) of extra-cosmological meaning was at least latent and often active in the monotheistic traditions. The particular content and strength of its Christian version is best understood in light of another inbuilt ambiguity: legislation can be seen as an inadequate medium for divine intervention in human affairs, and visions of redemption respond to the demand for a more direct presence. The Christian notion of incarnation is the most prominent case in point, but it gave rise to a new round of particularly acute interpretive conflicts: as Gauchet puts it, the religion of incarnation is also par excellence the religion of interpretation.

If monotheism is ambiguous at its core, the resultant tensions and divergences are central to the third issue raised above. A post-Weberian approach to the plurality of monotheisms and their variations on a contested theme would have to cover cases which Weber left out of consideration. With regard to the experience of Eastern Christendom, the obvious starting-point is the common but questionable view that 'caesaropapism' set Byzantine civilization (and to some extent its Muscovite successor) apart from the more dynamic tradition of the West. Although Weber expressed doubts about the

notion of caesaropapism as such, they are formulated in very general terms and take no note of the specific problematic of the Byzantine case. Gilbert Dagron's (1996) work on the Byzantine political tradition breaks new ground and shows that this supposedly classic example of caesaropapism is irreducible to any simple formula. Briefly, Dagron's interpretation stresses the tensions between alternative solutions to an ultimately intractable problem. A union of sacred and secular power was envisioned through the model of a Christian emperor, as well as in relation to the unity of emperor and church (the latter was not equated with imperial control of the Church through a subordinate centre, and therefore not incompatible with more or less sustained assertion of authority on the part of the Church); no final fusion of the two paradigms was ever achieved, and both had to cope with limitations inherent in the Christian elaboration of monotheism. There could be no human reincarnation of the divine incarnation.

The Weberian approach to Islam, although less developed than the major parts of the project, is unmistakably conducive to strong assumptions about the very core of Islamic traditions: they appear as a regressive version of monotheism. Schluchter's (1987: 39) summary of Weber's views highlights the contrasting images of divinity. The Islamic God is primarily an omnipotent and omnipresent one, whereas the Christian one is first and foremost infinitely good and merciful; as a result, Islam lacks the religious foundations for a principled ethic of world rejection. Temporary world domination through conquest is the only road to activism. Marshall Hodgson's analysis of Islamic civilization—probably the most thorough work of its kind in Western scholarship—leads to a much less skewed comparison. In contrast to Weber, Hodgson did not focus on crucial moments of innovation or transformation; rather, he compared Islamic and Christian traditions in a long-term perspective, with particular reference to the most prominently recurrent themes, and tried to do justice to distinctive orientations on each side. In the Christian world, 'a central theme has retained its hold on Christian imaginations under all sorts of circumstances: the demand for *personal responsiveness to redemptive love in a corrupted world*'. For 'Muslims of different allegiances . . ., a central theme has retained its power under the most diverse circumstances wherever the Quran has been taken seriously: the demand for *personal responsibility for the moral ordering of the natural world*' (Hodgson 1974, 2: 337). The implications of this

contrast affect all dimensions of social life, but for present purposes, one point may be singled out: the Islamic pattern is, as Hodgson describes it, more disposed to create and diffuse its own models of order, whereas the Christian one tends more strongly to combination and compromise with inherited or encountered models. Hodgson develops this idea most explicitly in relation to forms of social order: he contrasts the 'unitary contractualism' of Islam with the 'hierarchical corporativism' of Western Christendom (ibid.: 342). The former is more directly related to the defining features of religious traditions than the latter. But the same line of argument seems applicable to images of natural order. If Islamic traditions place a stronger emphasis on the continuity of the moral and the natural world, they are by the same token both less receptive to and less in need of cosmological inputs from pre-monotheistic sources. There is, in other words, less scope for a synthesis of the kind described in Brague's analysis of Western Christian traditions, and no parallel to the complex cultural dynamic generated by the decomposition of the synthesis.

The survey of major monotheistic traditions would be incomplete without a brief glance at one more side to the picture. If the idea of gnostic religion is defined in a very broad sense, i.e. as an intellectualization of the quest for salvation, it refers to a trend present within all world religions (Max Weber sometimes used the term 'gnosis' in that sense); if we stress the more specific theme of a reunion of the soul with divine sources through esoteric knowledge, the currents in question can be demarcated more clearly. But Gnosticism in the most specific sense was an internal alien in the monotheistic world, and its relationship to monotheism is perhaps best described as a paradoxical mixture of radicalization and relativization. On the one hand, the separation of divine and mundane reality became even more radical than in monotheistic religions: the created world was irredeemably evil, salvation could only be attained through absolute detachment from the world, and the supreme divine redeemer is as alien to the creator god as he is to the cosmos. On the other hand, visions of the road to reunion with the divine source were expressed in more or less extensively re-mythologizing forms. As Brague shows, this diffuse but resilient counter-tradition typifies a model of world order which deviates from basic premises of the dominant ones while defining itself through opposition to them; the basic orientation is best described as anti-cosmism (rather than acosmism), but it is not

incompatible with strong visions of order in general and aesthetic order in particular (there is such a thing as malignant perfection). The long-term transformative impact of Gnosticism is one of the most unsettled issues in the comparative study of religion. Strong claims about its role as a hidden source of modern thought and culture (Eric Voegelin) have been countered by equally strong denials of any such links and attempts to show that modernity had more to do with overcoming the inbuilt gnostic tendencies of the Christian tradition (Hans Blumenberg); all such arguments will however, have to be reconsidered in the light of recent and ongoing additions to our knowledge of Gnosticism as a historical phenomenon. Another line of comparative inquiry has been opened up by those who explore the trajectory of gnostic themes in the Islamic tradition; here the anti-cosmic stance is more muted and symbiosis with other heterodox currents correspondingly easier. A seminal but highly controversial account of this field can be found in the work of Henry Corbin (1971).

4.5 *Institutional patterns, I: Politics and ideology*

As I have tried to show, the analysis of civilizational patterns begins with constellations of meaning that are best understood as articulations of the world; at this level, our problematic overlaps with comparative philosophy (a field systematically avoided by Weber). But it has also become clear that when such constellations are seen as cultural orientations, constitutive of social formations on a large and lasting scale, they are particularly closely related to political structures and traditions. In one way or another, this connection was central to the major civilizational complexes surveyed above. It hinges on cultural interpretations of power; if we broaden the perspective to include other domains of social life, the most obvious question to ask is whether a corresponding case can be made for images or interpretations of wealth and their ramifications. The following discussion will link these interconnected problematics to the more concrete analysis of political and economic institutions. Their dynamics are, in turn, entangled with ideology in the broad sense of institutionalized cultural orientations. Finally, the question of civilizational patterns on the organizational level of social life goes beyond the cultural and institutional context and leads on to another set of problems.

As has already been suggested, analysts of political cultures deal
with interpretations of power and their formative effects, but often
without any explicit reference to these themes. To bring them into
clearer focus, it may be useful to reconsider Max Weber's account
of the relationship between two paradigmatic forms of social power.
His analysis of the Indian caste order, quoted above, contrasted the
separate identities of priests and warriors—reflected in different ethics
and modes of religious thought—with the Chinese example of sacred
kingship as the sole embodiment of supreme power. Weber sees the
two models as alternative responses to a problem, perceived and
solved in other ways elsewhere; the choice of one pattern rather than
another may be a matter of historical contingencies, too complex or
obscure to be reconstructed, but a self-stabilizing and systematizing
logic perpetuates the results over a long period of time. Although
Weber emphasized the decisive impact of the structures in question
on long-term development, his one-sided concern with economic
ethics left other aspects of social-historical dynamics unexplored. The
present attempt to revisit a central but prematurely abandoned theme
will draw on post-Weberian perspectives. To trace the implications
of the changing but indissoluble relationship between priests and
warriors, the division must be linked to broader issues of order and
power, at best adumbrated and often unnoticed in Weber's work.
The complexity of the two paradigms of power becomes more vis-
ible in light of their later historical transformations, now better under-
stood than at the time when Weber's project took shape; but the
changes which open up new horizons can also revive older mean-
ings, sometimes in strikingly archaic forms.

It seems clear that the power of warriors—as analyzed by Weber—
culminates in kingship. We can therefore discuss the problem in
terms of kingship, priesthood and their interrelations; from a broader
point of view, the demarcation and mutual involvement of politics
and religion is at stake. But it would be misleading to equate this
problematic with the question of secular and sacred authority. Each
side embodies and invokes a specific combination of the sacred and
the secular. Kingship is originally unthinkable without a strong sacred
component, and that aspect remains active throughout later histor-
ical metamorphoses; priesthood cannot function as a social force
without a share of or some control over secular power. Kingship is
by definition more directly involved in the exercise of secular power,
whereas priesthood presupposes a closer contact with the sacred, but
although this difference can become important for their respective

historical destinies, it does not give rise to mutually exclusive identities. Rather, a comparative inquiry should begin with the basic premise that all forms of distinction between the sacred and the secular are also ways of combining them. Their relationship is, in other words, always a problematic mixture of fission and fusion.

The connection between sacred and secular domains is—most obviously in archaic settings—by the same token a union of cosmic and social orders. In this regard, sacred kingship may be seen as a more central institution than any other version of the nexus: it represents the most visibly operative and authoritative link between the two levels or order. We need not go as far as a pioneering analyst did when he claimed that 'the earliest known religion is a belief in the divinity of kings' (Hocart, 1941: 1), nor agree with the same author that the separation of priesthood from kingship is 'a differentiation of an original genus into two species' (ibid.: 71; the figure of the priest is interpreted as a derivative variant of kingship). Hocart assumed a fundamental continuity from tribal chiefs to the kings of more complex societies, but this view is incompatible with more recent understanding of the historical divide between stateless and state-centred societies. If the institution of sacred kingship is linked to the emergence of the state (the historical evidence is conclusive enough to assume that this was at least the predominant pattern), Gauchet's description of the turning-point seems apposite: 'the religious Other actually returns to the human sphere' (Gauchet, 1997: 35). The line previously drawn between a sacred realm of archetypal ancestors and its mundane social replica is redrawn inside the human world, and a separate power centre claims authority over society on the basis of its privileged connection with the sacred. But the institution which embodies the re-imagining of society and its place in the world—sacred kingship—is characterized by a double inbuilt ambiguity. On the one hand, it not only retains the reference to a superhuman sacred sphere, but gives rise to more elaborate representation of the latter, while at the same time claiming a new capacity for autonomous action which translates into more or less expansive strategies of domination. On the other hand, its unconditional supremacy over society is in practice diluted by interaction with a broader social field and by the compromises which this context inevitably imposes.

Gauchet's analysis underlines these structural problems of sacred kingship. But the argument may be taken a step further and used to explain the separation of priesthood from kingship. If the very

idea of the sacred ruler—allowing for differences in type and degree
within a common pattern—is prone to permanent tensions between
constitutive roles, there must by the same token be strong pressures
for a more or less institutionalized division into separate foci of social
power and symbolism. Priesthood appears from the outset as an
intrinsic counterpart and potential counterweight to kingship, rather
than a result of later differentiation from a single model. The divi-
sive dynamic is at work even in traditions centred on particularly
strong versions of sacred kingship. To quote Weber's example again,
the survival and imperial reaffirmation of sacred rulership in China
did not block all developments in other contexts of authority: sub-
ordinate religious specialists, at first mainly concerned with ritual and
divination, seem to have evolved into the more autonomous intel-
lectual stratum which played a key role in the breakthrough to higher
levels of reflexivity and later in the elaboration of a cultural syn-
thesis which redefined the meaning of sacred kingship. The more
archaic pattern of ancient Egyptian civilization underwent no such
changes, but a priestly establishment was an integral part of the
power structure and proved capable of significant moves to strengthen
its position.

   As Weber saw, different versions of the relationship between the
two most salient conjunctions of meaning and power can have for-
mative effects on whole civilizational complexes. Civilizational the-
ory has yet to make proper use of this insight. But to place the issues
in perspective, the question of sacred authority and its dual embod-
iment should be linked to the problematic of state formation. At the
most elementary level, this turn takes us back to the concept of civ-
ilization in the singular. The distinction between primitive or tribal
societies on the one hand and historical or civilized ones on the
other can—first and foremost—be justified on the grounds that state-
hood changes the overall framework of socio-cultural life; further
analysis of the event which 'severs history in two' (Gauchet, 1997:
34) must therefore focus on the primary structures of state for-
mation. As we have seen, the most seminal attempt to theorize the
civilizing process as a unitary dynamic takes an unambiguously
state-centred line. Norbert Elias' model of state formation reflects a
particular interest in Western European trajectories, but the concepts
tailored to this set of cases can be redefined in more general terms.
Elias' emphasis on the twin monopolies of taxation and violence
highlights the experience of a sustained and successful centralizing

drive against an initial state of extreme fragmentation. Both mono-polies involve mechanisms of control which also serve to mobilize resources; the interconnected imperatives of control and mobiliza-tion may thus be seen as the most basic motive forces of state for-mation. But they can take forms which fall short of effective monopolies in the Eliasian sense and allow for more de-centred power struc-tures; moreover, they operate in other contexts beside those of vio-lence and taxation, and achievements in some fields can compensate for shortcomings in others. The patterns and processes that fall under these categories are to a large extent located on the organizational level of socio-cultural life (as defined above) Elias' conception of power points beyond that domain, his tendency to equate civiliza-tion with an 'involuntary learning process' (Elias, 1995: 8) and an ongoing effort to perfect basic controls leads him to over-emphasize organizational dynamics.

The first step towards a broader comparative framework would be a closer analysis of the institutional side to state formation; differences at this level would in turn raise questions about the impact of cultural traditions and orientations. Useful conceptual clues to these problems can be found in R. Bin Wong's work on European and Chinese patterns of social change. Wong's comparative history of state formation and transformation—to date the most compre-hensive and articulate project of its kind—combines four main ana-lytical perspectives: state structures take shape through the interrelated dynamics of challenges, capacities, claims and commitments (Wong, 1997: 73–104). The category of challenges encompasses all difficulties and obstacles that have to be overcome in the course of state for-mation. They include—in principle—environmental as well as geopo-litical conditions, but Wong follows the path taken by Elias and other scholars in stressing the rivalry with other aspiring states and the resistance of social forces. The second perspective corresponds most closely to Elias' model; capacities to extract resources and mobilize armies are crucial to state building, although a broader range of enabling structures must be taken into account. The notion of claims takes the argument beyond the Eliasian frame of reference, links the pursuit of power to cultural premises and situates the state in a field of social forces. Claims involve 'definitions of what a state is expected to do and what it is not allowed to do' (ibid.: 82). The most familiar example of links between claims and capacities is the long-drawn-out struggle over the legal authority to tax. Finally, commitments

have to do with more basic ideological principles invoked to support claims and to justify overall styles of rule.

Wong goes on to note distinctive features of the long-term trajectories of state formation in China and Europe. Divergences in all four respects resulted in a durable and pervasive contrast: the distinction between state and society is much more sharply drawn in Europe than in China. The lasting achievements of early Chinese rulers forestalled the challenges most common in the European context. The reproduction of an agrarian empire, rather than rivalry with other political actors, was the main concern of government; there were—again in contrast to Europe—'no powerful elites that could place claims on the state in ways that legally limited the state's boundaries of action' (ibid.: 92); and the ideological principles of the imperial state gave more weight to popular welfare than those of medieval or early European states, but this commitment was integrated into an orthodoxy which gave the central authorities a mandate for all-round maintenance of moral order. Strengths inherent in all these structural foundations could compensate for weaknesses in regard to key state capacities.

Wong's comparative analysis of China and the West sets standards that have yet to be applied in other domains of regional macro-history. But for present purposes, its main merit is that it exemplifies the broad perspective on state formation which can—as I have suggested—link up with the problematic of political culture, re-centred around the long-term transformations of sacred and secular power. Challenges, claims, capacities and commitments shape the interaction of state structures with their socio-cultural settings; the problem-solving and institution-building strategies devised in this context result in varying forms of statehood as well as levels of state autonomy, and these outcomes also reflect underlying interpretations of power. With regard to the last aspect, divergent transformations of sacred kingship—and of its more elusive priestly counterpart—are the most obvious sources of different civilizational traditions.

The developments in question can be analyzed from several angles. To begin with, the very survival of sacred kingship—in more or less emphatic versions—within different civilizational contexts does not follow a uniform pattern. Ancient Egypt is the most familiar example of a civilization centred on a particularly strong and enduring model of sacred kingship, but the transformative capacity of this core institution was correspondingly limited (although some borderline

episodes, including an abortive religious reform often seen as a move towards monotheism, are still debated by historians). The Chinese paradigm of sacred kingship, unique among major historical civilizations and imperial formations, was the result of much more complex historical processes: An archaic model, apparently characterized by highly kingship-centred forms of religious life, gave way to a regime which separated a nominal sacred ruler from a cluster of rival power centres capable of significant but not radical secularization; in the wake of imperial unification, a restructured model of sacred kingship—enriched by ideas inherited from a phase of intensive reflection and strengthened by statecraft of a more secular bent—became the linchpin of the new order. Another distinctive case of sacred kingship as a constitutive civilizational symbol can be found on the periphery of the Chinese world: in Japan, a crucial historical transformation invested ruler, dynasty and court with new meanings which served both to counterbalance the borrowing of Chinese models and to regulate changing power structures. Finally, changes at the level of basic religious beliefs could lead to redefinitions of the relationship between the apex of social power and the domain of the sacred; in particular, the Christian notion of incarnation was—as we have seen—conducive to new visions of sacred kingship as well as to new limitations on its claims.

Christian traditions exemplify a further side to the metamorphoses of sacred kingship: it can function as a framework for rationalizing processes which enhance the structural autonomy of the state. Ernst Kantorowicz (1957) gave an authoritative account of medieval Western developments to this effect. As he showed, the early medieval adumbrations of Christ-centred kingship, checked by the counter-offensive of the Church, gave way to law-centred and later polity-centred models but the underlying imagery of the 'king's two bodies' continued to sustain changing notions of a trans-personal power represented by the ruler. The theology of kingship thus provided intellectual resources for innovations which pointed towards a new understanding of the state as 'an abstract entity which can be neither seen, nor heard, nor touched' (van Creveld, 1999: 1), i.e. the rationalizing breakthrough which Weber had in mind when he described the state as a Western invention. This is the best documented case of its kind, but comparable connections between sacred premises and secularizing trends seem to have been established in other civilizational settings. Earlier interpretations of the 'Warring States' epoch in Chinese

history (and of the 'Legalist' school of thought which flourished during its later phase) tended to emphasize the self-contained logic of pure statecraft; but although there is no denying the shift to secular approaches in the political sphere, recent scholarship (Lewis, 1997, 1999) has drawn attention to the enduring ritual and cosmological references which served to contextualize state building at all levels.

The various forms of sacred kingship and the more rationalized structures that grow out of them can be analyzed in terms of inbuilt notions of sovereignty. This is perhaps the most promising line of cross-civilizational inquiry, but so far, it has not been pursued in a systematic fashion. One of the more interesting attempts is an essay on Indian and European traditions by S.N. Eisenstadt and H. Hartman (1992). As they see it, the Indian emphasis on 'multiple rights of different groups and sectors of society' (ibid.: 494), combined with the peculiarly aporetic relationship between kings and Brahmins, gave rise to diffuse ideas of sovereignty which did not lend themselves to systematic reconstructions of the political arena. By contrast, the European tradition was—despite an interval of parcellized sovereignty that bore some resemblance to Indian conditions—marked by a more structured distinction between priestly and princely mixtures of sacred and secular power, more centripetal notions of sovereignty in the secular sphere, and a straighter path from exclusive sovereignty to abstract statehood.

A more comprehensive typology could link visions of sovereignty to the claims and commitments which Wong includes in his analytical frame of reference. Variations in the scope and content of sovereignty affect both the aspirations and the assumed obligations of state-building rulers; conversely, definitions of aims, limits and overarching norms enter into the constellations of meaning which determine the significance of sovereignty. Since kingship is mostly the nucleus of state formation, modes of sovereignty are best understood in connection with styles or conceptions of kingship. The claim to universal supremacy is a particularly salient type, not inherent in the elementary structures of kingship but recurrent in major civilizational complexes and variously interpreted in different traditions (one of the most momentous developments of this kind was the idea of a Christian empire, characteristic of late antiquity and transmitted to the post-Roman world); its concrete impact on state formation depends on a whole range of other factors. The idea of universal kingship does not automatically translate into active pursuit of conquest, and

visions of world conquest can emerge as secondary variants of a less consistently conquest-oriented primary tradition (the imperial nomadic formations of Inner Asia responded in this way to the Chinese model). Strong versions of sovereignty may vary in their capacity to concentrate the exercise of power, and strategies effective at one level may prove counterproductive in another context; for example, the unification of China was the crowning achievement of governmental techniques developed during the Warring States period, but the attempt to rule a vastly larger polity and implement a superior idea of sovereignty on the same basis proved self-defeating. Another differentiating factor is the reference to interpretive frameworks: conceptions of sovereignty vary as to the importance and scope of world-constitutive significations to be represented by the ruler. Traditions drawing on common sources can diverge in this regard. For example, the critique of 'caesaropapist' models does not cast doubt on the fact that the Byzantine imperial institution claimed more doctrinal authority than kingship in Western Christendom.

These multiple visions of sovereignty can be traced back to transformations and reinterpretations of sacred kingship. The core meanings of the various patterns are directly and actively involved in the making of political institutions; they serve to maintain what Claude Lefort (1986: 257) calls the 'mise en forme', 'mise en scène' and 'mise en sens' of social power in its political capacity, and cannot be reduced to rationalizations or justifications of pre-given practices. Their impact on processes of state formation is most evident in projects as well as underlying orientations of strategic actors; in that context, they enter into the definitions of situations, possibilities and perspectives of the kind discussed above with reference to Wong's comparative history. But comparative analyses can also focus on the role of interpretive patterns in paving the way for objectifying constructions of the state as an entity encompassing the rulers, rather than a set of instruments at the service of the rulers. Although there is no denying the exceptional significance of early modern Western moves in this direction, the contrast with other traditions should not be overdrawn: some approximations to the state as an abstract entity can probably be found in all major traditions, and major conceptual shifts are not unknown outside the West. Ideas of a political order transcending the ruler—and divided opinions as to whether he was the most important part of it—developed during the formative pre-imperial phase of Chinese thought. Even in the Indian tradition,

commonly seen as much less conducive to such views, the allegories
of the body and the tree seem indicative of recurrent attempts to think
of the state in slightly less ruler-centred terms (Scharfe, 1989: 3).

   The above discussion dealt with connections between the dynam-
ics of state formation and the culturally codified interpretations of
power. A more complex picture will emerge if we go on to consider
less typical but more radically transformative paths of political devel-
opment. All processes of state formation have to adapt to situational
constraints and limits of various kinds, but some are self-limiting in
a more specific way: counterweights—or fundamental correctives—
to the strengthening of centres and the accumulation of resources
are built into the basic operative structures. Political regimes char-
acterized by durable parcellization of sovereignty may, in a loose
sense, be included in this category (structures of that type occur in
otherwise different settings, and comparative analyses need not rely
on an over-generalized concept of feudalism). But the outstanding
and decisive cases in point exemplify a more radical self-limiting
logic. It is not merely a matter of inbuilt and acknowledged limits
to the accumulation of resources, entitlements and capacities; rather,
the underlying meanings of order and power are redefined in ways
which inhabit the formation of strong centres. More precisely, such
patterns of state formation dismantle the integrative symbolism and
totalizing authority of sacred kingship. This political turning-point is
inseparable from radical changes to the world-interpretive context.
As noted above, a particularly sharp turn towards self-limiting state
formation is central to the genealogy of monotheism. From a broader
comparative perspective, ancient Israel and ancient Greece are the
most crucial cases in point. Parsons's description of these two sem-
inal cultures as 'seedbed societies' could be reformulated from a civ-
ilizational angle: both of them achieved historical breakthroughs of
exceptional long-term significance, but the new dimensions of mean-
ing proved difficult to translate into sustainable institutional forms
(although the Greek patterns was more complex and more capable
of initial crystallization as a separate civilizational complex). Both
had a durable and formative impact on whole clusters of later civ-
ilizations; we can, in that regard, speak of civilizational legacies in
the strong sense of paradigms transcending their original contexts
and unfolding their potential across successive historical divides. In
the Greek case, this dynamic of transmission begins with Hellenistic
and Roman civilizations. On the institutional level, the Greek inno-

vation was more radical than the Jewish one, in that it gave rise to a fundamentally antimonarchic form of political order: the *polis*. The religious reorientation inherent in this political change was not as significant in itself as the monotheistic turn. But the absorption of religious activities and institutions into the collective life of the *polis* seems to have opened up new field for the interpretive and creative imagination, beginning with epic poetry and culminating in the invention of philosophy and tragedy. Institutional and interpretive patterns interacted in mutually transformative ways: a new type of political order provided new social frameworks and analogies for the interpretation of the world, but the proliferation and confrontation of alternative perspectives on the world also affected political thought and made for more diversity in conceptions of the *polis*.

These reflections on ancient Greece and ancient Israel touch upon the more general problematic of Axial civilizations. Chinese and Indian developments do not reflect the same kind of self-limiting twists to the dynamic of state formation, but it may be possible to link them to other structural problems in the same domain. As we have seen, the most turbulent and creative period in Chinese history was marked by a split between two levels of state formation—the surviving sacred kingship of the Zhou dynasty and the stronger power structures of ritually subordinate states—and a long-drawn-out struggle for supremacy between rival centres at the second level. This fragmentation of the political realm seems to have paved the way for a transformation of ritual specialists, originally attached to the sacred ruler, into a more autonomous stratum of intellectuals.

In the Indian case, an exceptionally complex and competitive relationship between priests and warriors—hence also between priests and kings—seems to have combined with regional differences. The eastern frontier of the Indus-Ganges region where Brahmin dominance was apparently less pronounced and monarchic states emerged at an earlier date, was also the original homeland of an alternative religion which went on to become—for the duration of a millennium—a distinctive variant within the Indian civilizational complex. Weber treated Buddhism as a heterodox offshoot of the Hindu mainstream, and Dumont took this view to extremes: in his model, Buddhism is only a particular case of the sectarian current generated by the institutionalized model of the renouncer. A very different picture emerges from more recent work on the background to Axial transformations in India. The reflexive turn of Vedic religion in the

Upanishads and the more radical reorientation that culminated in early Buddhism are now increasingly seen as parallel and rival developments. Whether Buddhism was from the outset related to new visions of kingship is a matter of debate (Tambiah, 1976; Bechert, 1992), but the bifurcation of religious traditions was in any case linked to divisions at the highest level of social power and their impact on state formation.

Axial transformations exemplify the specific role of political institutions in relation to cultural patterns. But the cases discussed above can also serve to clarify the question of ideologies as institutional formations. Eisenstadt traces the origins of ideological politics to Axial sources; the implications of that view will be easier to grasp if we consider it in light of his distinction between the order-maintaining and the order-transforming roles of culture. As he sees it, the two aspects are fundamental and omnipresent, although the relationship between them is subject to historical variations. Axial civilizations combine a new and more elaborate foundation for order-maintaining functions with an unprecedented extension and articulation of perspectives for order-transforming action. The distinction is important and unobjectionable, but other sides to the picture should be noted. We can speak of an *order-transcending* potential of culture, rooted in the semantic reservoir of underlying imaginary significations and very unequally developed in different civilizational contexts. The flowering of cultural creativity during Axial epochs—as well as in some other settings—is a prime illustration of this aspect, and of the need to distinguish from the order-transforming one: institutional and organizational innovations draw on the cultural ones, but always in a selective fashion. Furthermore, the breakthrough to higher levels of reflexivity—a defining feature of Axial epochs—strengthens and diversifies the *order-questioning* capacities of culture. Axial achievements in that respect were only in part adaptable to the dynamics of subsequent structural transformations, but they gave rise to currents and traditions which ensured an ongoing cultural articulation of meaning and thus a degree of autonomy in regard to institutional forms. From this point of view, contrasts and parallels between the philosophical traditions of Axial civilizations suggest a particularly promising field for comparative study.

These differentiations within the domain of culture provide a background to the analysis of ideology. Ideologies, in the sense proposed here, are relatively self-contained and systematized frameworks for

the interplay of order-maintaining and order-transforming patterns of meaning. In concrete historical contexts, closure is never complete: there are, strictly speaking, only ideologizing processes which to some degree absorb broader cultural horizons. This definition does not limit the concept of ideology to affirmative interpretations or explicit justifications of an existing order; projects of alternative order are subsumed under the same category. But the relationship between these two prototypical ideological structures varies from case to case, and comparative analysis must also take into account ideological formations which exclude the very notion of social alternatives. Further theorizing of the ideological field can draw on Michael Mann's conceptual distinctions, but they should be separated from his a priori reduction of ideology to power. As Mann notes (1986: 22), ideologies do not operate only at the level of beliefs and meanings; norms of social behaviour and interaction, as well as aesthetic/ritual practices, are also involved. Varying combinations of such basic mechanisms are reflected in different overall modes of control and mobilization. Mann contrasts immanent ideology, built into communications, education and life-style, with the autonomous or transcendent versions which generate their own authority structures (world religions are paradigmatic examples of the latter type). The distinction seems useful (here the second level will be referred to as autonomous rather than transcendent), but if we want to thematize the cultural premises of ideology together with its embodiment in power structures, the autonomous forms cannot be equated with 'transcendent power', cutting 'right across existing economic, military and political power networks' (ibid.: 301). Rather, the definition should start with institutionalized meanings (of the order-maintaining and/or order-transforming type mentioned above), codified in ways which set them apart from the operative rules and ongoing routines of social life, but not *ipso facto* translated into fully-fledged institutions and infrastructures of their own. The level of autonomy in the latter regard varies from one-civilizational complex to another.

The issues to be explored in this context include some key themes in Eisenstadt's discussion of Axial civilizations. They also link up with the frame of reference which Krejčí uses to theorize civilizations in general. Ideology at its most autonomous takes the form of prescriptive or even exclusive worldviews, superimposed on more ambiguous and mutable constellations of meaning. Civilizational integration through such world-views is most effective when they at the

same time transcend civilizational boundaries and claim some kind
of universal jurisdiction. World religions are the obvious cases in
point (although it should be noted in passing that religions can reach
beyond their primary domains and identities in ways quite different
from those commonly seen as criteria of universalism: for example,
Greek *polis* religion defined its divinities in terms conducive to sys-
tematic matching with the gods of other cultures). The claims of a
dominant world-view exacerbate the conflict of interpretations, all
the more so in the case of universalistic doctrines. Tensions and
clashes between orthodoxy and heterodoxy affect the trajectories of
major civilizations. Eisenstadt sees this recurrent conflict as a shared
feature of traditions building on Axial breakthroughs, but his analy-
ses of specific cases stress the contextual factors: the levels and direc-
tions of the antagonism between orthodoxy and heterodoxy depend
on the cultural contents as well as on institutional forms.

Other aspects of the ideological field are best understood in rela-
tion to the codified interpretive core. A dominant world view is by
definition embedded in some networks of social power, but the insti-
tutional basis in question is not ipso facto a 'main integrative insti-
tution' in Krejčí's sense, i.e. one which takes primary responsibility
for defining and defending the identity of a whole civilization. The
most striking case of an ideological institution functioning in such
an integrative capacity is the Catholic Church in medieval Western
Christendom. The case can, however, also be cited as an example
of other preconditions for the integrative role: the Church could not
have maintained its commanding authority on a civilizational scale
without pioneering techniques and guidelines for state formation.
A very different constellation developed in China. Here the inte-
grative core was not a direct institutional depositary of orthodox doc-
trine, but an imperial centre whose self-image and official rationale
depended—to a varying extent—on inputs from the trained guard-
ians of orthodoxy. The Indian pattern differed from both China and
the West. A streamlined and strictly brahmin-centred interpreta-
tion of the caste order (taken at face value by influential Western
analysts) served to strengthen the elite which claimed both ideolog-
ical expertise and supreme authority; but as we have seen, this
status-maximizing strategy faced permanent problems with rival
claimants to primacy within the same framework. These contrasting
institutional configurations are based on and reflected in different
characteristics of the intellectual strata typical for each civilization.

The authorized articulators of civilizational patterns have, for obvious reasons, figured prominently in comparative studies (Weber's focus on the Confucian literati and the Brahmins is the most familiar example). But more balanced approaches will take note of variations to the centrality of such groups, as well as to their relationships with other elites.

4.6   *Institutional patterns, II: The historical forms of economic life*

The economic aspects of civilizational patterns have proved much harder to theorize than the political and ideological ones, and as I will argue, this problematic involves a specific twist to the relationship between civilization in the singular and civilizations in the plural. There are no developed ideas of economic culture that could be adapted to a pluralistic framework in the same way as the contested but suggestive concept of political culture. Although the question of different potentials for economic innovation was central to the single most seminal project of civilizational analysis, the results were highly problematic: as has been noted at several junctures of the above argument, Weber's concern with the sources of capitalist dynamism tempted him to a shortcut from religious to economic psychology, while the broader civilizational interconnections emerging from his studies of India and China were left unexplored. A later attempt to reactivate the question of civilizations and economies in more comprehensive terms seems to foreground patterns of authority and power, and thus to base the analysis of economic structures on analogies with political ones (Hamilton, 1994).

On the other hand, the study of civilizing processes—guided, at least to begin with, by the concept of civilization in the singular— has thrown light on developments in the economic domain. Elias' analyses of state formation in Western Europe link the long-term consolidation of central power structures to correspondingly sustained processes of commercialization and economic integration on an expanding scale. Some of the most important recent contributions to economic history (e.g. Epstein, 2000; Pomeranz, 2000) have— without any direct connection to Elias—highlighted more specific connections between state strength and economic growth; this line of argument is particularly effective when linked to comparative perspectives and directed against the neo-liberal narratives of unilaterally market-driven development. Research in this vein has yet to be

used for the purposes of a pluralistic civilizational theory.

If the problem is more easily approached from the side of civilization in the singular, it seems appropriate to start with the historical watershed commonly seen as a transition to civilized forms of social life. A set of interconnected transformations lends meaning to the concept of civilization in the singular, but can also be seen as an opening to the kind of differentiation associated with civilizations in the plural. With regard to the problematic of civilizations and economies, three aspects of the transition are of major importance. First, early civilizations build on the legacy of the neolithic revolution, especially the invention of agriculture, and this basis remains relatively constant despite later changes of and advances in other fields of socio-cultural life. The permanence of agricultural foundations throughout premodern history may be seen as a limit to cultural pluralism: historians committed to civilizational studies (e.g. Hodgson, 1974, 1: 105–09) can begin with general features of 'agrarianate life' and go on to analyze the differentiating patterns imposed on the shared substratum by separate cultural traditions. While this is not to deny significant divergences between the agrarian economies of different civilizations (with regard to organizational as well as technological aspects), the main point commonly made is that both the imperatives of reproduction and the standard mechanisms of control applied by ruling elites are uniform enough to constitute a trans-cultural core.

Second, the early states and their supporting cultural frameworks are—as we have seen—characterized by variations which give rise to an enduring diversity of civilizations, and this pluralizing dynamic also affects the economic dimension. In light of recent work on the origins of the state it seems clear that the socio-cultural mutation in question was too radical to be explained as a result of cumulative changes at the infrastructural level. Very few cases of complete and autonomous primary state formation can be reconstructed; in the earliest and by far the most momentous case, ancient Mesopotamia, the emergence of fully-fledged city-states with distinctive religious institutions is best seen as a revolution in its own right, not as a direct or delayed consequence of the earlier neolithic revolution (some historians would even argue that the Mesopotamian transition was unique; for an insightful if somewhat overstated account, see Crone 1986). The combined development of state structures and other innovations—including, in particular, the more complex division of labour

that took shape in and around urban centres—opened up new possibilities for the pursuit of central power as well as for more autonomous dynamic of economic life. The relative weight of these two aspects changed from one historical epoch to another, but long-term trends could also be distinctive enough to leave their mark on whole civilizations. Some earlier interpretations of Mesopotamian history assumed that it began with a particularly extreme form of religious and political control over the economy (the so-called Sumerian temple-state); more recently, scholars have found evidence of 'mixed economies at every stage' (Hallo, 1979: 100), with varying roles of temple, state and private enterprise. On the other hand, there is no doubt that state control of economic life was—notwithstanding changes in the course of a long history—a much more constant and pervasive feature of Egyptian civilization than of the Mesopotamian one.

Finally, the importance of cross-cultural trade—including trade between civilizational centres—for the history of early civilizations is now more widely recognized than before. But there were two sides to the dynamic that unfolded in this domain. On the one hand, commercial connections and initiatives were essential to the processes of state formation, especially when state-building activities took an imperial turn. On the other hand, long-distance trade paved the way for more far-reaching cultural exchange and enabled groups specializing in this field to develop distinctive interests and identities. The 'trade diasporas' (Curtin, 1984) played a crucial role in the history of intercivilizational encounters. That problematic will be analyzed from a broader perspective below. But in the present context, a further implication of the new emphasis on long-distance trade— taken together with the above considerations on state and economy— should be noted. Max Weber's well-known distinction between *oikos* and market economy can now be revised in a way which does more justice to historical diversity. In Weber's view, the primitive household economy had—historically speaking—been transformed in two different ways: the dissolution of domestic authority and community led to the growth of markets and ultimately to capitalist development, whereas restructuring and expansion gave rise to 'the authoritarian household of a prince, manorial lord or patrician' (Weber, 1968, 1: 381). With reference to states, and more particularly to the early civilizations of the Near East, it would seem useful to distinguish several aspects of the process in question and define the ambiguous relations between them more clearly than Weber did. The

quasi-natural form of economic life which he associated with the *oikos* can perhaps be placed in a more historical perspective: in contrast to the cultural and political spheres most directly involved in the constitution of civilizational patterns (and from the viewpoint of the elites active at those levels), the less mutable forms of material reproduction appear as a natural infrastructure of the historical world. The economic sphere is thus excluded from the historical narratives and theoretical reflections that develop along different lines in various premodern civilizations (or at best marginally touched upon at critical junctures, as in Aristotle's concluding survey of the *polis*); it is only in the course of the modern transformation that economic life comes to be perceived as a pro-economic life comes to be perceived as a problematic (Wagner, 2001: 7–8). At the same time, the emerging structures of sacred and secular power impose their patterns of control and appropriation on the economic domain. This is the core content of Weber's notion of the *oikos*, but the view taken here stresses the historical novelty of state power and its imaginary extensions, rather than the continuity from household to state posited by Weber's concept of patrimonialism. Moreover, kingship and priesthood represent two different but not always equally distant modes of supreme power. Their respective versions of *oikos*-building can combine or alternate, but at least in the most crucial historical cases, they also leave some space for market activities and institutions. This is the third aspect of the proposed restructuring of Weber's problematic: the marketizing dynamic which he saw as a polar opposite to the *oikos* is in fact inherent in the very structures which we have identified as the prime historical bearers of the *oikos* model. Commercial networks crystallized around the urban centres of early states, became integral to their power structures, and were more or less effectively adapted to strategies of state- or empire-building. The interpenetration of political and economic dynamics is thus too complex for the latter to be seen as a linear path to capitalism. But the fourth and last aspect complicates the structure even further. Intercultural long-distance trade contacts (and the diasporas actively involved in them) were also linked to the initiatives of states in pursuit of power, and thus to the *oikos* side of the institutional spectrum, but they also open up interstitial spaces for uncontrolled development.

This preliminary survey of the economic side to civilizations in the making must now be taken a step further. A framework for the analysis of civilizational diversity in economic life—in my opinion

the most promising of its kind—can be found in Fernand Braudel's work on capitalism and material civilization (1979, 1–3). Although Braudel's own way of theorizing civilizational patterns leaves more than a little to be desired, his vision of economic history may provide points of orientation for a more complex model of civilizational theory. He distinguishes three levels of economic life, all integral to the common core structure of civilizations and interconnected in varying ways; in the present context they are best understood as historical extensions of the three aspects noted above in connection with early states and their economies. The most elementary level which Braudel first described as 'material civilization' and then as 'material life', is the realm of production and consumption, seen as separate from networks of exchange. Although Braudel often prefers to locate this domain outside the economy proper, it will—for the purposes of the following discussion—be subsumed under a broadly defined concept of the economic sphere; when contrasted with more dynamic sectors, 'inflexibility, inertia, and slow motion' (Braudel, 1977: 5) appear as its key characteristics, but it also encompasses the growth and diffusion of technical skills. Moreover, Braudel's analysis of material life culminates in a discussion of money and cities, important to material life in all civilizations but also central to the next level: the domain of circulation or—in other words— the market economy. Money becomes, as Braudel points out, a part of the routinized infrastructure of economic life, and is in that sense analogous to more material parts; the boundary is thus fluid, but the more complex structures of the market economy—including banks and stock exchanges—are increasingly far removed from material life. Finally, Braudel separates the historical prototype of capitalism from the market economy and defines it as the pursuit of high profits through long-distance trade, typically based on monopolies more or less insulated from market pressures and frequently backed up by direct or indirect state involvement. Capitalism in this sense 'emerges at the beginning of macrohistory (*grande histoire*) and develops and perpetuates itself for centuries' (Braudel, 1979, 3: 532). The 'macro-history' in question is the process that begins with the rise of states and civilizations.

A closer examination of Braudel's three categories will suggest ways of exploring their civilizational backgrounds. In that context, the reference to state power structures, explicit in Braudel's concept of capitalism, can be extended to the two other levels, and the interplay

between political and economic dynamics—rather than any separate logic of economic development—becomes the main focus for comparative civilizational inquiry. But to begin with, some obvious and enduring civilizational connotations of economic landmarks may serve to legitimize the general line of argument. At the level of material life, Braudel notes basic facts which set whole civilizational complexes apart from each other. Agricultural staples of historical macro-regions—wheat in Europe, rice in East Asia and maize in pre-Columbian America—are the most massive case in point. In view of the cultural meanings and projections attached to these infrastructural factors, we can speak of civilizational choices or identifications; but with regard to ramifications throughout the diverse domains of socio-cultural life, the notion of civilizational determinisms (Braudel borrows it from Pierre Gourou) is no less appropriate. Less fundamental features are sometimes salient enough to be seen as civilizational traits: for example, Braudel notes the unique role of the 'folly of fashion' in European history (ibid. 1: 271–90). In short, both foundational and derivative aspects of material life testify to the diversity of civilizations. But it is equally true that when connections of this kind are thematized in isolation from their broader context, they lend themselves to highly speculative theorizing.

Technological traditions and innovations are central to material life, and their changing historical constellations raise further questions about civilizational dynamics. Braudel quotes a definition first proposed by Marcel Mauss: a technique is an effective traditional pattern of action. In stressing the formation of habits shaped by purposive rationality and more or less open to further upgrading, this formulation runs counter to Weber's overdrawn distinction between rational and traditional action. By the same token, it underlines the traditionalizing as well as the transformative potential of civilizational patterns. If we compare Braudel's elaborations on this theme with Joel Mokyr's comparative analysis of technological progress (Mokyr, 1990—the most condensed survey of the field), a basic congruence of perspectives seems more important than any differences in detail. The discontinuous and divergent paths of technological progress have proved very difficult to explain, and the intrinsic limits of historical explanation should by now be at least as visible in this field as in any other, but there are good reasons to assume a general relevance of civilizational patterns to the dynamics of innovation. Major cases of sustained lead as well as enduring lag in technological progress

are clearly related to cultural backgrounds of the scope and kind which call for civilizational analysis.

In the pre-industrial world, two examples of long-term technological creativity stand out above all others: Western Europe, from its medieval beginnings onwards, and imperial China before the fifteenth century. The record of these two civilizations seems all the more remarkable when compared to shorter flowerings elsewhere, e.g. in the Near East during the first centuries after the Islamic conquest. But the contrasts between them are also instructive: 'The greatest enigma in the history of technology is the failure of China to sustain its technological supremacy' (Mokyr, 1990: 209), whereas the Western European advance continued into the early modern period and culminated in the industrial revolution. No attempts to explain the different outcomes have come anywhere near consensus, but Mokyr's account of the debate suggests that complex civilizational dynamics were at work on both sides. In the Chinese case, the loss of technological momentum seems to be connected to the weakening or containment of socio-economic forces set in motion during the first centuries of the second millennium, and to the unchallenged supremacy of an imperial centre whose mode of rule became more autocratic and at the same time less activistic. The imperial state had for many centuries been a major promoter of technological change (its record in that field is impressive enough to refute the idea that empires are uniformly uncongenial to progress), but as it adjusted to changing social conditions without conceding institutional autonomy to any rival social forces, the overall constellation became less conducive to inventive change. As for the Western European record, interstate competition alone explains as little as enduring imperial unity in China (in other cases, the consequences of rivalry between political centres have been primarily destructive), but in conjunction with other factors, it obviously counts for something. It is worth noting that beliefs and attitudes characteristic of Western Christendom are frequently invoked by historians of medieval technology, however difficult it may be to establish causal links: there is certainly no general correlation between Christianity and technological progress, nor can other religious traditions be seen as unequivocally obstructive, but once the Christian notion of creation was adapted to 'the belief in a controllable, mechanistic universe in which human beings may exploit the laws of nature for economic purposes' (ibid.: 202), the combination seems to have generated lasting incentives to invention.

Finally, the civilizational approach may throw light on particular biases and orientations in the technological field, as distinct from a stark contrast between innovation and stagnation. Here the record of classical civilizations (Greek, Hellenistic and Roman) is of particular interest. As Mokyr shows, a balanced consideration of all three successive cases casts some doubt on traditional views. There was no all-round blockage of technological progress in the classical world, but there was certainly a striking discrepancy between stagnant techniques of production and ingenuity in areas more central to social life: although 'classical civilization had the intellectual potential to create complicated technical devices' (ibid.: 22), its main achievements of that kind—from coinage and writing to military machines and astronomical instruments—did not directly affect the economic foundations. Both the specific foci of invention and the failure to make use of spillover effects are related to broader civilizational context.

The civilizational dimensions of material life will come into clearer view if we consider a question which Braudel raises elsewhere but does not pursue at this level. Although the reference to 'elementary activities' might suggest a quasi-natural substructure of society, the patterns and processes of material life enter into close contact with power structures in general and state-forming dynamics in particular. Most obviously, the cycle of production and consumption is adapted to and restructured by strategies of accumulation. The unequal distribution of social power, upheld and epitomized by the state, leads to privileged appropriation of an economic surplus whose extent and uses are subject to socio-cultural definitions in different historical contexts. Accumulation in this broad sense is never an exclusive prerogative of the state, but the more or less autonomous effective claims of other social forces are best understood in relation to the general framework outlined above: an all-round restructuring of inequality and domination, due to the emergence of the state as a separate power centre. As various critics of historical materialism have shown, autonomous forms of economic power—emphasized and over-estimated by theorists of class domination—are secondary versions of a division which was first enforced and long maintained on a political basis.

To grasp the impact of state formation on material life, the cultural context must also be taken into account. The exercise of control and the appropriation of resources are always accompanied by visions of more far-reaching sovereignty; these imaginary extensions

can—in important but otherwise different cases—take the form of totalizing models of material life. As noted above, the Weberian conception of the *oikos* foreshadows this problematic, but the historical trends in question have to do with a whole range of imaginary projects which develop shared themes on different ways. The notion of the *oikos* as an invariant archaic structure should therefore be abandoned. An effort to re-establish the unity of production and consumption and recentre it on the state may be seen as a common denominator; the proprietary powers, redistributive functions and organizing capacities of the state lend some operational meaning to the phantasms of integration, but the varying interpretations grafted onto this practical basis reflect different civilizational premises and priorities. The civilizational background may be a composite one: some of the Hellenistic states (especially Ptolemaic Egypt, often seen as an extreme variant of the *oikos* type) imposed Greek superstructures on pre-existing state- and ruler-centred complexes of economic institutions. The rationalizing input served only to maximize and systematize exploitation. But if the project was in this case implemented with unusual consistency, its ultimate impracticality was—in the long run—reflected in dysfunctional trends. At the other end of the spectrum visions of statist reintegration can allow for social needs and adjust to welfarist principles. As Max Weber observed, such tendencies were integral to the Confucian tradition; later research has highlighted their importance for Confucian reformism and shown that the critical potential of the latter was much more significant than Weber thought. There was, however, another side to the Chinese tradition. Early phases of state formation and interstate competition had—more markedly than anywhere else—been characterized by efforts to maximize and mobilize resources. The strategies applied with that end in view can, according to some historians, be seen as the first adumbrations of a developmental state, and although this trend did not continue on the same scale after imperial unification, the legacy of utilitarian and proto-totalitarian statecraft crystallized into an ideological current which became a lasting complement to Confucian notions. Chinese history is thus a particularly promising field for comparative study of the statist imagination and its relationship to material life.

But for present purposes, it is enough to note a general point: the elementary forms of economic life (the first of Braudel's three analytical levels) are linked to political contexts, and the constellations

of meaning through which this nexus is articulated do not derive from any prior historical source (the mythical image of the self-sufficient *oikos* is perhaps best understood as a product of the same imagination as the statist projects discussed above). More precisely, they represent images of wealth, closely related but not reducible to images of power. To the extent that they respond to social needs, one can speak of correctives against self-absolutizing conceptions of power. The distinction between power and wealth will become clearer if we go on to examine the two other parts of Braudel's interpretive model.

The category of material life refers to infrastructural or (in terms of the framework sketched at the beginning of this chapter) organizational aspects of the social world, analytically prior to the plurality of civilizations but—as we have seen—open to further specifications in civilizational contexts. Similar considerations apply to core structures of the market economy: as Braudel puts it (ibid. 2: 93), they have to do with 'elementary obligations for all human beings'. They are, in other words independent of civilizational choices, traditional legacies and political structures. If the networks of exchange are—in this sense—infra-civilizational phenomena, they can be expected to emerge and develop in different settings, and basic similarities would take, priority over any context dependent divergences. Braudel has no qualms about drawing this conclusion. He sees the sixteenth-century world (the logical starting-point for a comparative study of early modern capitalism) as a multi-civilizational 'ecumene' where major centres of market dynamics meet on roughly equal terms. It goes without saying that relatively large populations must be involved (Braudel speaks of the 'exigence du nombre'), and in that regard, civilizations—large by definition—have an advantage over cultures constituted on a smaller scale; but disparities between civilizations have to do with long-term directions and outcomes, rather than unequal capacities for opening moves. Braudel goes on to argue—more succinctly than some recent critics of Eurocentrism—that the Western lead over other world regions was a late result of complex developments (it was certainly not a fait accompli in the early modern phase), and that the ongoing rationalization of the market economy does not explain the whole process (ibid. 2: 111). As will be seen, this view has far-reaching implications for the genealogy of capitalism.

But the question of market economies and their civilizational frameworks merits some further reflection. Braudel's emphasis on the universality of market mechanisms does not prevent him from noting the contextual factors which affect their workings. Among promising attempts to trace civilizational connections, he quotes G.W. Skinner's work on markets in imperial China. Skinner's analysis, now widely accepted by historians of China, focused on a multi-layered hierarchy of local and regional markets, linked to a lasting historical pattern of macro-regions, and thus ultimately to the unifying and diversifying dynamics of the imperial order. There is, however, no obvious parallel to be drawn with work on other civilizations. Braudel's working hypothesis on Islam stresses the high level of urbanization and the concentration of commerce in cities, at the expense of local markets (ibid.: 106). But the obverse of this top-heavy structure was a massive development of long-distance trade, commercial institutions and corresponding cultural values. More than any other comparable formation, Islam was a 'commercial civilization' (ibid.: 437). Although the dynamics of its formative phase are still a matter of debate (and more so during the last two decades than in earlier twentieth-century scholarship), it seems clear that they had something to do with empowerment and social upgrading of merchants, as well as of urban strata in a more general sense. The strong cultural focus on trade during the heyday of Islamic societies gave a distinctive turn to the images of wealth. Due to specific structures of social and political power (and ultimately to the whole civilizational pattern that encompassed them), this trend did not translate into visions or strategies for urban autonomy. On the other hand, Islamic innovations in the field of commercial institutions and techniques had an intercivilizational impact. Concrete cases of transmission to the more slowly developing European world may be difficult to document, but Braudel's assessment of the circumstantial evidence seems convincing: it is overwhelmingly likely that Islamic models influenced the commercial upswing (or, as some historians have called it, the 'commercial revolution') of medieval Europe. However, the borrowing and/or reinvention of more advanced methods took place in a context which ensured further development along more original lines. The European paths of commercial development and their civilizational underpinnings are therefore of particular importance to comparative history.

In this field, recent re-interpretations of economic history seem to
side with Braudel, and they have—in particular—strengthened his
case against mainstream liberal narratives of market-led progress.
Liberal accounts of 'the rise of the West' tend to favour a qualified
version of economic determinism: a plurality of background factors
is acknowledged, but only to the extent that their effects converge
in a relatively early and self-reinforcing breakthrough to sustained
economic growth. To quote a critic of this model, 'markets are
assumed to have been conducive to growth, and Europe is said to
have had the most perfect markets' (Pomeranz, 2000: 69). The most
telling counter-arguments take aim at the key part of the story.
Contrary to the claims of those who impute an economic logic to
the progress from proto-industrialization to industrial revolution, it
can be shown that European markets were much less streamlined
and their transformative impact less clear-cut than neo-classical con-
structions would have us believe, and there are some reasons to
assume that market mechanisms had freer rein elsewhere without
triggering any kind of industrial take-off. Summing up a detailed
comparison, with particular reference to land and agricultural prod-
ucts, Pomeranz argues that 'eighteenth-century China (and perhaps
Japan as well) actually came closer to resembling the neo-classical
ideal of a market economy than did Western Europe' (ibid.: 70).

Doubts about the autonomy and inbuilt dynamism of markets lead
to a stronger emphasis on the 'visible hands', of states and other
power centres. Pomeranz's comments on early modern developments
of that kind are best understood in connection with Braudel's the-
ory of capitalism. But the underlying general point—the emphasis
on political preconditions and implications of economic growth—is
no less applicable to the pre-history of the capitalist transition. S.R.
Epstein (2000) has criticized both Marxist and neo-classical expla-
nations of pre-industrial growth and shown that they rest on anachro-
nistic premises: the notion of an early modern world system is as
misplaced as the model of a state which can take sovereignty for
granted and put it to predatory or optimizing uses. The latter approach
ignores the long drawn-out effort to consolidate state sovereignty
through administrative and jurisdictional integration. This process
was, in turn, crucial to the market integration which world system
theorists have projected too far into the past. 'The main contribu-
tion by European states to pre-modern economic growth was thus
the centralisation of government, the reduction of decentralised rent-

seeking, and the creation of viable markets' (ibid.: 169). On this view, the centralisation of political sovereignty—'the establishment of clear *state* property rights', as Epstein (173) puts it—was a prerequisite for the progress of individual property rights.

Epstein's analysis puts economic history in contact with essential but underdeveloped insights of the sociological tradition. The links between state formation, commercialization and economic growth were most clearly outlined in Norbert Elias' work, but the new historical perspectives make the details more visible. The patterns of state formation are, as we have seen, embedded in broader civilizational contexts whose influence on economic life can also be traced through other channels. In the European case, a more direct civilizational input is evident in the medieval beginnings of economic growth. The unity of Western Christendom as a civilization, based on cultural—more specifically religious—integration across fluid political boundaries, was of major importance from the commercial expansion of the High Middle Ages (Michael Mann stresses this point in his analysis of medieval Europe). And although the multiple processes of state formation became increasingly central to later developments, they were never the only outlet for civilizational dynamics. Specific civilizational complements to the state system that grew out of Western Christendom also affected the course of history, including its economic side. Liberal historiography has tended to interpret the dynamic of the state system from a minimalist point of view; the most widely shared view is that interstate competition for skills and resources reinforced the competitive logic of a market economy. But this line of argument neglects other aspects of the interstate constellation, such as the political, ideological and scientific cultures which emerged and developed on a supernational scale.

But there is another side to the European civilizational trajectory and its effects on economic life. If images of wealth are relevant to the comparative analysis of civilizations, that applies not only to the more or less institutionalized implicit meanings of social practices, but also to the intellectual traditions which build on them and articulate their logic. In this regard, the innovations in early modern European thought appear as civilizational phenomena of major significance. On the one hand, the mercantilist approaches to economic problems reflect an effort to rationalize the accumulation of wealth within limits set by the prior commitment to an image of power (Braudel cautions against the facile dismissal of mercantilism

as a symptom of economic irrationality: it was based on genuine economic imperatives of the absolutist regimes). On the other hand, the critical response to mercantilist policies led to an unprecedentedly radical re-imagination of wealth. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* epitomizes a reflexive turn towards the recognition of the creation of wealth as an autonomous activity and of the organization of economic life as a social problematic rather than a quasi-natural order (Wagner, 2001). Although the comparative study of economic thought in other civilizational settings still has a long way to go, it seems clear that no comparable intellectual mutation took place anywhere outside Europe. The new modes of thought took shape in response to new historical experiences (including the economic spaces opened up by European expansion), but they were at the same time shaped by latent connections and overt confrontations with distinctive traditions, including—most importantly—the tradition of political philosophy. At this level, the civilizational sources were channelled through paradigms of inquiry and reflection.

Later debates linked to more advanced stages of capitalist development, continued to draw on the legacy of early modern economic thought. The Smithian interpretation of the market economy became a permanent frame of reference for the ideologies of capitalism. But this continuity on the level of representations obscures the novelty of industrial capitalism: as economic historians have been more willing to admit than economic theorists, the dynamics of this new socioeconomic formation differ from the pre-industrial market economy (theorized in *The Wealth of Nations*) in fundamental respects, and 'Smithian growth' occurred in several premodern economies, European and non-European, without necessarily leading to an industrial breakthrough. On the other hand, themes of mercantilist thought have reappeared—in more or less modified forms—in various versions of economic nationalism, with the aim of containing or reorienting capitalist development. Finally, the Smithian paradigm—as reinterpreted by Marx—also became one of the main building-blocks of a synthetic project which in theory envisaged a leap beyond both capitalism and nationalism, but was in practice adapted to a strategy of imperial modernization which failed on both counts.

These considerations bring us to the third and last part of Braudel's argument. His distinction between market and capitalism has far-reaching implications, and as I will try to show, it throws new light on the question of civilizational factors in economic history—even if

Braudel's own formulations do not do full justice to this issue. As he sees it, a 'capitalist potential' ('capitalisme en puissance'—ibid. 3: 538) is part and parcel of the general history of civilizations (to put it another way: it is built into civilization in the singular), but its expressions vary in degree and kind, not least due to different civilizational patterns. The main reason for distinguishing this elementary matrix of capitalism from its market infrastructures is that it involves a twofold transgression of their typical rules. Braudel speaks of 'the unusual, the outstanding, the long-distance connections' (ibid. 2: 403), i.e. the search for extra profits beyond the routine of reproduction, and on the more or less monopolistic control. This deviation from the mainstream of market dynamics is often dependent on privileged access to or direct share in state power. In short, the capitalist pursuit of wealth presupposes a concentration of economic power and benefits from political privilege; these connections are particularly obvious in epoch-making cases, such as the symbiosis of states and overseas trading companies in early modern Europe. In premodern economies, long-distance trade is the most important outlet for capitalist activities, but speculative ventures of various kinds belong in the same context.

Braudel's unorthodox use of basic economic concepts must be judged in light of theoretical and empirical results. The first thing to be said in favour of his definition of capitalism is that it allows us to reformulate the Weberian question of unity and diversity. Weber combined a strong emphasis on the novelty of modern capitalism with a clear awareness of the fact that capitalism as such is 'several thousand years old' and has 'existed in many different forms' (Swedberg, 1999: 9). Braudel's macrohistorical concept of capitalism is more specific and more attuned to changing modes of operation. It is, as we have seen, general enough to grasp an inbuilt trend of civilization in the singular. In more concrete terms, this translates into cross-civilizational processes: the most extensive networks of long-distance trade link different civilizational domains. On the other hand, a certain capacity to combine and alternate activities in different areas—commerce, finance, manufacture, agriculture and transport—is characteristic of the capitalist sector well before the industrial revolution. For Braudel, the reflexive aspect of capitalism is crucial. The ability to 'create a strategy and to change it makes capitalism superior' (ibid. 2: 353). But the transformative dynamic of capitalist development takes a new turn with the industrial revolution. The accumulation

of wealth now becomes an overriding goal for the whole economy and revolutionizes the infrastructures of material life. This fundamental break with traditional patterns has often led historians of capitalism to neglect differences within the pre-industrial world. But for Braudel, the simple dichotomy of commercial and industrial capitalism is misleading: a more or less developed plurality of capitalisms is the rule rather than the exception, and the industrial mutation—pioneered in a particular situation and re-enacted with very uneven success in other places—opens up new dimensions of differentiation. This approach is easily combined with comparative civilizational perspectives. Both the general potential for capitalist growth and the capacity to diversify its forms vary from one civilizational context to another. Commercial development is not the whole story: the Chinese experience shows—more conclusively than any other case—that a vibrant market economy does not necessarily give rise to a 'capitalist superstructure' (ibid. 2: 535) capable of further transformations. As for the decisive step from capitalist expansion to industrial breakthrough, Braudel insists on the complexity of the background. A 'multi-secular overall movement' (ibid.: 535) of European societies created key preconditions for the 'great transformation', but no combination of internal factors can add up to a full explanation. To put it another way, the intra-civilizational perspective is essential, but not sufficient. The distinctive economic dynamism of European civilization reached its highest levels in a global context, through the transformation of old 'economic worlds' and the creation of new ones (this seems a more adequate translation of 'economie-monde' than the more frequently used 'world economy'). More specifically, the early modern conjunction of a heightened internal momentum and an enlarged global arena set the stage for more radical changes. Finally, the concrete and contingent factors that triggered the first industrial revolution in one European country—eighteenth-century Britain—must be given their due. These considerations point to a more complex picture than the selective use of Braudel's work by world system theorists would suggest.

But the civilizational implications of Braudel's argument are clearest when it comes to the question of the 'spirit of capitalism'. Although Braudel is reluctant to use this term (on the grounds that it distracts attention from the more decisive structural and institutional aspects), he deals with the issues which it has often served to define and takes a distinctive view of them. On the most fundamental level, he sides

with Werner Sombart against Max Weber (although he criticizes both of them for having portrayed European capitalism as a pinnacle of rationality and civilization): if a specific meaning or mentality is to be attributed to Western capitalism, the claim must be based on immanent and operative orientations of economic practices and institutions, and from this point of view, the innovations of the Renaissance were more significant than those of the Reformation. The link to Braudel's general conception of capitalism is obvious. The pursuit of accumulation beyond the routines of more or less market-mediated reproduction gives rise to a specific image of wealth, with an inbuilt potential for expansion and generalization which can develop further in some traditions than in others. In that context late medieval Europe and more particularly the Renaissance stand out as major landmarks. At the same time, the ascendant image of wealth lent itself to new combinations with images and networks of power; the early modern upswing of European capitalism was inseparable from new developments in state formation. Both the emphasis on immanent dynamics and the analysis of political connections set Braudel's argument apart from the interpretation put forward in Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. But this does not mean that the sixteenth-century division of Christendom and the consolidation of Protestant states are of no importance: as Braudel sees it, Protestantism gave a new identity and cultural cohesion to a previously more marginal region (he speaks of an end to the Latin 'colonization' of Northwestern Europe—ibid. 2: 509). Within this separate and newly self-contained part of the European civilizational sphere, socio-cultural change took a direction more congenial to capitalism than elsewhere. We can, in other words, still speak of a Protestant background to capitalist development, even if the connection is not as direct and exclusive as Weber claimed.

Braudel's work deals mainly with the early modern combinations of capitalism and other forms of economic life. Questions related to a more advanced and dominant form of capitalism, characteristic of the industrial era but not confined to industrial production (ibid. 2: 327), are therefore left unanswered, but some tentative ways of linking them to the tripartite model may be suggested. There is, in particular, more to be said on the accumulation of material wealth and its part in the cultural constitution as well as the structural dynamic of capitalism. Braudel discusses money as an integral part of material life and takes it for granted as a medium of capitalist activities

in the broadest sense, but does not analyze its metamorphoses into
more and more dynamic forms of capital. Recent contributions to
the debate on the spirit of capitalism, especially the arguments devel-
oped by Christoph Deutschmann (1999, 2001), have thrown light on
the issues to be explored along these lines. The whole problematic
centres on images of wealth and their interrelations with meaning
and power. As a general symbol of wealth, money serves to separate
accumulation from the cycle of production and consumption, and
thus to open up social spaces for capitalism (in the macro-historical
sense defined by Braudel). When the logic of capitalism prevails on
all levels of economic life and finds expression in permanent trans-
formation (the industrial revolution in the conventional sense was
only the beginning of accelerated change), the general symbol of
wealth becomes, as Deutschmann puts it, a 'promise of absolute
wealth': a vision of unlimited accumulation which also holds out the
prospects of unlimited satisfaction of human needs and development
of human capacities. On the level of meaning, monetary symbolism
'extends to all dimensions of human existence', but this global reach
'is anchored in the last instance in nothing else than a generalized
trust or faith' (Deutschmann, 2001: 40). As a fully monetarized econ-
omy capitalism thus takes on some traditional attributes of religion;
to put it another way, it is a secular religion, less doctrinaire but
more resilient than the twentieth-century currents more commonly
described in such terms. The quasi-religious character of capitalism
becomes more manifest through refashioned images of power. Economic
power in pursuit of absolute wealth is no longer adaptable to tradi-
tional modes of coexistence with state power, but new developments
open up other perspectives. The phantasms of unlimited accumula-
tion and ever-expanding rational mastery reinforce each other; on
the practical level, their combined impact is reflected in the union
of economic growth and technological progress. But the all-round
monetarization of economic life gives a more specific twist to this
complex of images and strategies: 'Individual command over *absolute
wealth, over the totality of human possibilities*: this promise, which money
contains, is perhaps the strongest utopian message that ever existed
in history, stronger than historical religions and stronger even than
socialism, as we know today' (ibid.: 41). These implicit meanings of
capitalist development become operative through more concrete
images or myths; in the most important cases, technical and orga-
nizational paradigms serve to communicate a specific version of the

capitalist message: 'for example, the utopia of unbounded individual mobility associated with the invention of the automobile, or the vision of "perfect" communication associated with modern information technologies' (ibid.: 47).

This reinterpretation of the 'spirit of capitalism' raises questions which touch upon the core of civilizational theory. Deutschmann argues that the capitalist imaginary represents a new kind of cosmological symbolism different from religious world-views of the traditional type but conducive to religious orientations in a broad sense. Although the problematic of capitalism is beyond the scope of the present discussion, a few concluding remarks may help to put the main issue in perspective. On the one hand, the new, distinctive and powerful civilizational dynamic of capitalism is—as Deutschmann shows—best understood in light of inbuilt meanings and their transformative potential. This line of argument takes us well beyond Braudel's explicit statements, but it can also be seen as a way of broadening his frame of reference through closer examination of the cultural dimensions of capitalism. On the other hand, the meanings—more precisely: imaginary significations—in question have to do with an enhanced autonomy and unprecedented primacy of the economic sphere, and this specific focus limits their interpretive as well as their institutional impact. In both regards, the civilizational logic of capitalism is a partial one, however radical it may be within its domain. Its historical paths and its relationship to concomitant changes are therefore affected by broader civilizational contexts, cultural as well as institutional. If the immanent spirit of capitalism can be characterized as a secular religion, a closer look at parallels and interconnections with other transformations of the religious imaginary will open up comparative perspectives. This applies, in particular, to the question of nationalism and its relationship to capitalist development: recent efforts to tackle this long-neglected problematic have sometimes led to uncompromisingly streamlined conclusions (Greenfeld, 2001), but a more cautious approach would acknowledge the need for further exploration of the field. The comparative analysis of civilizational backgrounds to the varieties of nationalism is an underdeveloped line of inquiry, and it has yet to be linked to the debate on the spirit of capitalism. As for the institutional side, the most obvious differentiating factors have to do with the dynamic of state formation and its more or less direct impact on capitalist development. Seminal analyses of East Asian economies and their

political foundations have highlighted distinctive features of that kind. But ideological diversity is also relevant to this issue. Whether we think of liberalism as 'polymorphic' (Murakami, 1996) and hence capable—to a varying extent—of adaptation to different traditions, constellations and environments, or of a variety of compromises between liberalism and other currents, the ideological frameworks of capitalist development are diverse enough to cast doubt on any claims to civilizational uniformity. Although the questions arising in this context go beyond Braudel's theoretical and historical horizons, they are not out of tune with his general conception of civilizations: the changing combinations of self-preservative and transformative capacities are still reflected in the varieties of capitalist development.

4.7   *Culture, institution and organization: The case of science*

Reflections on the distinctive directions, experiences and achievements of Western societies have been central to the research programmes of civilizational analysis. Among the historical phenomena most frequently singled out for such purposes, the rise of modern science seems a particularly obvious case: the scientific revolution is a prime example of innovations pioneered in the West and based on prior developments within the Western world, but capable of unlimited diffusion and conducive to basic changes across the whole spectrum of intercivilizational relations. It appears, in other words, as a crucial point of contact—and a decisive shift in the balance— between civilizations in the plural and civilizations in the singular. Major theorists have been aware of these implications. In a concluding section of the *Protestant Ethic*, Max Weber mentions 'philosophical and scientific empiricism' as a key theme to be tackled at the next stage of his inquiry into the origins of Western modernity. His later introduction to collected works on the sociology of religion makes the same point in more emphatic terms: the scientific pursuit of knowledge now heads the list of Western breakthroughs to universal rationality. Benjamin Nelson's reconstruction of Weber's project laid a stronger emphasis on scientific progress and its preconditions, both in the context of macro-historical comparisons, where Nelson used Joseph Needham's work on Chinese science to correct Weber's oversimplified views of contrasts between East and West, and on the European side, where the early stages of the scientific revolution—

and their medieval antecedents—now seemed more decisive than the Reformation. Finally, Eisenstadt's reflections on the civilizational dimensions of modernity have always stressed the role of science, both as a factor in its own right and as a background to broader cultural interpretations. The cumulative pursuit of knowledge is—on this view—an integral part of the cultural programme of modernity, intertwined with other key components in multiple ways.

But when it comes to more systematic analysis and theorizing, the same authors show a marked tendency to bracket the question of science and prioritize other issues. Weber's programmatic statements on modern science were never translated into concrete analyses; the bulk of the historical and comparative work which followed the *Protestant Ethic* was designed to put the Western transformation and its world-historical meaning into a broader perspective, rather than to provide a more detailed account of the direct causes. Nelson's theoretical arguments centre on the 'structures of consciousness' and their dynamics, defined in very general terms and with particular emphasis on the changing forms and contents of religious belief. From that point of view, the question of scientific or proto-scientific structures appears as a derivative issue to be tackled at a later stage. Eisenstadt's civilizational theory relates most directly to a particular type of premodern civilizational patterns (the Axial traditions); the much later transition to modernity can be analyzed in light of their distinctive features, but the Axial paradigm as such is not primarily geared to a genealogy of scientific progress.

In short, the question of science—more precisely: the rise of modern science—has been a recurrent but repeatedly postponed theme of civilizational theory. There is an obvious reason for this ambivalent stance, even if it has mostly been left unstated and may seem incompatible with more explicit claims: the European scientific revolution is undoubtedly an attractive starting-point for civilizational analysis, but it also exemplifies the need for broader perspectives and for a critique of familiar assumptions. A comparative framework built around the case of modern science runs the risk of absorbing unquestioned beliefs (an established *doxa*, to use the terminology favoured by Bourdieu and his disciples) and projecting them onto the level of theoretical premises. The more complex model needed to redress the balance would not only stress the socio-cultural context of science and the variety of interconnections in different civilizational settings. In a more specific sense, the comparative civilizational view

serves to clarify both the aims and the difficulties of an *interpretation of science.*

 There are two sides to this problematic. On the one hand, the sustained growth of scientific knowledge in modern societies has been accompanied by interpretive constructs which affect the public image as well as the self-understanding of science in significant ways. Weber's acceptance of a massively reductionist model—the image of the cosmos as a causal mechanism—reflects a more general trend, and it weakens his overall approach to the question of rationalizing processes and their modern forms. The hermeneutical distinction between implicit and imputed meanings of science has been made by various currents of twentieth-century thought; for present purposes, it is enough to quote Whitehead's comment that science 'has never cared to justify its faith or to explain its meanings' (Whitehead, 1961: 20), but can by the same token be harnessed to interpretive projects which draw their ultimate rationales from other sources. Neither the scientistic thinkers who advocate a uniform and definitive model of rationality, nor the sceptics who cast doubt on the most elementary foundations of all such efforts, have faced up to the tasks of a genuine philosophical interpretation of science. As Whitehead saw it, the alternative to both these blind alleys was a new—and permanently self-critical—version of speculative philosophy that would articulate the pre-suppositions of scientific practice, locate them within a broader spectrum and a longer history of more or less explicitly metaphysical interpretations of experience and spell out the conceptual implications of new horizons of scientific inquiry. The details of this programme cannot be discussed here; but the very idea of a philosophical interpretation of science links up with the comparative perspectives of civilizational theory. No strong a priori assumptions about the convergence or complementarity of philosophical traditions across civilizational boundaries are needed to justify this connection; but at the very least, confrontation with other cultural worlds can serve to problematize underlying premises and facilitate reflection on inherited modes of thought.

 On the other hand, the interpretation of science raises—or forecloses—questions about the socio-cultural context. In this regard, mainstream sociological thought has often tended to conflate different levels: cultural, institutional and organizational aspects merge in a model which nevertheless places particular emphasis on the organizational ones (in the sense defined above). Weber's reflections on the

links between modern science and a generalized rationalism of world domination point in this direction. Critical variations on the same theme include the reduction of scientific rationality to a latently totalitarian logic of domination, suggested—but not unequivocally endorsed—by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* A kindred but less overtly reductionistic view is taken by those who see the growth of applicable knowledge as central to the whole modernizing process: the result is a general blurring of boundaries and distinctions between levels of socio-cultural formations. Finally, the widespread tacit assumption of invariably close links between scientific and technological progress is best understood as a minimalist or residual version of the conflation mentioned above.

The present argument aims at elucidating the general context of civilizational analysis. Its main focus must therefore be on categories and connections which are—explicitly or implictly—central to the interpretation of particular developments; in that sense it follows the example of those who noted major turning-points (such as the rise of modern science), but sought to broaden the frame of reference before embarking on a detailed historical analysis. However, given the crucial importance of themes and problems associated with the scientific revolution, it may be useful to indicate a way of fitting them into our framework, and this is most easily done through a brief discussion of the most ambitious attempt so far made to analyze the rise of modern science from a comparative perspective. Toby Huff's work builds on Benjamin Nelson's insights, but takes some significant steps beyond Nelson's field of inquiry. The historical context of Huff's comparative studies helps to substantiate his theoretical claims; in particular, the detailed comparison of Western Europe with the Islamic world as well as with China breaks new ground and poses new problems for the sociology of scientific progress. For several interconnected reasons, the case of Arabic science is a corrective to the more familiar picture based on comparisons between China and the West. As Huff (1993: 48) argues (and the evidence seems compelling), 'from the eighth century to the end of the fourteenth Arabic science was probably the most advanced science in the world, greatly surpassing the West and China.' 'Arabic' rather than 'Islamic' is the appropriate label, both because of the importance of the Arabic language for the scientific community in question and because of the problematic relationship between scientific inquiry and Islamic belief. In the long run, the lack of Islamic legitimacy

proved fatal to scientific pursuits, but during the first centuries of
Islamic history, a more favourable civilizational constellation led to
a flowering unequalled anywhere at the time. China's lead in tech-
nology was not accompanied by comparable progress in the natural
sciences.

The contrast between early achievements and subsequent decline
of Arabic science highlights a more general issue: in certain social
and civilizational settings, the sciences may flourish in such a fash-
ion that they seem to be in the vanguard of cultural innovation, but
this does not mean that we can speak of a general rationalizing
process, epitomized and spearheaded by scientific reason. The oper-
ative rules of scientific inquiry are embedded in institutional and
interpretive contexts, and the internal dynamics of both these domains
are decisive for the long-term success or failure of science as an
autonomous socio-cultural force. Huff's analyses of the two other
major scientific traditions trace such connections in detail. A com-
parison of complex and long-drawn-out processes also serves to
counter a common misunderstanding: the argument is about trends
within non-Western civilizations and differences between their suc-
cessive historical phases, rather than a simple contrast between break-
through in the West and blockages elsewhere (the history of science
in both the Chinese and the Islamic world is characterized by incon-
clusive advances, failures of cultural memory and epoch-making rever-
sals, rather then stagnation). The reference to internal long-term
perspectives on all sides is the best antidote to Eurocentrism. Here
we cannot discuss Huff's interpretations of Islamic and Chinese his-
tory. His main theme is—in both cases—the enduring dominance
of institutional structures and institutionalized visions of the human
condition, different enough to make the two traditions very unlike
each other but comparably adverse to the unfettered pursuit of sci-
ence. The positive implications for institutional and cultural analy-
sis will emerge more clearly from the Western European case. Huff
follows Nelson in shifting the emphasis from seventeenth-century
innovations—most often singled out as the take-off of the scientific
revolution—to earlier phases. The importance of the Copernican rev-
olution is easier to understand if we accept that it was 'primarily a
metaphysical transformation' (ibid.: 322), rather than a result of
improved techniques of observation and calculation (in the latter
regard, Arabic science had earlier reached an equally advanced stage).
The decisive step was, in other words, a leap of the interpretive

imagination which changed key aspects of the established world-view, although it still left room for conflicting interpretations of ultimate meaning. Both in regard to its institutional background (as a product of the European university system) and in the context of intellectual history, the genealogy of the Copernican model leads back to the twelfth and thirteenth-century transformation of Western European culture. Nelson had put this exceptionally creative period on the agenda of civilizational theory; Huff's much more detailed analysis has already been noted in another connection, but here we need to reconsider his version of the case for backdating the scientific revolution.

The cultural core of the 'twelfth-century renaissance' was a rationalistic twist to notions of order, with far-reaching implications for the human pursuit of knowledge: 'Just as the universe itself was conceived to be a unified whole, so too man was presumed to be part of this rational whole. As such he was thought to be endowed with reason and thereby enabled to read and decipher the patterns of the universe, that is, to "read the book of nature"' (ibid.: 104). This new rationalism—first inspired by a new reading of Plato's *Timaeus* but soon modified by the influence of newly discovered Aristotelian sources—gave rise to an 'irrevocable metaphysical image of man' (ibid.: 110) and necessitated a reorientation of Christian doctrine, more radical, systematic and definitive than any response to Greek thought in the Islamic world. The autonomous exercise of reason did not replace the authority of revelation, but the limits set by the latter became more debatable: a crucial precedent was created when the bishop of Paris tried and failed (in 1277) to confine philosophy to a more marginal role. Within the vast domain thus opened up for rational inquiry, disputation was recognized as essential to the pursuit of knowledge. The twelfth-century codification of the dialectic gave a more concrete content to the rationalist project.

Cultural transformations went hand-in-hand with institutional change. From the twelfth century onwards, the medieval universities provided a social space to match the intellectual one made available by the new metaphysics. As institutions of higher learning, they differed from Islamic and Chinese patterns in fundamental respects. But the invention and diffusion of the university was an integral part of a much broader trend. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were characterized by a sustained push for institutionalized autonomy in various sectors and at different levels of Western European society;

the rise of self-governing urban communities was one of the most momentous innovations, but 'more or less permanent collectives for a great variety of purposes' (ibid.: 135) were formed in all fields of social life. As Huff argues, this comprehensive reconstitution of Western European society could not take place without far-reaching legal reforms: 'the legal and political principle of treating collective actors as a single entity—a *corporation*' (ibid.: 119) served to articulate and rationalize the visions of autonomy. The 'legal revolution' of the High Middle Ages was thus a basic precondition for the institutionalization of the intellectual breakthrough. But Huff also insists on a more direct connection between legal and scientific rationality: drawing on Harold Berman's work on medieval law, he suggests that 'the new science of law may be seen as a proto-science of the modern type, a substantive discipline meeting certain methodological requirements' (ibid.: 128). The idea of jurisprudence as an integrated body of knowledge, relating particular phenomena to general principles, exemplifies and reinforces a model which could be put to much wider use.

Huff makes a convincing case for interpreting the rise of modern science in the light of long-term cultural and institutional transformations. In particular, his account of the High Middle Ages as a formative phase is unobjectionable. The questions that could be raised have to do with closer examination of the cultural premises. Huff tends to see the medieval rediscovery of Greek philosophical thought as a breakthrough to a scientific research programme, followed by gradual extension of the field of application and full institutionalization of free inquiry in the modern West. This strong emphasis on continuity obscures a whole set of interpretive problems, beginning with the question of models of natural order and the interaction between Greek and Judaeo-Christian traditions in that field. Whitehead's above-mentioned reflections on science and its rival interpreters may be read as a sensitizing probe, even if his constructive proposals are open to further questions. He traced the philosophical inarticulacy of modern science back to a self-limiting use of Greek sources: 'science started its modern career by taking over ideas derived from the weakest side of the philosophies of Aristotle's successors' (Whitehead, 1932: 21), and the result was the entrenched reductionism which Whitehead set out to overcome. This levelling notion of order was, of course, a result of complex and protracted developments after the twelfth-century renaissance; but the very mini-

mization of meaning—and therefore of the potential for interpretive conflict—made it easier to institutionalize science as a separate socio-cultural sphere with its own developmental logic. Whitehead's aim was to reactivate the philosophical questions sidelined by scientific progress, restate the case for metaphysical inquiry, and coordinate this line of argument with internal challenges to the self-understanding of science. This project was not the only one of its kind in twentieth-century thought (for example, Castoriadis' philosophical reflections took a similar turn). The questions at issue cannot be discussed here, but it may be noted in passing that they revolve around the same themes as Brague's above-mentioned interpretive history of cosmo-logical models: visions of world order, their implications for our understanding of the human condition, and attempts to rethink the philosophical notion of the world in response to the scientific inval-idation of its traditional versions. The most general lesson to be learnt from Brague's analysis is that the adaptation of Greek cos-mology to a monotheistic mode of religion gave rise to a new round of conflicting interpretations, rather than to a definitive and irresist-ible idea of rational inquiry, and that this historical context is still relevant to the ongoing debate on the interpretation of science.

4.8 *Intercivilizational encounters*

Two different approaches to the question of interaction between civ-ilizations have already been considered. On the one hand, those who rejected the pluralistic model—or became increasingly conscious of its limits—saw the expanding networks of exchange and diffusion as the most conclusive evidence for the unity of civilization. William McNeill's evolving conception of world history is perhaps the most striking case in point; from the initial vision of civilizations as the main world historical actors, the focus shifted towards a network of communications (first Eurasian, then global) whose unity and dynamic now seemed more important than the vaguely demarcated and loosely integrated units conventionally known as civilizations. On the other hand, our discussion of Benjamin Nelson's civilizational theory laid due emphasis on the concept of intercivilizational encounters. It served to underline the mutually formative relations between civili-zational complexes, and thus to set the sociological version of civi-lizational analysis apart from the notion of self-contained worlds à

la Spengler. Although Nelson did not tackle this problematic in a systematic fashion, his reflections on key examples—especially the Western European encounter with the more advanced Byzantine and Islamic worlds—foreshadow a more general argument. Nelson did not use the concept of intercivilizational encounters to refer to the whole spectrum of interaction between civilizations; his main concern was with contacts of the kind that affected core structures of consciousness, and especially the cases of external sources, models or challenged activating the internal dynamics of such structures. As he saw it, encounters of the most momentous sort could be highly asymmetric, but not wholly unilateral: the receiving side always retained some capacity to autonomous responses. Cases of complete cultural assimilation would, on this view, not fall into the category of intercivilizational encounters.

Nelson's unfinished argument is an obligatory starting-point for any further work on the problematic of intercivilizational encounters. The basic idea adopted here is that this theme should be linked more closely to the most central concepts and questions of civilizational theory. The openness to encounters is to be seen as an integral aspect of civilizational patterns. This approach is radically opposed to the models which posit closure as the primary or predominant state of civilizations. Visions of closure and efforts to achieve it are not uncommon, but they are best understood against the background of intrinsic and fundamental exposure to other forms of socio-cultural life. By the same token, however, the comparative analysis of civilizations has to deal with different expressions and levels of this underlying openness. Nelson's interpretations of the structures of consciousness and their involvement in intercivilizational encounters suggest ways of theorizing the general connection as well as its variations. But before taking that line of argument further, we must broaden the analytical perspective. Our discussion of civilizational patterns has emphasized the need for a multi-dimensional model, giving more weight to institutional structures and dynamics than Nelson did, and this view must now be extended to the field of inter-civilizational relations. If civilizations are to be analyzed as inter-connected constellations of meaning, power and wealth, the same applies to the processes that unfold across civilizational boundaries. More precisely, the concept of intercivilizational encounters calls for a redefinition that would move beyond Nelson's exclusive focus on cultural traditions and more or less institutionalized ideologies, with

a view to encompassing economic and political factors. A brief survey of approaches to this broader field will clear the way for a re-engagement with basic concepts.

Cross-cultural trade (Curtin, 1984) goes back to very early stages of economic history, and inter-civilizational trade began with the very formation of separate civilizational complexes; if we follow Braudel, trading contacts across civilizational boundaries are central to the genealogy of capitalism. Among the civilizational phenomena emerging in this context, trade diasporas—in the sense of 'trade communities of merchants living among aliens in associated networks' (ibid.: 3)—may be noted as an obvious major topic for comparative study. But if we want to use the concept of inter-civilizational encounters, with the more emphatic connotations outlined above, it is not enough to point to the omnipresence and variety of economic contacts: only major turning-points with far-reaching consequences on a civilizational scale will fit the term. Some landmarks of economic history would seem to answer this description. At the beginning of the second millennium AD, commercial networks across the Eurasian macro-region—between China and the Islamic world, as well as between the latter and the emerging civilization of Western Christendom—entered a new phase of growth, so markedly different from earlier conditions that it has been described as the making of a world system (McNeill, 1983). To avoid anachronistic claims, the new constellation is perhaps better described in intercivilizational terms. From that point of view several aspects are worth noting. The Islamic world, most centrally situated within the Eurasian context and culturally most attuned to long-distance trade, became to some extent a model for innovations in other regions. As we have seen, there are reasons to believe that the commercial and financial institutions of the late medieval West owed something to Islamic precedents; China also seems to have borrowed trading techniques from the Middle East and combined them with indigenous traditions and infrastructures (McNeill, 1998: 219). On the other-hand, the long-term economic effects of changes brought about by 'hemispheric integration' (Bentley, 1998) were much more significant in China and the West than in the Islamic heartland. But the two paths of sustained commercial growth differed in fundamental respect. Even if we prefer a late date for the 'great divergence' (Pomeranz, 2000) and stress the consequences of European maritime expansion, there is no doubt about the contrasting end results: containment of transformative trends

and perpetuation of an imperial order in China, industrial-capitalist mutation in the West.

   The question of European conquest and its effects on the internal dynamic of European societies links up with larger perspectives on the global context of early modern history. Contrary to the sweeping claims of world systems theory, the first phase of European expansion was not characterized by any worldwide redistribution of power and wealth: colonial power structures were built on the ruins of Amerindian civilizations, and a network of commercial outposts was established in major Eurasian regions, but there was no global European hegemony. On the other hand, economic contacts with other parts of the world (and indirect effects on their economic conditions) were significant enough to be described as another round of intercivilizational encounters. But since this series of interconnected changes was—within a relatively short span of time—submerged in more radical transformations on a global scale, closer analysis must confront the question of the civilizational status and dimensions of modernity. Divergent views on that issue are still under debate: modernity may be seen as a distinct civilization with a global reach (Eisenstadt, 2001), as a triumph—provisional or definitive—of civilization in the singular, or as an incomplete civilizational constellation which remains open to more or less formative influences of older ones, as well as encounters between them. Although a preference for the last alternative has been indicated at various points of the present argument, the problematic of modernity is not on our agenda. Rather, the aim is to clarify some preconditions for an informed debate, and this work must begin with the basic categories of civilizational theory.

   Intercivilizational encounters in the political sphere have taken more visible and variegated forms. Contacts between the early civilizations of the Near East gave rise to three different patterns which recur—in varying proportions and combinations—throughout later stages and in other contexts. Imperial power structures superimposed a shared and a more or less lasting political order on different civilizations, opened up new channels of mutual influence and could— at their most constructive—pave the way for partial fusions of cultural traditions. In all these respects, the Achemenid empire (founded on the ruins of Mesopotamian empires in the mid-sixth century and conquered rather than destroyed by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BC) was both heir to a much older legacy and markedly

more effective than all precursors. When different power centres were too evenly balanced for any exclusive hegemony to be possible, a cross-civilizational state system could—if favourable conditions lasted long enough—take shape and make some progress in the regulation of interstate relations. An unprecedented but relatively durable constellation of that kind emerged in the Near East between the sixteenth and thirteenth centuries BC. Finally, the category of political encounters should be defined so as to include the transmission of complex models or specific techniques of state formation from one civilizational context to another. Early examples of that can also be found in the ancient Near East, where pioneering civilizational centres were imitated and often challenged by later arrivals. But the intercivilizational ramifications of state formation are not limited to cases of positive transfer: counter-projects, developed in conscious apposition to pre-existing models are no less relevant to the questions discussed here (as we have seen, such aspects were involved in both ancient Greek and ancient Jewish self-definitions against the Near Eastern background).

All these intercivilizational patterns of political life are—among other examples—very much in evidence during successive phases of European expansion. European empires, models of international relations and adaptable strategies of state-building changed the course of global history. It is worth noting that a new vehicle of intercivilizational encounters was added to the traditional ones: political ideologies could now spread across civilizational boundaries as never before. This innovation was obviously not related to the changes which had channeled some religious attitudes and aspirations into the political sphere. But as in the above-mentioned case of economic expansion, the intercivilizational dynamics must be analyzed in connection with the overall—and inescapably controversial—civilizational transformation that sets modernity apart from earlier historical epochs.

As I have tried to show, the concept of intercivilizational encounters can be applied at the institutional level of analysis. But the most familiar and spectacular examples of formative contacts between civilizations are to be found in the cultural domain; in particular, the spread of world religions from their original settings to other cultural worlds has tended to overshadow more ambiguous phenomena in the same category. Nelson's interest in encounters which affected core structures of consciousness but did not lead to assimilation may be seen as a corrective to the more common emphasis on religious

conversions. But the problematic of world religions and their expan-
sion can also be reconsidered in light of the broader typology of
encounters. When a world religion prevails across a wide range of
societies and cultures, more or less alien to its original sources, it is
tempting to describe the whole process in civilizational terms: as a
diffusion of patterns which restructure all fields of social life. Eisenstadt's
references to analogies between modernity—seen as a distinctive civ-
ilization—and the world religions hint at such assumptions. Closer
examination of the key cases suggests that relations between religions
and civilizational patterns might be too variable to fit this model.
There is no doubt that the expansion of Islam had the strongest civ-
ilizational impact. The pronounced unity that has prompted some
historians to theorize Islam as a world system *sui generis* (Voll, 1994)
is—from the present point of view—more indicative of a civiliza-
tional identity, and a shared framework at that level is compatible
with the diversity stressed by those who prefer to speak of Islamic
societies rather than society. However, it could also be argued that
we are dealing with the growth of a whole civilizational complex,
within which the diffusion of Islamic religious beliefs and codes of
conduct is of prime and pervasive importance, but not to the extent
of absorbing all other components. To underline this point, Marshall
Hodgson proposed a distinction between Islamic religion and 'Islam-
icate' civilization; the interconnections are close enough to justify a
derivative label, but not a single equation of religion and civiliza-
tion. And in some important cases, Islamic expansion resulted in
situations best described as prolonged intercivilizational encounters:
a complete absorption of indigenous traditions was as impossible as
an overarching synthesis of the two sides. The history of Islam in
India is the most obvious case of this kind. As for the other monothe-
istic world religion, it is much more difficult to speak of a univer-
sal Christian civilization, but correspondingly easier to associate
variants of Christianity with distinctive civilizations. This applies, first
and foremost, to Western and Byzantine Christendom, but more
peripheral formations—such as the Ethiopian empire or the states
of Christian Caucasia—have sometimes been counted among the
marginal or abortive civilizations which emerge within the orbits of
major centres. Finally, the idea of a Buddhist civilization—although
not unanimously rejected—is distinctly more problematic than its
Islamic or Christian counterparts. Even during the heyday of Buddhism
in India it was only one component of a more complex formation

which also included traditions of Vedic origin and in process towards the later Hindu pattern. Jaroslav Krejčí (1990: 180–196) calls this civilizational complex 'Pan-Indic' in the double sense of a combination of multiple traditions and an enlarged geo-cultural area including Southeast Asia. The most significant success of Buddhism outside India was its spread to China and to the more outlying parts of the Chinese world, but it seems highly misleading to speak of a 'Buddhist conquest of China' (Zurcher, 1972). There was no fully Buddhist phase of Chinese civilization, and the interaction with the Chinese context—the imperial order and its cultural framework—can be described as a prolonged intercivilizational encounter. The end result was very different from the Islamic trajectory in India: a re-interpreted Confucianism spearheaded a general reaffirmation of Chinese traditions which confined Buddhism to a subordinate role but absorbed some of its distinctive themes. A more convincing case can perhaps be made for the Buddhist identity of more marginal cultures or politics, such as Sri Lanka and the later Theravada Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia, but this question is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

The complex and often ambiguous relationships between civilizational formations and intercivilizational encounters can also be analyzed in light of developments outside the domain of world religions, Hellenism—the shared culture of the Greek and the Near Eastern worlds during the last three centuries BC—is a particularly instructive example of a cultural encounter without religious driving forces. The conventional view of this epoch is that an intercivilizational encounter, initiated by the Macedonian conquest of the Persian empire, translated almost instantly into a predominantly Hellenic set of cultural patterns which transcended an earlier civilizational divide. Some historians have stressed a later resurgence of the Near Eastern traditions, or even a 'metamorphosis of Hellenism into a religious oriental culture' (Jonas, 1963: 23). More recent scholarship raises questions about the very identity of the early Hellenistic world. Jan Assmann (2000b: 277) rejects the label 'Hellenism' as a misnomer and argues that the unitary culture which did emerge in the wake of Macedonian conquest was from the outset marked by strong Near Eastern influences: in particular, the dominant model of monarchy—central to a broader spectrum of socio-cultural trends—owed more to Persian than to Greek sources. On the other hand, it can be argued that the first combination of Greek and Near Eastern elements

was undermined by the rise of the Roman Empire and then rela-
tivized in a more fundamental way by subsequent interaction of the
imperial centre with its eastern domains and neighbours. In short,
it remains a matter of debate whether Hellenistic and Roman history
should be analyzed as the making of a civilizational formation, as a
series of intercivilizational encounters or as a changing combination
of both aspects. If the focus is to be on distinctive internal struc-
tures, rather than a sequence of transformations through encounters,
the idea of a composite civilization (by analogy with the composite
state, familiar to historians of early European modernity) would seem
particularly applicable to this case.

   To conclude, the problematic of intercivilizational encounters—
illustrated by the above survey of landmark examples—should be
linked more closely to the proposed frame of reference for civiliza-
tional analysis. As I will try to show, the reasons for treating encoun-
ters—or the openness to them—as an inbuilt and constitutive feature
of civilizations have to do with the most basic categories of social
ontology. The constellations of meaning, power and wealth are char-
acterized by an interplay of closure and opening which makes them
susceptible to formative contacts with other variants of the same tri-
partite structure. To put it another way, the obverse of the creativ-
ity that manifests itself in more or less integrated civilizational patterns
is a receptivity that may be seen as the most general precondition
for mutual influence. This ambiguity is a defining trait of interpre-
tive frameworks: as the most fundamental level, they articulate the
world in a specific way and in explicit or implicit contrast to other
perspectives. At the same time, the world as a 'horizon of horizons'
(Merleau-Ponty) resists absorption into self-contained cultural para-
digms, and its irreducible alterity can become a common ground for
the cross-cultural—in the last instance cross-civilizational—interplay
of meaning and experience. The world is, in other words, a back-
ground to the mutual demarcation of civilizational patterns as well
as a potential but never unrestricted arena of conflict, exchange and
communication between them. Another source of ambiguity and ten-
sion between opening and closure is to be found on the subjective
side of world articulation. Socio-cultural creativity finds expression
in multiple constellations of meaning, but it also appears as a de-
stabilizing undercurrent and a counterweight to the totalizing ten-
dencies of cultural order. The latent instability of institutionalized
and codified meaning, observed by many theorists of otherwise

different dispositions, can become more acute through contact with other universes of meaning. Both the inherent variability of interpretive patterns and their communicative potential can—when other factors assist—take reflexive turns. Reflexivity is always embedded and at the same time—by definition—conducive to detachment: a more explicit articulation of premises goes together with some questioning of inherited rules and conventions. The changing combinations of these two aspects are reflected in attitudes to other cultural practices and principles, but on the level of civilizational complexes, the connections between self-reflexivity and active interest in other worlds vary markedly from case to case.

The historical forms of power and wealth take shape in the context of civilizational encounters in these domains—primarily but not exclusively linked to political and economic institutions—and must therefore differ in significant ways from those which involve constellations of meaning. Some contrasts between the two categories should also be noted. With regard to the varieties and transformations of power, a basic ambiguity becomes most visible at the level of state formation. On the one hand, cultural interpretations of power provide frameworks for its organization, accumulation and rationalization; civilizational analysis deals with large-scale and long-term contexts of this kind. On the other hand, state formation involves techniques and projects based on general principles of strategic rationality and therefore applicable across cultural boundaries. But although this distinction between contextual and trans-contextual aspects has obvious implications for the question of intercivilizational encounters, some qualifications must be added. Trans-contextual logic does not lead to a simple transfer from one civilizational setting to another: as the comparative history of state formation shows, models borrowed because of their obvious general applicability are often adapted or reinvented in new environments. As for the cultural images or interpretations, they may be perceived as power-enhancing constructs and grafted—with more or less far-reaching modifications—onto political formations outside their original context. Imitations of imperial models are the most familiar cases in point.

As we have seen, images of wealth do not play the same role for economic institutions as images of power for the political ones. The economic sphere is closer to the interface of the social and the natural world, and correspondingly less open to cultural variation. But cultural frameworks affect economic life through the more directly

operative political factors; at the civilizational level, we can therefore distinguish contextual aspects from trans-contextual ones, and changing balances between them are crucial to the history of intercivilizational relations. On the other hand, there is—if we follow Braudel's line of argument, as recapitulated above—a specific intercivilizational side to economic life. Commercial growth is an integral part of civilization in the singular, but its most expansive offshoot—the long-distance trade with Braudel saw as the seedbed of capitalism—soon gave rise to a network of exchanges between different civilizations. In that sense, the problematic of intercivilizational encounters links up with the genealogy of capitalism. But the intra-civilizational contexts remain important at all stages of capitalist development, not least through the cultural sources of the 'spirit of capitalism' in its various but always formative versions.

4.9   *Civilizational groupings*

The idea of civilizations as multi-societal units was most clearly formulated by the French pioneers of civilizational theory: when Durkheim and Mauss referred to 'families of societies', they were focusing on large-scale groupings beyond the level of more familiar social formations. Similar programmatic statements can be found in later sources. As Benjamin Nelson put it, civilizational perspectives apply to two or more societies, and his concept of civilizational complexes was coined to stress the large scope of the structures in question. If the civilizational scale of unity, identity and integration is thus to be distinguished from the societal one, closer analysis must begin with the specific points of contrast. Since political unity was a crucial—although often implicit—premise of the classical concept of society, Durkheim and Mauss obviously included it among their defining criteria. Civilizational unity is, in other words, compatible with a plurality of political centres. This first observation raises the question of political patterns that might come into play at the civilizational level. Empires and state systems are two obvious possibilities, but both of them can reach beyond the domain of one civilization. Comparative analyses would therefore have to consider a further question: can civilizations give rise to specific types of state systems or patterns of imperial rule, even if these power structures are projected beyond the boundaries of their original context? Mauss refers

to imperial formations in passing, but does not pursue the topic. His most explicit statements on civilizational unity refer to cultural patterns which prevail throughout the 'family' in question but take more or less different forms in separate societies; since this cultural constitution of civilizations is to be understood in very broad terms, it overlaps with the political dimension (the concept of political culture was not available, but it seems—in retrospect—easily adaptable to Mauss' programme). Further reflection would suggest contrasts and comparisons between the cultural foci of different civilizations; it is, for example, obvious that some civilizational formations are more dependent on a common religious culture than others. Finally, the distinction between societal and civilizational levels of analysis assumes that each of them is characterized by specific forms of socio-cultural integration. Durkheim and Mauss left this issue unexplored, but it is bound to figure prominently in any attempt to develop their programme.

A theoretical foundation for the analysis of civilizations as groupings of societies was thus adumbrated at an early stage, and the same approach is often evident in popular usage. When Europe, Islam or traditional India are described as civilizations, their multisocietal character is taken for granted, and although the long history of imperial unity and the progress of cultural unification seem to set China apart from other cases, the broader Chinese sphere of cultural influence is still characterized by a higher degree of pluralism. But this widely shared idea of civilizations and their internal pluralism—different in degree and kind from the higher-level plurality of civilizational complexes as such—must now be confronted with another well-established notion. The concept of a civilization—one among others—is sometimes applied to particular societies or cultures, without any implication of further subdivisions, but on the often tacit assumption that some specific features call for an emphatic label. Some of the most extreme examples can be found in Toynbee's inventory of abortive and fossilized civilizations, but the following discussion will focus on less controversial cases.

It seems appropriate to begin with the first civilizations of the most central Afro-Eurasian region. For most historians, Mesopotamia and Egypt are the early civilizations par excellence, and although there are good reasons to insist on the chronological primacy of Mesopotamia, it would be counter-intuitive to claim that Egypt was in some sense a less civilizational entity. But these two paradigmatic

formations differ markedly when it comes to the patterns of unity and plurality. There is no doubt about the multi-central and multi-societal (as well as multi-ethnic) character of Mesopotamian civilization; its history was marked by intermittent bids for imperial power, but a relatively durable success was only achieved by a state which absorbed Mesopotamia into a much larger domain and put an end to its central role (the Achemenid empire). By contrast, Egyptian civilization was from the outset cast in a strikingly more compact and unitary mould—so much so that some historians have described Egypt as the first nation-state. Even if that term is dismissed as anachronistic, it seems clear that the territorial state was an Egyptian invention (Assmann, 1996: 51). To qualify this picture, several pluralistic aspects may be noted, but they still leave us with a very significant difference between the two civilizational frameworks. Archaeological evidence suggests that a multi-central pattern, structured around proto-urban settlements, was in the making when an abrupt and innovative shift to monocentric rule changed the course of Egyptian history. The suppressed polycentrism reappeared at later critical junctures, and in the most important cases, the re-integrative responses to it led to major modifications of the Egyptian civilizational patterns. Finally, the states which emerged on the Nubian periphery belonged to the Egyptian civilizational sphere; they were mostly too weak to sustain a multi-state constellation, but a Nubian power centre played a key role during a late phase of fragmentation, and a more distant offshoot of this derivative tradition mutated into a distinctive version of imperial Christianity (the Aksumite state, ancestor of the later Ethiopian empire).

Eisenstadt's analysis of Axial civilizations highlights another salient example. Both China and India were—during their respective Axial ages—characterized by cultural and political pluralism. The same can be said about ancient Greek civilization: in view of the sheer number of independent city-states and the range of variations within the shared pattern of the *polis*, this case might even be described as the most eminently multi-societal one—all the more remarkably so because of the small scale of its constituent unity. But ancient Israel—for Eisenstadt one of the four prime examples of an Axial breakthrough—is a clear exception to the rule. Here the religious transformation which Eisenstadt equates with a civilizational rupture took place within a small and marginal ethnic community: even if we accept the thesis that the division of the Hebrew kingdom into

Israel and Judah was of some importance to the changing relationship between politics and religion (Levy, 1993), this was a far cry from a self-contained multi-state constellation, and some of the most significant changes occurred after the loss of statehood (in exile and during the period of the second temple). On the other hand, it could be argued that ancient Israel ranks among Axial civilizations because of its posterity—both in the sense of the monotheistic world religions and with regard to the diasporic character of Judaism after the destruction of the second temple (a diasporic civilization would indirectly reflect the plurality of other civilizations). But the pluralism thus brought in through a long-term perspective, and hence with reference to the diachronic dimension to be discussed in the next section, is very different from the internal pluralism of civilizations seen as 'families of societies'. Neither the diaspora nor the complex of monotheistic traditions fits the model outlined by Durkheim and Mauss.

Finally, the Japanese experience is particularly relevant to this question. If Japan is seen as a separate civilization, it becomes difficult to maintain the multi-societal perspective. It is true that the seventh-century transformation of the Japanese periphery into a distinctive and cohesive part of the East Asian region changed the internal balance between unity and plurality: a set of new integrative models, based on combinations of borrowings from Chinese sources and adapted traditions of local origin, was superimposed on a culturally variegated background. However, this reminder of diversity—backed up by recent work of Japanese historians—does not take us very far. The underlying differences between regional cultures and identities may often have been more important to the course of events than the traditional vision of the past would have it, but it has yet to be shown that they translated into variations on the level of the unifying pattern. In the East Asian context, the Japanese tradition stands out as a remarkably autonomous and enduring world by itself, but the permanence of its insular condition is equally striking. Prior to the regional upheaval caused by Western expansion, the Japanese refashioning of Chinese patterns did not give rise to alternatives on a regional scale; the abortive expansionist push of the sixteenth century seems to have been devoid of civilizational ambitions (unless we take the very short-lived vision of Japanese dynastic rule over China to signify a shift in that direction).

In short, examples of socio-cultural formations commonly described as civilizations, even if they do not fit the multi-societal model, are

not hard to find. But as I suggested when discussing Mauss' prole-
gomena to civilizational theory, he may have envisaged a solution
to the problem. The brief reference to societies singularizing them-
selves within a broader field has obvious implications for civiliza-
tional analysis, but to the best of my knowledge, no attempt has
ever been made to take the argument further. Set against the back-
ground of the multi-societal model, the notion of singularization
would seem to indicate an alternative—but clearly derivative—type
of civilizational formations. Patterns first embodied in 'families of
societies' may undergo more or less radical transformations within
the limits of smaller socio-cultural units whose relations to the shared
field are—for one reason or another—conducive to separate develop-
ments. But if our interpretive framework is to be extended in this
way, both conceptual analyses and case studies will be needed to
clarify the points of issue. At this stage, we can only speak of a
promising line to explore, and the following reflections will not go
beyond preliminaries; a sampling of the multiple modes of singular-
ization will help to structure a more long-term agenda.

It seems best to begin with another glance at the cases consid-
ered above. The Japanese experience is perhaps most easily under-
stood as a singularizing process. The Japanese tradition was—from
the seventh to the nineteenth century—characterized by a funda-
mental but exclusively cultural and selectively codified dependence
on the Chinese paradigm; the indigenous component was recon-
structed and adapted to a complex pattern of combination with
imported models. Some aspects of the resultant synthesis had a
remarkable staying-power, but others were open to historical varia-
tions (both sides are reflected in the vicissitudes of the Japanese impe-
rial institution). Japan was, in this view, not so much a separate
civilization as a markedly autonomous and internally dynamic part
of a broader civilizational constellation. I have developed this inter-
pretation in detail elsewhere (Arnason, 1997; 2002). Other historical
examples may open up complementary perspectives. Ancient Greece—
arguably the most important case of singularization in the whole of
world history—went through a phase which historians have described
as an 'orientalizing episode' or even an 'orientalizing revolution'; an
unusually intensive and comprehensive borrowing of skills and cul-
tural techniques from the more advanced centres of the Near East
brought the Greek periphery back into closer contact with a multi-
civilizational sphere. But the same period—the Archaic Age, from

the early eighth to the late sixth century BC—was marked by even more exceptional innovations in the fields most central to the self-understanding of the resurgent Greek world: political institution-building and political thought. The originality of the *polis* as a form of life is the most compelling reason to classify ancient Greece as a distinctive civilization. Moreover, the basic structures of the *polis* were—as we have seen—compatible with a variety of concrete forms and developmental trends. The very focus of singularization thus became a framework for internal pluralization. Here we are, in short (and in contrast to Japan), dealing with a fully-fledged constitution of a new civilizational pattern through demarcation from older ones.

The singularization of ancient Israel took a very different turn. To begin with the broader context, some historians of the ancient Near East have argued that the crisis of the late Bronze Age disrupted power balances between centres and peripheries across the region, and that in the longer run, this upheaval led to lasting modifications of political structures, as well as to less easily traceable transformations of religious cultures (Liverani, 1988: 629–660). Some of the peripheral formations of the early Iron Age (in the widest sense, they included post-Mycenaean Greece as well as the southern margins of Syria) embarked on more original paths than societies closer to the centres. Phoenician civilization seems to have reconstituted itself without a radical break with Bronze Age traditions (as far as we can judge from our admittedly fragmentary knowledge of the religious and political structures of its city-states); the contrasting record of Archaic Greece is all the more remarkable because of the common ground of the city-state. The Jewish trajectory is more complex and controversial. But if there was (as has been suggested) an anti-statist side to the earlier political organization of Israeli society, it can plausibly be argued that undercurrents linked to that source were to some extent active under the monarchy and conducive to the religious devaluation of political authority during the decisive phase of monotheistic reform. The singularizing process that began with a radicalization of monotheism—the idea of a divine, exclusive and extra-mundane legislator—differed from Greek developments in regard to internal as well as external contexts. The affirmation of a distinctive identity focused on the religious sphere and found expression in a new type of religion; it went together with a far-reaching rejection of cultural and political borrowings from the dominant Near Eastern civilizations; and it led to repeated conflicts

(up to and including the schisms of the Hellenistic period) between exclusivist and assimilationist currents. All these aspects of the Jewish case set it apart from other civilizational formations and raise questions which call for further discussion.

The early Near Eastern constellation should also be reconsidered in light of our reflections on singularization. Although Mesopotamian primacy is hardly open to doubt, it has become increasingly clear that Mesopotamian centres reached out to and interacted with a larger sphere; in particular, early Syrian city-states are now known to have been crucial links in a regional network. It does not seem far-fetched to interpret the emergence of Egyptian civilization as a singularizing response to growing contacts with this multi-central environment. Civilizing innovations were obviously transmitted from Mesopotamia and Syria to Egypt, but the inventions that gave shape to a distinctive civilizational pattern—most importantly the territorial state, centred on a particularly emphatic version of sacred kingship—were of indigenous origin.

Salient as they are, these examples are far from exhausting the spectrum of meanings that can be grouped under the category of singularization. To conclude the survey, one more case of singularizing developments may be noted; it did not culminate in the crystallization of a separate civilization, but its long-term consequences are of some interest for civilizational theorists. The emergence of national states and cultures within the former domain of Western Christendom—clearly without parallel in any other civilizational setting—did not lead to a division of the region between multiple civilizations. But on the one hand, it is a significant fact that the concept of civilization—both in singular and in plural—was involved in the interpretive constructs and conflicts which accompanied the process: some of the singularized units invoked it as a self-defining purpose, whereas others invented alternative terms of analogous purposes. A conceptual history of civilizational analysis must take these rival interpretations into account. On the other hand (and more importantly), the interaction of the singularized units created preconditions for a civilizational mutation of a new kind: the emergence of modernity.

Further discussion would have to deal with the internal unity and plurality of civilizations from other angles. In particular, the integrative patterns superimposed on primary units by empires and world religions pose a whole set of questions for comparative analysis. Some aspects of this problematic have already been singled out in con-

nection with inter-civilizational encounters. Here I will only note in passing the profoundly ambiguous interrelations between civilizations, imperial formations (always associated with some cultural and ideological visions of unity) and religious universalisms. On the one hand, both imperial and religious aspirations go beyond civilizational boundaries. The oldest and most formative imperial tradition in the Afro-Eurasian world began with Mesopotamian rulers striving to control a multicultural environment and reached a new level with the Achemenid empire. As for the Chinese imperial tradition (the only Eurasian one which developed independently of Near Eastern sources), it was much more closely linked to a civilizational context, but even here, the trans-civilizational dynamic of empire asserted itself: through expansion into Inner Asia when the Chinese centre was at its strongest but also in the shape of 'shadow empires' (Barfield, 2001) which emerged on the Inner Asian side and combined partial imitation of Chinese models with different structural foundations. World religions are, by definition, more emphatically trans-civilizational in intent and scope—so much so that they have repeatedly been invoked as evidence of historical or spiritual progress beyond civilizational particularism. The universalistic ambitions of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are beyond dispute. Hinduism, according to Michael Mann (1986: 302) 'the pinnacle of the powers of ideology in human experience to date', is a more complicated case: it does not transcend civilizational boundaries as the three abovementioned traditions do, but the dimensions of its civilizational domain and the complexity of its cultural world are often seen as reasons enough to rank it among the world religions. One possible interpretation of its specific features would stress the reconsolidation of particularism through the absorption or deflection of potential alternatives. Historical Hinduism was, on this view, the outcome of complex developments which neutralized the challenges posed by Buddhism as well as by other countercurrents.

On the other hand, the question of Hinduism draws attention to a more general point. Notwithstanding the trans-civilizational aims and intercivilizational effects of imperial or religious projects, there is no convincing historical case of a supra-civilizational empire or religion. The formations that embody such visions are always marked by specific civilizational contexts, inseparably linked to particular civilizational complexes (or a set of them), and often central to the maintenance of civilizational identity over time.

Further ramifications are beyond the scope of a tentative sketch. But the discussion of civilizational groupings has shown that this external aspect must be analyzed in light of the core internal structures of civilizational formations; in particular, the twin notions of multi-societal unity and singularizing counter-trends can be linked—respectively—to the institutional and the cultural side (and thus to the perspectives one-sidedly reflected in Toynbee's conception of civilizations as intelligible units of interaction and Spengler's vision of closed symbolic worlds). The relatively stable patterns that serve to demarcate a family of societies belong—in a broad sense—under the heading of institutional frameworks. But when the concept of civilizations in the plural is applied to more self-contained units, often without any reference to arguments about singularization, it is intuitively taken for granted that a distinctive universe of meaning deserves this label. Ambiguity at this level reflects persistent conceptual problems of a more basic kind; a better understanding of changing relations between the internal unity and plurality of civilizations presupposes further work on the frame of reference which underpins all specific arguments of civilizational theory.

4.10   *Traditions in transformation*

The idea of civilizations as 'families of societies' has historical connotations: it suggests not only coexisting relatives, but also successive generations. This aspect of civilizational patterns involves more than a mere survival of socio-cultural units within shared framework. A historical continuity of civilizational contexts, in the sense envisaged by Durkheim and Mauss, must be compatible with the emergence of new socio-cultural configurations. Civilizations are, in other words, to be understood as formations of the *longue durée*, open to significant internal changes, and adaptable to new conditions. But a closer look at concrete trajectories will soon raise more far-reaching questions about continuity and discontinuity. If civilizations encompass sequences as well as constellations of societies, transitions from one civilization to another must also be taken into account, and some of them are obviously more organic than others. A comparative analysis would therefore have to distinguish several levels of change. It can be safely said that this is one of the least explored areas of civilizational analysis, and as we shall see, the problem can-

not be tackled in earnest without extensive rethinking of very basic assumptions. But before elaborating on the theoretical points at issue, it may be useful to link the discussion to specific examples of contrasting civilizational dynamics.

China and Europe are perhaps the most instructive cases. On both sides, the historical record of continuity and discontinuity is open to different readings, but the overall terms of debate have developed in markedly divergent ways. Interpretations of Chinese history have become more sensitive to structural changes and epochal transitions, especially in regard to developments from the tenth or eleventh century onwards; at the same time, strong claims are made for civilizational continuity at another level. The most far-reaching and most detailed version of this view (Vandermeersch, 1977–1980; Billeter, 1991) traces the defining features of Chinese civilization back to socio-cultural conditions of the late Bronze Age—the Shang dynasty— as well as to modifications brought about by the Zhou conquest at the end of the second millennium BC. The constitutive components of the enduring pattern have already been singled out in other contexts. A political order based on sacred kingship and on an assumed consubstantiality of political and paternal authority (Billeter, 1991: 879) survived major redistributions of social power; it drew both legitimizing support and rationalizing capacity from a vision of cosmic order, evolving out of divinatory practices and increasingly characterized by what Vandermeersch calls a semiological conception of reality as a universe of patterns and processes to be deciphered rather than a realm of gods and spirits. These interconnected models of order proved exceptionally capable of containing social change and conflicts. The original fusion of kingship and kinship could be translated into more flexible ways of intertwining political and familial hierarchy. A pervasive ritualization of all social life helped to maintain institutional continuity. This is not to deny that challenges to the dominant pattern came from different directions at successive junctures of Chinese history: the Legalist projects of state-building and state intervention, the Daoist visions of retreat from the social to the cosmic plane of order, and the millennarian offshoots of Daoist religion deviated from the instutionalized mainstream. But those who stress basic continuities argue that the countercurrents were based on partial and ambiguous rejections of entrenched cultural premises, overshadowed in the long run by more central trends, and easily

absorbed or contained by the imperial order after the unification of China.

However, the other side to the debate must not be overlooked. Two periods of Chinese history are particularly attractive to critics of the continuity thesis: the centuries around the middle of the last millennium BC (especially the Warring States period, 480–221 BC), and 'China's greatest age' (Fairbank, 1992: 88) under the Song dynasty, particularly the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, with a much-debated sequel under later dynasties. In the former case, the changes that cast doubt on visions of continuity have to do with structural as well as cultural aspects, but the most visibly challenging ones occurred in the world of thought. It can however, be shown that those who make strong claims about intellectual innovations or breakthroughs tend to tone them down by reaffirming the rule of tradition in other respects. Eisenstadt's analysis of the Axial transition to a new civilizational type is meant to apply to China, but he describes the Chinese way of separating the transcendental from the mundane as the least radical among the major Axial models; it does not translate into a distinction between this-worldly and other-worldly domains, and the continuing emphasis on political centre as a link between both dimensions reinforces the institution of sacred kingship. Another line of argument stresses a series of specific changes, rather than a single decisive rupture. A shift from anthropomorphic to amorphic notions of a supreme principle is accompanied by higher levels of reflexivity and rival visions of the proper human relationship to the cosmic Way (Elvin, 1986: 358–59). But as the same author notes, these new approaches left 'Chinese culture as a whole . . . untorn by those uncompromising oppositions that, in their extreme form, opened up such a wound in the European soul' (ibid.: 326). The absence of stark ontological polarities reflects an underlying positive vision of order, or—as Elvin puts it—an 'ecological' mode of thought, familiar to those who insist on the survival and sublimation of archaic cosmology.

The debate on discontinuity during the later imperial phase is more consistently focused on economic and social changes (not that innovations in Song, Ming and Qing thought are insignificant or uncontroversial, but they can more easily be interpreted as elaborations of an enduring civilizational legacy). Notions of new beginnings range from the early modernity attributed to Song China to reconstructions of a civil society in the making during the Qing period.

Here the case for continuity does not depend on minimalist views of China's economic dynamism. Rather, the most plausible claim is that the imperial order—and the civilizational framework behind it—proved resilient enough to contain the social repercussions of economic change. A combination of indirect social control, limited delegation of power and entrenched cultural orientations channelled the dynamics of late imperial society in a much less transformative direction than in the West (Chevrier, 1996).

It is not being suggested that the continuity of Chinese civilization—including a more constitutive link to late Bronze Age antecedents than anywhere in the Near East or its broader orbit—is a fully established fact. But arguments to that effect are an integral part of debates on Chinese history, backed up by extensive evidence in relevant fields of social life, and illustrative of the general assumptions involved in such claims. If a civilizational pattern can be said to retain its identity throughout the transformations of Chinese society (at least prior to the collapse of the imperial order), the key to its constitution is to be found in cultural orientations, intertwined with power structures and operative at the level of general frameworks for social relations. The other example mentioned above presents a very different picture. Although popular notions of Western civilization may assert an unbroken line from ancient Greece to advanced modernity, this view does not merit serious consideration in the context of theoretical debates, and it is hardly relevant to the current revival of civilizational discourse (as noted in the first chapter, Huntington's construction of the West seems to trace its proper history back to medieval beginnings, whereas classical sources belong to a more remote prehistory). Among those who accept the case for civilizational perspectives, the prevalent view—and the obvious starting-point for further discussion—would seem to imply a sequence of civilizations, punctuated by major transformations but integrated over time by constitutive links between earlier and later phases. Some reasons for distinguishing between Greek and Roman stages of the classical world have already been noted; if imperial Rome is to be understood as a composite civilization, further work is needed to define that concept in more precise terms. Against this background, the recent rediscovery of late antiquity as a distinctive historical world acquires a more specific meaning. The transformation of the Mediterranean world from the fourth to the seventh centuries AD amounted to a new civilizational synthesis, centred on the

institutional nucleus and the imaginary horizons of the Christian empire. Three successor civilizations—Byzantine, Islamic and Western Christian—restructured the legacy of late antiquity in different ways and divided its geo-cultural domain between them. Western Christendom, long overshadowed by the other two and more marginal to Afro-Eurasian history, was in the long run most open to transformations which culminated in another civilizational mutation. As we have seen, only an untenably reductionistic approach can limit modernity to an episode within a pre-existing and self-reproducing civilizational pattern. On the other hand, the view that it represents a distinct type of civilization is open to objections: the relationship between modern innovations and civilizational contexts is too complex to be analyzed in terms of ready-made alternatives. The European civilizational sequence thus takes a final turn which problematizes the most basic categories of civilizational theory.

The successive formations mentioned above are not uniformly equated with religious cultures or traditions, but connections between religious interpretations of the world and institutional settings of social life are central to the argument. New bonds between religious and political centres, as well as a broader reconfiguration of social power, set the Christian empire apart from its classical predecessors. Divergences between its Byzantine and Western Christian heirs are most easily defined (and often oversimplified) in terms of their respective constellations of religious and political power; a conflictual and dynamic relationship between these two poles, combined with other sources of internal pluralism, made Western Christendom more capable of changes which in the end transcended its outer and inner boundaries. But the dividing lines which can thus be drawn between successive formations should not obscure the other side of the civilizational sequence. Legacies of past epochs enter into the making of new civilizational patterns and can be reactivated in changing contexts. If civilizations are in general 'capable of inter-epochal transposition as well as inter-societal transmission' (Arjomand, 2001: 456), the inter-epochal encounters—often known as renaissances—were particularly important for the European trajectory. Moreover, the multiple sources of European traditions lent themselves to new combinations as well as polarizing re-interpretations. The productive tension between Greek and Jewish themes is the most familiar part of a more complex pattern.

Further indications of underlying continuities may be found in controversies about the frameworks of periodization. Growing agreement on the importance and specificity of late antiquity has not settled the question of its historical boundaries. The most plausible view is—in my opinion—that this epoch came to an end and gave way to three successor civilizations in the seventh century, but some of the most authoritative work on the subject is based on a different chronology: the simultaneous decline of the Carolingian empire and the caliphate in the ninth century appears as the end of an era and the beginning of another one (Bowersock et al., 1999). From a different point of view, the history of the medieval world is taken to begin with Emperor Constantine's rise to supreme power in 312 (Nicholas, 1992). Norbert Elias' idea of the 'long Middle Ages' presupposed a much later starting-point (the post-Carolingian fragmentation of Western Europe), but as he saw it, the basic structures and dynamics of the medieval world continued to shape the course of European history until around 1800. On the other hand, we have seen that reconstructions of the Western European background to the modern breakthrough can easily lead to visions of new beginnings in the High Middle Ages, more important than any later landmarks. Finally, the dating of modernity proper (as distinct from its prehistory) is still a matter of debate between those who focus on eighteenth-century origins and those who speak of an early modernity from the sixteenth century onwards.

In short, the fluctuating and contested definitions of historical periods reflect problems which civilizational analysis must tackle in a more direct fashion. The two trajectories which we have surveyed at some length exemplify the main points at issue: they have to do with the continuity of civilizations across the more short-term transitions from one social formation to another, as well as the continuity of more loosely integrated sequences which encompass more than one civilization. Sociological approaches to the problematic of civilizations have at best glimpsed this field of inquiry. The focus on Axial civilizations has not been conducive to clearer views: since the Axial breakthroughs were seen as openings to very long-term cultural dynamics of codification and re-interpretation, the difference between intra-civilizational and intercivilizational continuity became less relevant. It was more important for Toynbee's inventory of civilizations, but his analyses of historical cases lacked conceptual

precision. His model allowed for civilizational sequences which could go beyond two successive generations; it was, however, difficult to draw boundaries and trace transitions without an adequate grasp of the units in question (as we have seen, Toynbee left that question half-answered), and a far-reaching change of opinion on the relationship between civilizations and religions undermined the intuitive criteria which had at first provided some guidance.

Jaroslav Krejčí uses the concept of a 'civilizational pedigree' in close conjunction with that of a civilizational area. As he sees it, civilizations exist in historical as well as geographical clusters, and the analysis of such groupings must progress in tandem with the interpretations of civilizational patterns from the inside. The questions of continuity and discontinuity thus become more central to the agenda than they have mostly been for other civilizational analysts. But Krejčí still works with a multi-phase cyclical model of civilizational growth and decline (from early foundational and 'heroic' stages through a classical one to recession and decline). This construct defuses the problem of internal continuity. Although the cyclical pattern is not presented as a matter of logical or structural necessity, it amounts to a very sweeping generalization, and it is only at the level of civilizational sequences that historical variety is given its due. In Krejčí's terms, civilizational pedigrees can take different forms. The European unfolded in three great cycles: from the rise of Minoan civilization in Crete to the crisis of the late Bronze Age, from Archaic Greece to the fragmentation and partial collapse of the Roman empire, and from the rise of Western Christendom to the present of modern industrialization. Pedigrees of the Levant (Krejčí prefers this term to 'Near East') and India are characterized by other patterns.

The concept of a civilizational pedigree seems useful, and it could be adapted to a more flexible conceptual framework. But if we want to link the problematic of continuity and discontinuity—outlined above—to a more comprehensive rethinking of civilizational theory, the argument must begin with unresolved questions at the most elementary level. Social theory is—as a result of assumptions and preferences that have shaped its history—less well equipped to deal with the diachronic aspects of civilizations than with the synchronic ones. On the synchronic level, a strong emphasis on integration and a one-sided conception of norms and values as its mainsprings have until recently been characteristic of the sociological tradition and common to otherwise different approaches; the distinctive features

of civilizational integration (across multiple societies) can be contrasted with this model and added to other evidence cited by its critics. But the 'temporal integration of society' (Shils, 1981: 327) based on traditions has been one of the most conspicuously neglected themes of sociological inquiry. Tradition often figures as an invidious contrast to rationality or modernity, without any sustained effort to theorize it in more positive terms. Complaints about this imbalance are more common than attempts to correct it; Shils' analysis of tradition and traditionality as omnipresent and constitutive aspects of social life is by far the most detailed and systematic work of its kind, but although it deals with a broad spectrum of cultural traditions, the argument is not extended to the specific forms of traditionality that prevail on a civilizational scale. The civilizational perspective implicit in the concepts of centre and periphery (as Shils notes elsewhere, civilizations have centres) is not explored. This shortcoming may be linked to a more basic conceptual problem. Although Shils distinguishes 'the real past which has happened and left is residues behind' from a 'perceived past . . . more capable of being retrospectively reformed by human beings living in the present' (ibid.: 195), his treatment of the two sides is markedly uneven. The main emphasis is on the 'presence of the past' in social institutions, objects and practices; much less is said about the permanent constructive and reconstructive acticity that is always involved in the perpetuation of traditions.

This latter aspect—the changing but invariably important role of perceptions, interpretations and codifications of the past—seems particularly relevant to civilizational questions. If civilizational patterns persist across successive periods of social history, it is by the same token reasonable to assume that they depend on interpretive and adaptive work of the most demanding kind. Neither the cultural nor the institutional frameworks singled out by civilizational analysis can be understood as self-perpetuating invariances: the obverse of their formative impact on action and understanding is a permanent involvement in practical and interpetive contexts of application. On the other hand, civilizational patterns embody traditionalization—the active affirmation of the past as a constitutive part of the present—in a more emphatic way than any lower-level structures. The 'inner conflict of tradition' (Heesterman), the tension between ongoing construction and instituted endurance of the past, thus becomes a key theme for civilizational theory. Ideas of invariant foundations are not

equally central to all civilizations, but paradigmatic or directive pat-
terns anchored in the past can be combined with more or less ambi-
tious visions of improvement.

Here I can only indicate a plausible approach to this problem-
atic. Jan Assmann's work on cultural memory is probably the most
seminal contribution of its kind and the most adequate guide to the
tasks of civilizational analysis in this particular field. The enduring
past is, as Assmann (2000b: 88) argues, always the 'result of cultural
construction and representation' and analyses of specific means to
that end may bring us closer to the civilizational dimension. Cultural
constructions of the past are always intertwined with images of social
order and articulations of the world, but different modes of mem-
ory interact with these other cultural expressions in different ways.
Assmann underlines the contrast between ritual and textual coher-
ence: the ritual representation of the past characteristic not only of
tribal societies, but also of civilizations like ancient Egypt and early
China, aims at an undisturbed reproduction of a pre-established order,
whereas the transition to textual coherence—exemplified by the grad-
ual demarcation of Judaism from the older religious cultures of the
Near East—opens up new possibilities for varying and even conflicting
interpretations. The divergent cases of Egypt and Israel can, how-
ever, also serve to illustrate the complicated relationship between cul-
tural memory and its media. There is no doubt that the invention
of writing was a major watershed in the history of mnemotechnics,
but attempts to show that the new medium as such changed the
whole domain of cultural memory have proved unconvincing.

As Assmann shows, neither writing in general nor any particular
system of writing (such as the alphabet) can be credited with revo-
lutionizing effects on cultural memory (or, more broadly, on modes
of thought and interpretation); a comparative approach highlights
different cultures of writing, dependent on historical contexts and
centred on specific choices among the possibilities inherent in writ-
ing as a cultural technique. Such choices may restrict the scope of
interpretive variation and confine the potentially more flexible medium
to uses reminiscent of ritual forms. A very widespread practice of
that kind is the construction of a 'canon', i.e. the condensation of
traditions into an invariant binding core (the analogy with ritual
coherence is, as Assmann notes, borne out by the fact that cultures
equipped with writing can subordinate it to canonical patterns of a
more archaic type: for example, the temple became the totalizing

and stabilizing symbol of Egyptian civilization in its last and most defensive phase). But different directions and implications emerge when Western notions of the canon are traced back to their diverse sources. The canonical texts par excellence, invoked to draw the line between orthodoxy and heresy, are the scriptures of the monotheistic religions that grew out of Jewish inventions. A less sacrosanct canonical status, first defined and institutionalized in a Greek context, is attributed to classics of art and literature. But the Greek tradition also developed another version of classical validity which cannot be subsumed under the idea of the canon: the philosophical reference to classical sources, for which Assmann introduces the term 'hypolepsis', centres on representative formulations of problems, rather than on definitive insights, and serves to sustain an ongoing dialogue between different interpretations.

The Greek innovations are—contrary to some recent attempts to pinpoint the alphabet as a decisive factor—clearly related to a broader socio-cultural framework for the use of writing. A comparison of the two very distinctive writing cultures that emerged in ancient Greece and ancient Israel throws light on the ramifications of cultural memory and links up with the agenda of civilizational theory. In Israel, the construction of a new 'figure of memory' (*Erinnerungsfigur*) coincides with a radical change in the relationship of religion to its social environment: the invention of 'religion' in the proper sense of a separate sphere of values, meaning and action, which is defined in sharp contradistinction to the domains of culture and politics' (ibid.: 104). The constitution of religion as a bulwark against cultural assimilation and political oppression (alien and domestic) is backed up by a reconstruction of the past; a supposedly historical event (the Exodus), interpreted through an ostensibly rediscovered text (Deuteronomy), serves to symbolize the transfer of sovereignty from political to divine authority.

Assmann refers to this turn as the 'Mosaic distinction' between religion and politics. In Greece, cultural memory focused on canonical but not sacred texts (the Homeric epics) whose dominant position relativized the role of *polis* religion. At the same time, the world-view articulated in these texts channelled the creative imagination into efforts which prefigured the later flowering of political and philosophical reflection. At this point, the analyses of cultural memory—in other words: of the new modes of traditionality invented by two exceptionally innovative cultures—link up with our reflections

on singularity and plurality in the preceding section. Interpretive pat-
terns first created to enhance the separate identity of marginal soci-
eties can develop into frameworks for much broader civilizational
constellations. The cases in question thus exemplify both aspects of
civilizational integration: unity on a trans-societal scale and conti-
nuity across historical epochs.

4.11   *Civilizations and regions*

The last set of themes to be surveyed concerns the historical geog-
raphy of civilizations. Both as complexes of existing societies and as
sequences of successive ones, they give rise to regional identities.
Although this point may be taken as a logical implication of the
ideas put forward by Durkheim and Mauss, Max Weber made more
explicit reference to it; his comparative studies of China and India
identified these two civilizational complexes with cultural areas (the
question of diffusion beyond original boundaries was considered in
relation to India but barely mentioned with regard to China). The
Chinese and Indian worlds were distinguished from 'Near Asia'
(*Vorderasien*) and regarded—in a vague but not negligible sense—as
more properly Asiatic or Oriental. Regional contours are thus clearly
integral to the Weberian vision of civilizations in the plural, but their
specific meaning and relative weight were never clarified. This prob-
lem does not figure prominently in later reformulations of civiliza-
tional theory, and it remains one of the least explored aspects of our
problematic.

   If the regional dimension is to be properly incorporated into a
paradigm of civilizational analysis, the discussion must begin on a
note of caution and conceptual pluralism. In recent debates the idea
of a region has been applied in different contexts and at different
levels of integration. It is safe to say that new models of regional
division in historical, cultural and economic geography reflect a strong
reaction against environmental determinism; the effort to theorize
regions as social-historical constructs is common to otherwise diver-
gent approaches. But the scale of analysis varies from case to case,
and the specific mechanisms of regional formation can be studied
from correspondingly different angles. Critics of the traditional over-
emphasis on nation-states have stressed the plurality of regions within
them, whereas others have taken more interest in regions at the

supra-national level, but not necessarily with any particular reference to large-scale cultural units. When a state is of civilizational dimensions, its territorial domain can be divided into regions and macro-regions. The debate on such categories and their changing historical content is one of the most productive controversies in Chinese studies (Cartier, 2002). In the present context, there is no need and no space to discuss these rival conceptions at length or to outline any synthesizing perspectives. The following reflections will be limited to civilizational aspects of regional identity and difference; a focus on the social and historical dimensions, rather than on strictly geographical configurations, will be taken for granted. Although the question of regional settings could be linked to a more extensive analysis of ecological factors (a necessary but so far very underdeveloped complement to civilizational theory), this line will not be pursued here. Finally, the aim is not to find a general and invariant formula for the relationship between regions and civilizations, but to develop a framework within which different constellations can be distinguished and compared. As will be seen, the civilizational background to regional patterns is sometimes relatively straightforward and stable, whereas other cases reflect much more complex combinations of historical forces and processes; the relevance of civilizational perspectives is not limited to the former category. Some civilizations are more regional than others, and some regions are more civilizational than others, but the task of civilizational theory is to account for the spectrum of variations on both sides, rather than to single out the most congruent cases.

Among recent contributions to the literature on regions, the model proposed by Martin E. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen (1997) seems best suited to present purposes—not because of any explicit civilizational connections made by the authors, but in view of questions raised and prospects opened up in the course of their argument. Their version of a 'world regional framework' builds on a radical critique of conventional 'metageographical' notions, especially of the traditional division into continents, which is seen as an offshoot of Eurocentric perspectives. The outcome is at first sight similar to the schemes used in the standard texts of 'area studies' (revisions include a distinction between Ibero-America and African America, the latter composed of the Caribbean and the northeast corner of Brazil, and a large region called 'Russia-Southeast Europe and the Caucasus', which encompasses Siberia but not Central Asia). But as Lewis and

Wigen see it, more emphasis is now to be laid on the historical con-
stitution of regions, and the eclectic criteria often used to define
regional boundaries (mostly with a pronounced bias towards envi-
ronmental determinism) must be avoided. The historical approach
does not entail any strong interest in civilizations. Lewis and Wigen
dismiss the civilizational conception of geohistory on the grounds
that it makes too much of literate high cultures and exaggerates their
mutual isolation; Toynbee is the main target of criticism to this effect.
The whole above discussion of civilizational patterns and dynamics
should have shown that these objections do not apply to all inter-
pretations of the field.

   Since the image of Asia as a separate continent is the most unten-
able aspect of traditional metageography, the demarcation of regions
within that part of the world is crucial to the alternative model, and
it may also suggest a way to bring civilizations back in. Lewis and
Wigen begin their attempt to 'reconceive Asia' with the observation
that 'three Asian regions are relatively unproblematic: East Asia (the
historical zone of Chinese influence), South Asia (the zone of Indian
influence), and Southwest Asia (the historical heartland of Islam,
joined with North Africa' (ibid.: 170). But the plausibility of all three
examples depends on civilizational contexts, and a closer look at each
'zone' will bring to light some significant variations on that level.
East Asia is without doubt the most straightforward case. Whether
we describe the civilizational pattern in question as Sinic or East
Asian, all analysts agree on its clearly defined and constant regional
boundaries. Chinese influence on Inner and Southeast Asia was, by
contrast, much less significant (although the borderline case of Vietnam,
East Asian in some respects but Southeast Asian in others, should
not be overlooked); Japan is, as we have seen, at least constitutively
related to the more China-centred and much larger part of the
region. In short, both the enduring impact on a distinctive region
demarcated at a relatively early stage, and the markedly limited
diffusion of cultural models beyond its borders may be seen as defining
features of the Chinese civilizational complex. The most visible evi-
dence of regional intergration is cultural: East Asia is, to quote Léon
Vandermeersch, the domain of Chinese characters, and this writing
system was inseparable from a whole universe of discourse which
ensured civilizational unity without posing uniform rules. A regional
power structure, based on an unusually stable geopolitical constella-
tion (the Sino-Korean-Japanese triangle), reinforced the cultural logic

of continuity and was in turn stabilized by transferable Chinese models of statecraft. As for the economic aspect of regional dynamics, the historical record is less clear-cut, and dominant trends varied from phase to phase: for example, commercial integration made significant progress during the early modern period (from the sixteenth to eighteenth century, despite the political barrier between Japan and the mainland, but at the same time, involvement in new international trading patterns, especially through the import of silver from Spanish America, affected the history of the region in various but often elusive ways which historians are still debating.

The South Asian region, more or less identical with the Indian subcontinent, is also defined in implicitly civilizational terms, but the background is more complex than in East Asia. The unity of the subcontinent is most easily attributable to Hinduism as a civilization, but a retrospective glance at earlier phases suggests a more nuanced view: during the first millennium AD, the Indian civilizational context included Buddhist alternatives, and Southeast Asia was an integral part of the arena where the diverse currents and traditions interacted. On the other hand, the shift to a more homogeneous pattern within a reduced regional framework was accompanied by other trends which complicate the picture. The Indian experience of Islam, continuing in diverse forms and contexts throughout the second millennium, was a more prolonged and overt intercivilizational encounter than any other episode in the history of Islamic expansion. As such, it became one of the defining historical features of the South Asian region. Complications of another kind arise if we consider the third 'unproblematic' region. The trans-regional dimensions and dynamics of Islam as a world religion are in doubt, but a 'historical heartland' can be fitted into the world regional framework. Marshall Hodgson defined it as the 'Nile to Oxus region'; Lewis and Wigen propose a similarly enlarged version of the Near East, but their model seems to include the whole of North Africa, whereas they retreat from Hodgson's redrawing of the boundary between Iran and Central Asia. Irrespective of such divergences, a long-term perspective on the region in question will throw light on older layers of its identity. Before the rise of Islam, this was the multi-civilizational sphere par excellence, with a record of inter-civilizational encounters going back to the very beginnings of city- and state-centred societies, and of a history more or less regulated interstate relations across civilizational boundaries that began in the

second millennium BC. Aspirations to imperial rule over the whole region were grounded in this past; they had first been put into effective practice by the Achemenids and remained an attractive but elusive goal for later claimants to their legacy. Since Islamic civilization was the outcome of a complex interaction between conquerors mobilized around a new version of monotheism and the pre-existing socio-cultural patterns of the Near East, the civilizational unity imposed on the region must be seen as a synthesizing transformation of earlier traditions. The Islamic synthesis also changed the relationship of the North African extension (west of Egypt) to the Near East proper: this previously detached periphery became a more integral part of the region.

Intercivilizational encounters thus turn out to be crucial to the formation of even the *prima facie* most straightforwardly civilizational regions. Their importance becomes even clearer in regard to two 'interstitial zones' which Lewis and Wigen discuss at length (ibid.: 170–181) and regard as test cases for the world regional scheme, because of the particular problems involved in pinpointing their unifying features. The civilizational aspect of their complexity is not stressed as such, but it is implicit in the whole argument. The idea of Southeast Asia (in the current sense, more narrowly defined than in some earlier references) emerged relatively late, and it was accepted for conspicuously conjunctural reasons (linked to World War II); although it is now a regular part of any regional scheme, the controversy about its defining characteristics goes on. It has, during its whole recorded history, been at the crossroads of civilizational currents from elsewhere: Indian, Chinese, Islamic and (from early modern times onwards) Western influences shaped the historical dynamics of the region. The phase of direct Western domination—unusual in that almost all colonial powers intervened at one stage or another in a relatively small area—left new patterns of division in its wake, and its interaction with older historical layers is still affecting the course of events. Historians of Southeast Asia have often argued that this sequence of encounters, reflected in the diversity of countries and cultures affected by different external currents, cannot explain the cultural unity of the region. But the search for an indigenous substratum has never been uncontroversial. The most sustained reconstruction of a Southeast Asian background to changing constellations (Reid, 1988) suggests that the internal factors are best understood through the twists which they give to intrusions or borrowings, and

that some of the trends observable on that level—such as a tradition of ruling elite involvement in maritime, commerce—were conducive to regional integration. The identity defined on this basis is not a fully-fledged civilizational one, a case can be made for regional attributes and commonalities which became more pronounced in the context of intercivilizational encounters.

The other 'interstitial zone' discussed by Lewis and Wigen was—in stark contrast to Southeast Asia—very important to traditional Western metageography, but became increasingly marginal to modern conceptions of world regions. Central Asia, previously known as Tartary, has also been a meeting-place of civilizations. As a result, some phases of its history (and some parts of the region more than others) were characterized by an exceptionally high degree of religious pluralism, including traditions which made more headway there than anywhere else (Manichaeism and the Nestorian version of Christianity). The decreasing visibility of Central Asia was due to diminishing impact on world history; at the same time, the Islamization of its core seemed to blur the most distinctive cultural features. More recently, the region was divided between two empires, whose civilizational impact became much stronger when they mutated from traditional to revolutionary modes (and did so through variants of the same ideology). This was the final twist to a long process of regional levelling.

Attempts to put Central Asia on the map again (and to identify some kind of indigenous substratum) tend to highlight ecological and geographical factors—more so than similar approaches to Southeast Asia. If the region is defined in a restrictive sense, the most plausible constitutive feature is 'the co-presence of two sharply contrasting ecologies: nomadic pastoralism and oasis agriculture, each an extreme of development' (Adshead, 1993: 14). As the author notes, this is—in contemporary geological terms—a description of 'the three Turkestans, Russian, Chinese and Afghan' (ibid.: 3); it remains unclear whether the culturally and historically highly distinctive Tibetan plateau should be considered as another varient of the same pattern. But a closer look at the dynamics of nomadic pastoralism quickly leads to an enlargement of the geographical framework. Central Asia merges into Inner Asia, which includes the northern borderlands of the Chinese empire, and ultimately—in some versions of the argument—into Inner Eurasia, which also includes Russia, Siberia and the northeastern corner of China. Geopolitical notions of the Eurasian

'heartland' are thus reinterpreted in a more ecological vein. The Inner Eurasian environment is seen as conducive to specific 'strategies of ecological, economic, political and military mobilization' (Christian, 1998: XVII). One of the more provocative conclusions drawn from this premise is the reduction of Soviet Communism to an 'Inner Eurasian backlash against capitalism' (ibid.: XXI). Critics of these massive concessions to geographical determinism seem—so far—inclined towards Eliasian views on state formation and its civilizing dynamics, rather than any version of civilizational pluralism. As one of them argues, the patterns of state formation in Inner Asia (more narrowly defined than Inner Eurasia) are too complex and too open to interaction with other power centres to be reducible to ecological imperatives (Di Cosmo, 1999).

As these examples show, there is no simple answer to the question of relationships between civilizational and regional perspectives. For a final sample of this problematic, we may turn to the most famous twentieth-century work on regional history, whose author was also a prominent contributor to civilizational theory. Fernand Braudel's work on the Mediterranean began with an intuitive grasp of its object: a region with relatively clear geographical contours and a record of cultural primacy in earlier phases of European history. At the time singled out for more detailed study, it was also a geopolitical field shaped by the coexistence and confrontation of two world empires at the height of their power, the Spanish and the Ottoman. Braudel's analyses build on these foundations and move towards a more articulate account of 'the unity and coherence of the Mediterranean region' (Braudel, 1972: 14); this was, as he later saw it, the major unchallenged achievement of the book. Much of the argument centres on the economic structures, dynamics and activities which give a more concrete meaning to geographical unity and create preconditions for the development of more complex formations: societies, empires and civilizations. Among these macro-structures, civilizations became more prominent as Braudel's ideas matured. It seems clear that a sense of civilizational distance between France and North Africa was important to Braudel's earliest visions of the Mediterranean (Daix, 1995), but the notion of a constitutively multi-civilizational region was not fully formulated until later. Civilizations play noticeably a more central role in the 1966 second edition of *The Mediterranean* than in the first one, published in 1949. But growing emphasis on this component of regional patterns did not trans-

late into clear conceptual criteria. Braudel often refers to three main civilizations present in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean: Latin, Islamic and Greek Orthodox. Jewish civilization is a case apart, 'one civilization against the rest' (ibid.: 802), but no attempt is made to theorize its anomalous status. Braudel then goes on to quote with obvious approval an interpretation of the Baroque as a civilization in itself, and to describe the Counter-Reformation with which it was associated as a 'militant civilization' (ibid.: 829, 831). The Baroque was the last great cultural wave travelling northwards from the Mediterranean, and to some extent capable of transcending the split within Christendom; its achievements are the most conclusive proof of a cultural creativity and ascendancy that lasted well into the seventeenth century (for Braudel, this insight—contrary to widely held views—was another major result of his work). The discussion of the Baroque ends with the somewhat disconcerting statement that it 'was the product of two massive imperial civilizations, that of Rome and that of Spain' (ibid.: 835). 'Rome' should probably be understood as a reference to the papacy in its capacity as heir to the Christian empire. In any case, the concept of civilization is—at the very end of the chapter devoted to this part of the Mediterranean complex—undergoing a major but inconclusive redefinition.

Braudel's posthumously published work on the 'memories of the Mediterranean' (1998) contains further variations on the civilizational theme. Here we need not discuss his reconstruction of early Mediterranean history; for present purposes, the main point is that the narrative ends with the formation of a Mediterranean civilization, which Braudel identifies with the cultural, institutional and infrastructural framework of the Roman Empire. Roman originality was most evident in law, urbanism, administration and military organization. In other fields, the imperial synthesis incorporated the legacy of Greek civilization, but with more scope for autonomous inputs in some areas than others: Roman contributions to art and literature were more distinctive than to philosophy, and science did not progress beyond the Hellenistic phase. The synthesizing process culminated in the Christianization of the empire.

Braudel did not bridge the chronological and conceptual gap between his two interpretations of the Mediterranean. But the implications of the later work—less massive and likely to remain much less known than the book which made Braudel's reputation—are obvious. If late antiquity was the final episode in the formation of

a common Mediterranean civilization, the subsequent interplay of unifying and dividing factors must be analyzed in relation to a background of civilizational unity. This perspective is all the more interesting because it is at odds with the most important post-Braudelian contribution to Mediterranean studies. Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (2000) take their bearings from Braudel's earlier work, but move in a direction opposite to the one just described: their Mediterranean is a region characterized by an unusually high level of connectivity between culturally and ecologically distinctive sub-regions. Civilizational questions seem irrelevant to the 'micro-regional' analyses which make up the bulk of their work. The details of their argument are beyond the scope of our discussion. But the Mediterranean would seem to be an exceptionally promising field for further study of relations between civilizational and regional patterns of history.

QUESTIONING THE WEST:
THE USES AND ABUSES OF ANTI-EUROCENTRISM

Mircea Eliade (1982: 148) once suggested that 'the cardinal phe-
nomenon of the twentieth century' might not be 'the revolution of
the proletariat but the discovery of non-European man and his spir-
itual universe'. His reference to the revolution must be understood
in the context of the times: it has to do with Soviet power and the
then ascendant Soviet model. A more nuanced formulation of the
underlying question would have to distinguish between revolution-
ary visions, coming from within European traditions, and a cluster
of power centres, mostly marginal or alien to the European civi-
lizational sphere, which claimed revolutionary identity and legitimacy.
As for the other side, the non-European 'spiritual universe' encom-
passes archaic societies as well as the high cultures more familiar to
civilizational analysts. For Eliade, the comparative study of these
multiple worlds was above all else a way to overcome culture-bound
preconceptions of religious phenomena. As we shall see, reminis-
cences of that idea can combine with more secular objections to
Eurocentrism. But in general terms, Eliade's thesis may—in view of
the underlying question rather than the explicit answer—be taken
as a cue for reflections on European or Western ways of confronting
a multi-civilizational world. The emphasis will be on major non-
Western civilizational complexes (in the sense explained at length
above), rather than on any generically non-European perspectives.
The metamorphoses of revolutionary projects beyond their original
setting can also be linked to this intercivilizational context. This is
obviously not the only legitimate approach to the problems of Western
self-images and their relativization through encounters with other
worlds. It is, however, congenial to the present line of argument, in
that it will enable us to relate current debates to a less familiar back-
ground, and thus to question some entrenched presuppositions. More
specifically, the civilizational theory defended here stresses the plu-
rality of cultural worlds and historical dynamics, and is for that rea-
son bound to be critical of Eurocentrism; but by the same token,

the focus and orientation of the critique will differ from other kinds of anti-Eurocentric discourse. The approach now most in evidence—and therefore most easily contrasted with the civilizational perspective—rests on emphatic but highly debatable assumptions about the record of revolutionary alternatives. Although that background cannot be discussed at length, a preliminary view from the civilizational angle will highlight aspects and interconnections which the more popular accounts—on the right as well as on the left, to use an obsolete but oddly resilient distinction—tend to overlook.

To return to the question posed at the outset (through a variation on Eliade's theme), the points at issue have to do with self-critical and self-transformative projections of trends within the modern West, as well as with the simultaneously unfolding and in part overlapping intercivilizational encounters. As we have seen, interactions between internal tensions and external historical experiences are not unfamiliar to civilizational analysts. But the modern context affects both the scale and the character of the ensuing developments. As Eisenstadt has argued on various occasions, modernity may be seen both as a 'distinct civilization' and as 'a new type of civilization—not unlike the formation and expansion of the Great Religions', (Eisenstadt, 2001: 321). The reference to a 'new type' might suggest that we are not simply dealing with one more civilization among others, but with a civilizational formation which in some ways deviates from or goes beyond the frame of reference that fits more conventional cases. At first sight, the exceptional features seem most evident in the dynamics of expansion: as the global impact of modernity shows, it surpasses world religions in its capacity to unleash interconnected/but not co-ordinated transformations in the cultural, political and economic domains. On the other hand, Eisenstadt has also insisted on the active role of diverse civilizational legacies in the formation of 'multiple modernities'. Premodern civilizations do not survive intact, but their fragments and sediments can enter into the making of new patterns.

Eisenstadt's analyses of the modern civilizational core and its variants tend to focus on visions of human autonomy, open to rival interpretations and often conducive to paradoxical results when they are translated into institutional and strategic models. Aspirations to autonomy find expression in efforts to master nature, as well as in demands for the democratization of social power structures, but they also give rise to projects which in practice turn into radical nega-

tions of autonomy (in this context, Eisenstadt interprets the Jacobin paradigm of political action as a key component of the modern constellation, adaptable to interests and ideologies of very different kinds). The emphasis on tensions and antinomies inherent in modern imaginings of autonomy is justified, but the persistently ambiguous understanding of modernity—another civilization or a civilizational formation of a new type—is reflected in uncertainties about more specific issues. As a first step towards clarification, it may be suggested that modernity represents both more and less than a civilization in the sense applicable to the major historical cases in point, and that these two contrasting aspects have a common background.

On the one hand, the modern transformation of the West and its global impact on other civilizational complexes were due to a set of radical innovations which affected the cultural, institutional and organizational frameworks of social life. Visions of rational mastery, translated into new strategies for the accumulation of wealth and power and embodied in the capitalist economy as well as the bureaucratic state, emerged in conjunction (but also in a state of intermittent tension) with an unprecedented development of self-defining, self-questioning and self-transformative capacities. Both sides of the mutation were crucial to the spread of modernity across civilizational boundaries: ideologies of protest and images of social alternatives accompanied the prescriptions for a more effective pursuit of power. This double dynamic of civilizational expansion—and the inbuilt ability to undermine the premises of pre-existing civilizations—sets modernity apart from the more self-contained formations which preceded it. On the other hand, the constellations of meaning (in Castoriadis' terms: the imaginary significations) that sustain change in all the dimensions indicated above do not coalesce into the kind of cultural unity (however relative) that can be ascribed to premodern civilizational complexes. The cultural self-interpretations of modernity draw on divergent traditions, give rise to rival projects and intertwine with the legacies of non-Western traditions in highly divergent ways. In short, the level of cultural pluralism seems to limit the scope of civilizational integration.

Seen against this background, the Communist vision of an alternative modernity appears as a bid to restore civilizational unity. A new social order was expected to overcome the internal conflicts of existing modernity, redress the distortions caused by uneven development, and lay the foundations of a universal culture that would

integrate the 'progressive' legacies of different cultural traditions. Foundational texts (the 'classics of Marxism-Leninism') gave a more distinctively traditionalist twist to this reintegrative project. Its failure is an established fact, and it is too early to assess the civilizational ambitions of the self-styled global liberalism which emerged victorious at the end of the twentieth century but bore some traces of mimetic rivalry with its now defunct adversary. A new consensus is expected to neutralize the tensions between economic and political liberalism, impose the liberal frame of reference on chastened critics, end the search for rival models of development, and universalize the fundamentals of the liberal-democratic order across all cultural boundaries. But the proclamations of an 'end of history' in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse did not amount to more than blanket statements of faith in further progress on all these fronts.

The above reflections on the civilizational status of modernity do not go beyond preliminary points, and no systematic analysis will be attempted in the present context. Rather, the question raised at the beginning of this chapter—the changing relationship between self-transcending visions and intercivilizational encounters in the more recent phases of Western modernity—will be discussed at some length on the assumption that this will help to clear the ground for a broader and more balanced debate on modernity as a civilizational formation. A better grasp of the intercivilizational horizons of understanding, and of their interaction with universalizing self-projections, may be of some use when it comes to the problematic of modernity's supra—or trans-civilizational dimensions. But the latter problematic will have to be reserved for more extensive treatment elsewhere.

5.1   *Images of otherness*

Two kinds of civilizations figure prominently among the 'others' that have been important to the history of the West: those of its formative past, to which it has related in different but often innovative ways at different junctures, and those of the surrounding world, with which it interacted from a position of growing strength but with long-term results which challenged both its self-understanding and its claims to global power. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1976: 271–74) saw the encounters with these two different kinds of otherness as stages in a progress through diversity to universality. After the definitive

rediscovery of antiquity (the Renaissance), continued expansion brought the West into contact with a whole spectrum of other civilizations (from the conquest of the Americas to the encounter with China), but the last and most decisive step was the invention of anthropology as a way of understanding pre-civilized societies, whose radical alterity could be reinterpreted as a key to human unity at a hitherto unexplored level. This scheme presupposes very strong and now implausible assumptions about the tasks and achievements of anthropology; the present project does not involve any comparable attempt to subsume the whole spectrum of encounters with other worlds under a definitive model. Rather, the focus will be on specific landmarks within a broader field, on open questions arising from the historical context and on the critique of misguided efforts to close the field of inquiry.

Classical antiquity is obviously the most important part of the past in question. Among the external others confronted with an expanding West, the Indian and Chinese civilizational complexes stand out as the prime examples. The two other civilizations that shared the Western European affiliation with late antiquity fall into a different category and can in a sense be seen as intermediary cases between the two poles of otherness. The Islamic world bordered on Western Christendom from the outset and became its most visible other; the relative strength of Islamic power centres declined after a long ascendancy which had boosted cultural influence, but even during the long-drawn-out downturn, this retreating rival was the main object of interpretive constructions which could be extended to the more newly discovered Indian and Chinese worlds (this is the grain of truth in the vastly overstated indictment of 'Orientalism', to be discussed below). As for Byzantine civilization, its centre was destroyed by onslaughts from the Western Christian as well as the Islamic side, whereas its Russian offshoot came under Inner Asian rule and was later transformed by successive waves of Westernization, but went on to challenge the West through an alternative project of modernity which owed something to all civilizational currents of Russian history.

Although the changing functions and interpretations of classical sources are not central to the present discussion, this problematic has been of some importance to the debate on Eurocentrism, and should therefore be briefly considered before going on to deal with the main points at issue. References to and reactivations of classical

traditions have accompanied major developments in Western history. That applies most obviously to the Greek connection: from aesthetic classicism to radical democracy and from philosophical archetypes to visions of communitarian recovery, Greek precedents have given meaning and direction to modern projects. But there have also been attempts to reinterpret the Greek legacy in such a way that it would serve as the starting-point for a radical challenge to the spirit of modernity as well as to the whole history behind it. Nietzsche's return to the archaic Greek world is the paradigmatic case in point. With regard to the Romans, there has been a stronger emphasis on affinity and continuity. At an important historical juncture, the Roman tradition became a source of images of republican and revolutionary politics; it has been a more durable model of legal order as well as imperial rule. It lends itself less easily to emphatic constructions of otherness than the Hellenic world, but one theme that has emerged in recent debates should at least be mentioned: as Rémi Brague (1993) argues, Roman models of cultural identity (more pluralistic than those which later prevailed), and a distinctively Roman—i.e. detached and in the literal sense catholic—attitude to cultural sources can help to guide the search for a new European order.

The cultural memories of classical antiquity are thus both persistent and varied. As for the historical basis of this ongoing hermeneutical presence, two levels of analysis should be distinguished. As we have seen, a sequence of civilizational shifts links the classical background to medieval Western Christendom and its modern heirs; the overall pattern is distinctive enough to define a long-term trajectory, but not an unbroken European or Occidental identity. A more explicit cultural affiliation was added to these historical connections when the 'twelfth-century renaissance' reactivated the classical legacy. But Nelson's analysis of the medieval turning-point shows how crucial the intercivilizational context was to Western Christian innovations. Intensified contact with the other heirs of classical antiquity—Byzantine and Islamic—triggered a transformation which enabled the previously disadvantaged West to redefine its relationship to Greek and Roman sources, in a way which not only made for more autonomous approaches than in the two other traditions, but also opened up perspectives for further reinterpretations (including, in particular, the renaissance that dwarfed all previous ones). Both the radical re-envisioning of a formative past and the role of external factors as a decisive moment are relevant to the case against Eurocentrism: they

contradict the notion of an enduring and self-contained West. But the very novelty of Western Christian attitudes to traditions—from the twelfth century onwards—may, from another angle, be seen as evidence of uniqueness. The constitutive but contested and variously redefined role of a classical legacy is one of the most distinctive aspects of the Western European civilizational complex.

Moreover, the relationship to the classical world, and particularly to its Greek foundations, raises questions about the source as such. Even if we allow for later ruptures and reappropriations, the issue of Greek uniqueness accompanies the debate on Eurocentrism and often becomes central in its own right. Traditional answers in the affirmative have been discredited: there can, for example, be no return to Husserl's vision of Greece as the 'spiritual *Urphänomen*' of Europe and the birthplace of a universal idea of reason which became constitutive for the whole European tradition. A more plausible case can be made for Castoriadis' claim that the Greeks pioneered a project of autonomy, based on the radical self-questioning of thought and society, and much later reformulated by Western European intellectual and political movements from the High Middle Ages onwards. Castoriadis' formulation of this thesis is open to the objection that it exaggerates the unity of philosophy and politics in ancient Greece, and that the very idea of autonomy is defined in Hellenocentric terms which entail an a priori devaluation of aspirations to autonomy in other traditions. But a modified version of the main point, backed up by comparative evidence, would still seem valid. The most systematic comparison of the 'three philosophical civilizations', Greece, India and China (Scharfstein, 1978; 1998), leads to the conclusion that their contrasts have less to do with singular characteristics than with different configurations of shared themes; on this view, the specific strengths of the Greek tradition are due on the one hand to more sustained elaboration of the idea of philosophy as a foundational science, and on the other hand to closer contact with political reflection, rather than to any exclusive model of rational discourse. In general terms, Greek exceptionalism is most evident in the links between radical political innovation and all-round flowering of cultural creativity (Arnason and Murphy, 2001).

Changing perceptions of the classical world—as an ambiguously intimate other, open to varying emphasis on familiar or alien features—are part and parcel of the modern encounter with other worlds, and they have often influenced the overall approach to ques-

tions of civilizational unity and diversity. But in the present context, they can be left aside; the early modern contacts with major Eurasian civilizations are much more important for the argument to be developed. Growing knowledge of the cultural centres and regions east of the Islamic heartland—particularly China and India, but also Southeast Asia, Japan and Inner Asia—led to keener awareness of human diversity and more detached self-reflection on the part of European observers. Jürgen Osterhammel (1998) has analyzed the impact of these broadening horizons on eighteenth-century thought and underlined the contrast with later stages. As he argues, the relatively balanced and pluralistic attitude to Asian cultures—characteristic of the Enlightenment—reflected a geopolitical equilibrium between Europe and Asia which only came to an end with the Russian offensive against the Ottoman empire in the late eighteenth century, the extension of British rule in India in the early nineteenth century and the Opium War against China in 1840. The work done by eighteenth-century writers on Asian subjects—travellers, diplomats, historians and philosophers—gave rise to projects of a general anthropology based on comparative studies and inspired the first adumbrations of the idea of civilizations in the plural; in this setting, the more familiar Islamic adversary could be observed from a less polarizing angle. The confrontation with Asian counter-examples prompted some European thinkers to relativizing appraisals of their own culture, although this trend had to contend with strong claims to European primacy and superiority. But even the latter view was, as, Osterhammel puts it, conducive to an 'inclusive Eurocentrism' (ibid.: 63) bent on enriching the European mind through appreciation of other cultures and their distinctive creations, in contrast to the later exclusive Eurocentrism which limited its interests to a supposedly self-contained and unconditionally superior world of its own.

The eighteenth-century openness to Asian horizons gave way to a very different attitude. In the early nineteenth century, European expansion entered a new phase, and the advance towards global domination was accompanied by an ideological redrawing of cultural boundaries. The sweeping and invidious distinction between Occident and Orient, with cultural diversity on the Asian side subsumed under a homogeneous Oriental pattern, became an integral part of the European self-image. This unqualified Eurocentrism could draw on eighteenth-century sources: theories and narratives of civilization in the singular, laying emphasis on the achievements of

European societies, were among the most characteristic constructs of the Enlightenment. But the vision of progress now became more rigidly unilinear, and the idea of civilization developed into a 'secular missionary ideology' (ibid.: 402) of civilizing tasks to be carried out through colonization. Osterhammel distinguishes various ways of theorizing the inferiority of the Orient; some writers stressed cultural decline after an early golden age, while others saw Asian societies as structurally stagnant from the beginning. The most ambitious accounts of Oriental backwardness and Occidental dynamism were grounded in comprehensive philosophies of history, such as those proposed by Hegel and Marx (with minor nuances in the latter case). It is not being suggested that the study of Asian civilizations lost its bearings or made no progress after the Eurocentric turn. But it became a subject for specialized disciplines and failed to develop into the cultural force that eighteenth-century debates had foreshadowed. For the broader intellectual public, the levelling dichotomy of Occident and Orient—allowing for some romanticizing deviations from the dominant negative image of the East—overshadowed the experience of cultural pluralism. Twentieth-century efforts to revive the pluralist perspective in more explicitly multi-civilizational terms should be seen against this background.

Osterhammel's analysis is convincing, as far as it goes, but there are some other sides to the picture. It is true that the early nineteenth century saw the rise of an exclusive and domineering Eurocentrism; at the same time, however, the affirmative self-image of the ascendant West was challenged from within and confronted with visions of possible alternatives that would build on the achievements of existing Western societies. This future-oriented project was the internal other par excellence, and its interaction with more external versions of otherness is central to the problematic which concerns us here. The socialist tradition in general and its Marxist component in particular were the most important countercurrents of this kind. Neither the contours of the alternative nor the prescriptions for practical realization were beyond dispute; the rejection of the existing order could be more or less radical, with regard to means as well as ends (major disagreements on both issues developed within the Marxian tradition), but the idea of a coming revolution was essential to the original formation of socialism as a counterculture, even if it could later be interpreted in a more gradualist vein. In this way, the revolutionary imaginary that had crystallized in the

context of the Western transition to modernity was rearticulated to
anticipate another transformation. The revolutionary faith became,
in other words, a bridge between widely shared perceptions of a
recent past and subversive visions of a more or less remote future.
On the other hand, this basic premise of socialist projects also proved
vulnerable to countermoves from another quarter. Recent research
on the ideological origins of fascism (especially Sternhell et al., 1994)
has clarified the transfers and connections between fin-de-siècle pre-
cursors of fascism and their broader intellectual environment: it seems
clear that notions of a radically different revolution, combined with
selective borrowings from the socialist tradition and subordinated to
an absolute primacy of the nation-state over other forces involved
in the making of modernity, were at the core of the most influential
proto-fascist projects. The complex processes which later gave rise
to fascist movements and regimes will not be discussed here. But
it should be noted in passing that there was a civilizational side to
the outcome. At its most radical, fascism became—as an early and
clear-sighted analyst put it—a 'war against the West' (Kolnai, 1938),
launched from within the Western world but in a fundamental sense
more anti-Western than the Communist alternative.

   In the present context, however, the Communist experience is
much more significant. It is one of the key facts of twentieth-
century history that the most influential alternative to Western moderni-
ty and the most enduring geopolitical division of the global arena
grew out of intercivilizational processes. The rebuilding and restruc-
turing of the Russian empire by the Bolsheviks after World War I
was a new twist to the trajectory that had begun with early mod-
ern attempts at imperial self-strengthening through controlled
Westernization, and with the civilizational inroads which inevitably
accompanied and exceeded the strategic borrowings. For a variety
of reasons, this aspect of the genealogy of Communism was widely
overlooked or misperceived by contemporary observers and partici-
pants (Franz Borkenau was probably the first critical observer who
saw it clearly). At the most visible level, the Soviet model—finalized
in the course of Stalin's 'second revolution'—represented a synthe-
sis of imperial and revolutionary traditions, both of which had already
mixed Russian and Western sources. Although the affinity with impe-
rial revolutions from above was to some extent acknowledged dur-
ing the Stalinist phase, this historical background was overshadowed
by the uncompromising universalism of the official ideology. Soviet

Marxism did not use the language of modernization theory, but its claims to transcend the West can in retrospect be interpreted as projects for a more advanced modernity. These ultra-modern aspirations did not prevent adversaries of the Soviet model from explaining it as traditionalism in disguise: a recurrent line of argument traced the specifics of Bolshevism—including the alien turn it had given to ideas borrowed from Western traditions—back to the religious culture of Russian Orthodoxy (Berdyayev, 1948; Sarkisyanz, 1955). The connection has always seemed plausible, but it was mostly posited without adequate conceptual grounding, and the multi-secular inter-civilizational prehistory of Bolshevism was not given its due. A proper civilizational framework for the analysis of this question has yet to be elaborated. On the other hand, those who took a positive view of Soviet achievements but kept some distance from the totalizing ideology that came with them were easily tempted to equate the new society with a new civilization (the classic example is Webb and Webb, 1944).

There was, in short, a civilizational background to the emergence of Communism as an alternative modernity, but it was both complex and elusive, and its ambiguities were reflected in the disparate civilizational traits which observers could attribute to the Soviet phenomenon. The proliferation and differentiation of Communist regimes opened up new perspectives. Chinese Communism is obviously the most instructive case in point; although it was from the outset characterized by distinctive modifications of the Soviet model, the dogmatic acceptance of a Marxist-Leninist scheme of universal history precluded any open connection with the Chinese civilizational context, but it could be invoked in a more covert fashion. The very vague references to a 'Sinification of Marxism' were suggestive of further possibilities, even if they were at first more conducive to obfuscation than to understanding of the relationship between Chinese tradition or civilization. Variations on this theme were not uncommon among Western admirers of Maoism; at their most sophisticated (as reflected, for example, in Joseph Needham's work on science and civilization in China), such views linked the Chinese version of Marxism to indigenous intellectual traditions that could still function as correctives to one-sided Western modes of thought. The search for philosophical secrets of Maoism has gone out of fashion, but more elementary (and much less benign) civilizational affinities have become all the more visible. On the one hand, the Maoist project

obviously combined memories of the imperial tradition with the
legacy of peasant-based protest movements (known in Western par-
lance as 'millennialist'); on the other hand, it seems to have drifted
towards a vision of leadership which fused the traditional images of
sacred ruler and sage, and was thus bound to come into conflict
with the orthodox model of the party-state.

But the demise of Communism and the different exits from it
have perhaps done more than any prior developments to strengthen
the case for civilizational perspectives. It is a commonplace that the
spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union was preceded by a 'creep-
ing cultural invasion' from the West (Kotkin, 2001: 42). But the
impact of Western popular culture would have been less massive if
it had not been accompanied by more abrupt shifts within the core
power structures. If the direct catalyst of disintegration was a reform
programme with some unmistakably Westernizing aspects, it may be
suggested that this final twist throws new light on the whole Soviet
episode. The 'Gorbachev phenomenon' is easier to understand if we
take account of a civilizational faultline inside the Bolshevik synthe-
sis of Russian and Western sources. As the highly authoritative
definition of Bolshevism as a combination of Russian revolutionary
sweep and American efficiency (Stalin, 1943) shows, emphatic invo-
cations of Western models were still possible in the early phase of
Soviet history, and the very extremism of later anti-Western cam-
paigns is best explained as a reflection of internal strains. A deep-
ening crisis could reactivate the idea of mimetic rivalry with the
West; as developments during the late 1980s were to show, a strat-
egy of selective Westernization was easily deflected towards the phan-
tasm of a wholesale one. Nothing similar has so far happened in
China, where the transition to post-Communism has been more con-
trolled and the overall direction remains more uncertain. But the
reopening of basic questions about China's future has made it eas-
ier to see the Communist phase in a long-term perspective: as an
inconclusive chapter in the unfinished history of the great transfor-
mation triggered by China's nineteenth century collision with the
West. A detailed comparison of Chinese and Russian patterns of
interaction with the West—which cannot even be outlined here—
would, among other things, deal with the different destinies and roles
of Marxist ideas in these two historical settings.

To sum up, there are good reasons to assume that civilizational
approaches would help to make sense of the Communist experience.

In regard to the question raised—with and against Eliade—at the beginning of this chapter, the main point is that the trajectory of twentieth-century revolutions can only be understood in an inter-civilizational context. More specifically, the task is to analyze the intertwining of revolutionary, civilizational and intercivilizational dynamics. Transformations due to—or reflected in—the global diffusion of revolutionary ideologies are no mere by-products or detours of intercivilizational encounters (inasmuch as they result in moderniz-ing processes, they contribute to a redefinition of the meaning and limits of civilizational pluralism), but much of their distinctive impe-tus has to do with the crossing of civilizational boundaries. Conversely, the comparative study of Communist projects, regimes and crises is one of the most promising ways to link civilizational analysis with the problematic of 'multiple modernities'. But very little has so far been done to explore this field. The lack of interest is not only symp-tomatic of a more general failure to develop a historical sociology of Communism; it also reflects enduring difficulties in establishing a civilizational frame of reference. Although there are—as we have noted—unmistakable signs of revival and important contributions to build on, those who advocate this line of theorizing still face an uphill task. The obstacles are not all of the same kind and there-fore not easily overcome through any standardized programme. Civilizational approaches are perhaps most fundamentally alien to the somewhat protean but not indistinct school of thought which combines neo-liberal triumphalism with a more or less refurbished version of modernization theory and strong but often loosely for-mulated assumptions about globalization. The result is an uncom-promising reaffirmation of the outlook which Benjamin Nelson described as 'uniformitarian'. On the other hand, there is a dispute to be settled with social and cultural theorists who deviate from the mainstream, but do so in ways which make no concessions to civi-lizational analysis. Since the present line of argument has some points of contact with the agenda of these critics (among other things, civ-ilizational theory should—as I have stressed—be seen as the proper framework for a balanced critique of Eurocentrism), a concluding survey of the points at issue may be useful.

The ideas and approaches to be considered represent a whole cluster of intellectual currents, but it seems appropriate to begin with the critique of Orientalism and finish with a discussion of claims made of behalf of postcolonial theory or criticism. The notion of

Orientalism, as used with critical intent, stands for a supposedly general paradigm of Western images of otherness, primarily related to the other major Eurasian civilizations, but also—as the rapid spread of anti-Orientalist rhetoric has shown—adaptable to cases outside the traditional boundaries of the Oriental world. A levelling and downgrading logic leaves no place for a plurality of significant others; but the critical alternative is conceived in terms equally alien to multi-civilizational perspectives. A brief look at Edward Said's extraordinarily influential book *Orientalism* will help to clarify these premises of later elaborations.

   The first point to note about Said's conception of Orientalism is that it oscillates between emphatic definitions and loose associations. He stresses the 'explicitly anti-essentialist' thrust of his whole argument (Said, 1995: 331), but this does not prevent him from declaring that 'the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (ibid.: 42); when this interpretation seems to narrow, he shifts his ground and insists on changing reasons 'given by the Orientalist for seeing the essential Orientality of the Orient' (ibid.: 255). The more elastic description makes it possible to include Western authors who emphasized the incommensurable otherness of the East, or even a spiritual superiority to the West. In later usage, inspired by Said's work, it seems to have mutated into a catchall label for all objectionable Western interpretations of the East grouped together on the vaguely intuited grounds that they are somehow imposed on their object and enmeshed in material relations of power. 'Orientalism' thus becomes little more than a misleadingly specific term for a general, but not uniformly intractable problem of intercultural hermeneutics. The tension between two different notions of the Orientalist tradition—an interpretive framework with clearly defined premises or a nebula of imputed affinities—has never been exposed to open debate. It is closely linked to another source of ambiguity. Said refers to Orientalism as a 'system of knowledge' and a 'corporate institution for dealing with the Orient' (ibid.: 6, 3). Only a structural conception of this kind can justify blanket claims to the effect that, what is thought, said, or even done about the Orient follows (perhaps occurs within) certain distinct and intellectually knowable lines' (ibid.: 69). But Said also acknowledges the 'varied work produced by almost uncountable individual writers' and the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a dis-

cursive formation like Orientalism (ibid.: 8, 23). It is hard to see how a 'determining imprint' could be reconciled with the idea of imposed lines or the belief that 'an assumption had been made' in a collective and impersonal fashion, about the inferiority or imma-turity of the Orient (ibid.: 40); and at the very least, it would have to be admitted that a re-focussing of the argument on the works of individual writers would call for much more detailed comparative study before venturing generalizations of the sort quoted above.

Other problems emerge when we try to trace the historical record of Orientalism. Said dates its modern history from around 1800 and sees Napoleon's invasion of Egypt as a turning-point, but adds that the nineteenth-century Orientalists drew on a 'still earlier tradition' (ibid.: 41) whose contours are much less clearly drawn. At one point, it seems rooted in 'a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer' (ibid.: 11); if 'almost' means any-thing, it is presumably to be taken as a reference to the latter cen-turies of Archaic Greece, but elsewhere Said tells his readers that 'Orientalism . . . refers to . . . the changing historical and cultural rela-tionship between Europe and Asia, a relationship with a 4000 year old history' (Said, 2000: 847). Apart from the very puzzling impli-cation that the distinction between Europe and Asia can be dated back to somewhere around 2000 BC, the reference to Asia invites exactly the kind of criticism which Said levels at Orientalist con-structs: as Lewis and Wigen (1997) have shown, the metageograph-ical notion of Asia is a particularly striking case of Eurocentric projection. Said uses similarly 'essentialist' categories to describe the other side. A historical continuity of Europe or the West from clas-sical times onwards is taken for granted; for example, the descrip-tion of the Near East as 'the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies' (Said, 1995: 1) can only be understood as a ref-erence to the Roman Empire.

Said defines the primary task of his book as 'a study of the ways in which the power, scholarship and imagination of a two-hundred-year-old tradition in Europe and America viewed the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam' (ibid.: 329). But ideas and interpretations first developed in relation to the Islamic world were also applied to a much larger 'Orient, which extended from China to the Mediterranean' (ibid.: 42), and the critique of this expanded Orientalist framework is an integral part of Said's project. In that context, India is discussed at much greater length than East Asia. At the most fundamental

level, however, the relationship between the specific and the gener-
alized version of Orientalism remains unclear. If it can be said that
'Orientalism expresses antipathy to Islam' (ibid.: 343), it has yet to
be explained how this defining attitude translates into images of the
enlarged Orient. Moreover, the historical setting of Said's analysis
is—to put it mildly—described in vague and cavalier terms. After
claiming that 'in general, it was the West that moved upon the East,
rather than vice versa' (ibid.: 73), he adds that Europe was on the
defensive against Islam for almost a millennium (ibid.: 74). And the
most amazing statement in the whole book should be quoted in full:
'Islam excepted, the Orient for Europe was until the nineteenth cen-
tury a domain with a continuous history of unchallenged Western
dominance' (ibid.: 73).

   Said's main concern is, very explicitly, with British, French and
American interpreters of the Orient. In the introduction to *Orientalism*
(ibid.: 18), he reproaches himself for not taking account of the German
tradition, but in a later essay (Said, 2000: 846), he insists that no
one has ever given any reason why German Orientalism should have
been included. The problem, however, is not so much the absence
as the unsubstantiated inclusion of German scholarship; this is most
evident in Said's treatment of Max Weber, whose work he dismisses—
without the slightest semblance of textual analysis—as 'an "outside"
confirmation of many of the canonical theses held by Orientalists'
(ibid.: 259). But the failure to engage with Weber is also related to
a more general lack of contact with the sociological tradition. Dismissive
references to 'people like Bergson, Durkheim and Mauss' (ibid.: 266)
and to 'the "type" as found in early-twentieth-century thinkers like
Weber, Durkheim, Lukacs, Mannheim and the other sociologists of
knowledge' (ibid.: 259) are the closest Said ever gets to a dialogue
with the sociological classics. As I have tried to show, their work
contains unsystematized but seminal contributions to civilizational
theory; the insinuation of complicity with Orientalism serves to neu-
tralize the challenge that might have come from this quarter.

   The concept of Orientalism could be defined in a precise and per-
tinent way. The subsumption of (historically speaking) a varying but
always significant range of Eurasian civilizations under a levelling
image of the Orient is an ideological strategy of long standing and
major importance; it can, furthermore, allow for varying valuations
of the imagined East with regard to the West. The romanticization
of Oriental wisdom or spirituality and the disparaging of Oriental

backwardness are, in that sense, variations on a shared theme. This interpretation presupposes a multi-civilizational perspective (the image of the Orient is seen as an amalgam of civilizational traits) and acknowledges the insights gained through critical reflection on that background. Both eighteenth-century thought and classical sociology—especially Max Weber—belong to the history of the search for civilizational pluralism behind the Oriental facade. But this clearly demarcated concept of Orientalism, counterbalanced by references to more critical currents, is not what Said and his followers have in mind. The extraordinary conceptual and historical looseness of the statements quoted above foreshadowed further proliferation of anti-Orientalist rhetoric across a wide range of academic and political debates (often very tenuously linked to any concerns with the Orient in the traditional sense), without serious interest in the projects or traditions which might be seen as intellectual counterweights. This is not to say that Said anticipated all later uses of his ideas. The critique of Orientalism has often been closely associated with fashions and strategies which had no part to play in his original project, and were in some ways at odds with his stated aims. The two most influential trends in question, postmodernism and postcolonialism, are related to a broader context which must now be briefly discussed.

5.2   *The post-mode and its pretensions*

Bernard Smith (1998: 1) described the 1980s as a time 'when virtually every social, intellectual and artistic activity was framed into a 'post-mode' posture in order to describe the contemporary cultural condition of this or that. Most have become rhetorical idiolects, but two have graduated into common currency: post-industrialism and postmodernism'. A critical historical sociology of the post-mode has yet to be developed, but some provisional hypotheses may be suggested. Following Peter Wagner's analysis of organized modernity and its crisis, the wide appeal of 'postist' labels can be explained as a response to changes of obviously major but unclear significance. The fracturing of the institutional frameworks of organized modernity and the cultural rebellion against them, as well as the shift towards more liberal but still very under-defined alternatives, undermined intellectual paradigms without providing clear indications of new

ones. But there is another side to the phenomenon. The disappear-
ance of plausible models for radical and programmed social change
(variously diagnosed as the end of socialism, the demise of secular
religions, or the exhaustion of the idea of progress) left a void which
the 'postist' movements—among others—attempted to fill or to con-
jure away. Ersatz radicalism was, in other words, an important ingre-
dient of the post-mode.

   Post-industrialism, noted by Smith as one of two lasting ideas of
its kind, is not relevant to the present discussion. On the other hand,
the list may have to be expanded. Postcolonialism now seems to
have outstripped (and to some extent absorbed) postmodernism; since
it makes the most determined attempt to align the post-mode with
a critique of Eurocentrism and a radical questioning of the West, it
will be central to the following reflections. Post-structuralism is widely
believed to have spelt out the most basic philosophical (or post-philo-
sophical) premises of 'postisms' in general, and its connection with
postcolonialism has become ever closer. It would therefore seem an
obvious starting-point for critical examination of the whole complex.
But even a cursory glance at post-structuralism is enough to suggest
that this notion—understood as a label for a distinctive mode of
thought—represents one of the most artificial and uninstructive
offshoots of the post-mode. It presupposes the idea of structuralism
and begins with the claim that key thinkers first seen as exponents
of structuralism (Foucault, Lacan, and to some extent Althusser)
should be reclassified as post-structuralists because of their increas-
ingly open disagreement with the only paradigmatic structuralist (Lévi-
Strauss); if there is an original post-structuralist, in the sense of a
thinker defined by his critical response to structuralism but never sit-
uated within its orbit, it can only be Derrida. On further consider-
ation, the ideas of these theorists (and of a few others that can be
added to the group) do not seem concordant or self-contained enough
to warrant inclusion in a separate school of thought. Derrida's cri-
tique of the philosophical tradition is related to a broader context
of post-transcendental phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty's work is the
most seminal part of that tradition, but its range is best illustrated
by the transformation of his themes in the writings of Castoriadis
and Lefort. Interpretations of other post-structuralist thinkers (includ-
ing Lacan) have noted points of contact not only with Adorno, but
also with the Habermasian version of critical theory. Michel Foucault's
work belongs partly in the domain of reflexive historical sociology,

defined as the combination of 'long-term historical studies' with the 'self-reflexive quest for understanding modernity' (Szakolczai, 2000: 3), and more particularly to the posterity of Norbert Elias and Max Weber.

These affinities with diverse thinkers and traditions add up to a larger universe of discourse: the critique of over-centred conceptions of subjectivity, of the logics of identity and determination, and of totalizing or synthesizing modes of thought—to mention only the most conspicuous post-structuralist themes—is a recurrent but variously articulated concern of contemporary thought The attempt to isolate post-structuralist views from other approaches to the same questions does more to distort the issues than to clarify them. If there is a strategic intention behind it, the main aim is perhaps—as Peter Dews (1987) has suggested—to extract a pure logic of disintegration, applied to conventional notions of meaning, subjectivity and identity, without acknowledging the broader hermeneutical horizons implicitly invoked by analyses of disintegration.

Postmodernism, often paired or amalgamated with post-structuralism, is of course a more complex and significant cultural phenomenon. The last thing needed here is another detailed survey of its multiple meanings, but one particular distinction may prove relevant to the discussion of postcolonialism. Postmodernism can be understood in two ways, as a negation of modernism or as an affirmation of postmodernity. In the former sense, it signals a revolt against the constraining norms and principles imposed by modernisms in various domains—aesthetic, political or philosophical. This interpretation enables the advocates of postmodernism to present it as 'a retheorization of the proliferation of distinctions that reflects the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity, the need to clear oneself a space' (Appiah, 2000: 92). But this is already a step towards redefinition: postmodernism becomes a more adequate self-understanding of modernity. Such formulations, frequently used to cover a retreat from more sweeping claims, shift the terms of debate and deprive the 'post' label of its original content. A more uncompromising stance is maintained by those who speak of postmodernity as a new socio-cultural formation or historical epoch. The most telling objections to that view have centred on its presuppositions: details may vary (in ways too diverse to be recapitulated here), but visions of an existing or emerging postmodernity are always based on oversimplified images of modernity, most of which tend to privilege

progress, rationality or sovereign subjectivity. Postmodernism can thus be seen as a reminder of the shortcomings built into dominant conceptions of modernity, and a challenge to be met by developing more adequate ones. But this response links up with the problematic of the first interpretation: modernisms are, by definition, idealizing and in that sense simplifying projections of modernity. A comparative critique of their premises and programmes is therefore a necessary complement to the interpretation of modernity.

The exploration of new perspectives on modernity has taken—and ought to combine—various directions. There is, however, no doubt that the question of colonial modernity is of major importance, both in its own right and because of the interconnections between colonial and metropolitan developments. To begin with general considerations, colonial modernity as such has distinctive characteristics due to its cross-societal and cross-cultural context. The modernizing structures and strategies at work in colonial settings differ from those of metropolitan societies because of their direct alignment with imperial power; their concrete social frameworks are shaped by interaction with indigenous traditions and power structures; finally, the multiple forms of active and passive resistance affect the trajectories of colonial rule. More specific patterns are superimposed on this general constellation. For example, Louise Young's (1998) analysis of Japanese imperialism in Manchuria reconstructs the logic of a total empire: a strategy geared to modernizing offensives on the colonial arena and mobilizing campaigns at home. Young notes similarities to some phases of British rule in India, but no fully-fledged parallel can be found in the history of Western colonialism.

Analyses of colonial modernity must also deal with a closely related issue: the perpetuation of its distinctive pattern—in more or less modified form—after the end of colonial rule. But the transition from colonial to post-colonial conditions is indisputably a turning-point which opens up new paths for historical interpretation. It must thus be acknowledged that postcolonialism has a prima facie case and a substantive content which set it apart from other versions of the postmode. India stands out as the most paradigmatic example. No civilizational formation of comparable size and complexity was as deeply affected by direct Western domination; both the Indian colonial experience and its aftermath are therefore crucial to the theorizing of postcolonial perspectives. This background explains the prominent role of Indian intellectuals in the debates which set the scene for

programmatic definitions of postcolonialism. The specific features of
the Indian situation—and hence the difficulty of across historical and
regional divides—become clearer when it is compared to other parts
of the non-Western world. The East Asian region was not colonized
by Western powers, but Japanese rule in Korea, Taiwan and Man-
churia gave rise to colonial modernities in different contexts. In Sout-
heast Asia the differences between institutions and strategies of Western
states active in the region were reflected in varieties of colonial moder-
nity; a non-colonial but very dependent pattern developed in Thailand.
More heterogeneous trends shaped the course of events in the Islamic
heartland (the Near East and North Africa). European colonialism
came rather late to the region, and colonial modernity in the strict
sense was limited to pockets of direct domination (especially French
rule in Algeria and British rule in Egypt); Western intrusions were
accompanied by imperial and later nationalist modernization in the
Ottoman Empire and its main successor state, various currents of
Islamic reform and renewal, and local processes of state formation
in outlying areas. Finally, the anti-colonial revolutions in Latin America
preceded the main colonizing push in most other regions, and the
whole historical context of the postcolonial problematic is corre-
spondingly different.

    This brief overview is enough to suggest a vast field for compar-
ative research. But problems of that kind have not figured promi-
nently on the postcolonialist agenda. More generally speaking, the
main emphasis has not been on postcoloniality as a theme of com-
parative or reflexive historical sociology. Rather, the postcolonial
frame of reference has served to rationalize claims to convergence
with—or appropriation of—other 'postisms'; and when it is com-
bined with visions of history, they tend to be of the more stream-
lined type. The growing distance between ideological operations and
historical experience has not gone unnoticed by critics; they often
dismiss the postcolonial theme as an 'aura', exploited for strategic
purposes by diasporic intellectuals in pursuit of ideological power
(Dirlik, 1994; Eaton, 2000). Their objections are convincing, as far
as they go, but agreement on this point leaves open the question of
more adequate ways to theorize the postcolonial condition and its
cognitive potential. The concluding section of this chapter will sug-
gest some tentative connections between civilizational and postcolo-
nial perspectives. But before going on to tackle that problematic, it
may be useful to take another look at the approach now most in

evidence; its excesses and fallacies should underline the need for a different paradigm.

   For an example of postcolonialism at its most totalizing and triumphalist, the obvious choice is Robert Young's recent treatise, written—as the author states—with the 'aim of rearticulating post-colonial critique with the full scope of its historical genealogies' (Young, 2001: 66). The first thing to note about Young's 'historical genealogies' is that the post-mode has come full circle and mutated into a very grand narrative. Its main theme is a multi-secular struggle against global imperialism and colonialism, but the more specific twentieth-century core of the story involves claims which add up to a full-scale re-mythologization of the history of the revolutionary left. The astounding (and of course unsubstantiated) statement that 'the Bolsheviks themselves always identified their revolution as "Eastern"' (ibid.: 6) is a foretaste of further rediscoveries. Stalin's work on the national question is praised as 'one of the most brilliant analyses of the problems of the relations between nationalism, culture and language' (ibid.: 121); Mao Zedong, who 'believed in the spontaneity of the masses, . . . argued that the peasants possessed knowledge inaccessible to intellectuals' (ibid.: 185) and 'was quite realistic about the continuation of anti-revolutionary forces within the social fabric' (ibid.: 187), is awarded the title of 'tricontinental theorist' (ibid.: 351), and his Little Red Book becomes a 'physical signifier of political will and social truth' (ibid.: 188). At a less anecdotal level, the harnessing of Communism to the postcolonialist project hinges on programmatic statements. The founding congress of the Comintern is credited with offering 'the first systematic programme for global de-colonization' (ibid.: 10), and 'the great Havana Tricontinental of 1966' is so central to the story that Young even proposes 'tricontinentalism' as a better name for postcolonialism (ibid.: 5). The tricontinental perspective precludes any interest in the internal dynamics, conflicts and crises of Communist regimes, and some of them seem to have been erased from history: 'most Marxist states have been physically located outside Europe, in Russia, Asia, Africa and South America' (ibid.: 10). The absence of Eastern Europe speaks volumes.

   This reaffirmation of continuity—more specifically: the historical continuity of revolutionary anti-colonial resistance—complicates the relationship of postcolonialism to other versions of the post-mode. Postmodernism disappears from sight, but no account is given of its demise. As for post-structuralism, it remains essential to the claims

made on behalf of postcolonial theory (as distinct from the broader historical currents of postcolonialism), but the notions and techniques borrowed from its canonical writers do not sit easily with other aspects of the project. If postcolonial theory continues to draw on the Marxist sources that have sustained postcolonialism as a historical movement (or cluster of movements), it might seem vulnerable to the disruptive logic of post-structuralism; inasmuch as Marxism shares some basic assumptions of a broader Western tradition, more particularly those of the Enlightenment, it is incompatible with thought in the post-mode. The all-purpose catchword of 'hybridity' serves to neutralize this problem. As a discursive strategy, hybridity provides a general licence to 'violate the historical integrity' (ibid.: 347) of theoretical traditions and use their resources in shifting contexts without any concern for overall coherence (although the mixing of Marxist and poststructuralist ingredients most clearly exemplifies this method, it is applicable in other settings: 'human rights, including peoples' rights' can thus be accepted as a supplement to Marxism (ibid.: 7)). The conceptual hybridity of Indian postcolonial theorists is, on this view, a direct continuation of the cultural and political hybridity of Gandhi's nationalist strategy—as if there was no problem with such direct transpositions from a strategic to an analytical framework. In more general terms, 'postcolonial theory produces a curiously fragmented and hybrid theoretical language that mirrors and repeats the changing forms of a central object of its analytic experience: conflictual and cultural interaction' (ibid.: 69). The engagement with post-structuralism has obviously not gone far enough to raise doubts about the idea that a theory could mirror and repeat its object.

Finally, the expanded (tricontinentalized) postcolonial frame of reference is obviously meant to put the whole experience of European domination in a more balanced perspective, and thus to avoid both unhistorical notions of imperialism and idealizing visions of progress. But the very few glimpses of more distant historical horizons are not encouraging. For instance, an introductory discussion of forms of empire refers to 'the empire of the Moors which, at its zenith, stretched from Vienna to northern Spain—the long way round, via northern Africa' (ibid.: 15). As an example of the 'postist' habit of riding roughshod across history, this composite howler can hardly be bettered, and it merits a brief unpacking. The mention of Vienna suggests that the 'Moors' (a Eurocentric-cum-Orientalist label if there ever was one) might in fact be the Ottomans, who besieged Vienna

(but did not conquer it) in 1529, and again in 1683. But Islamic rule is Northern Spain had come to an end in the twelfth century, and the last foothold in southern Spain was lost in 1492; besides, the Ottomans never made it even to Morocco, let alone to Spain.

5.3 *Rescuing postcoloniality from postcolonialism*

As we have seen, the militantly ideological version of postcolonialism is not conducive to dialogue with historical sociology or civilizational theory. It remains to be seen whether a way can be found to connect the genuine problematic of postcolonial theory and history with the line of argument developed in this book If the discussion is to avoid one-sided premises, it should draw on inputs from postcolonial sources; Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of 'provincializing Europe', developed in a recent work (Chakrabarty, 2000, perhaps the most reasoned exposition of postcolonial thought to date), is a convenient starting-point. From the tricontinental point of view, Chakrabarty's project is suspect of 'myopic intellectual nationalism' (Young, 2001: 351), but this can only be read as a recommendation.

   To speak of 'provincializing Europe' is to signal a radical critique of Eurocentrism, comparable—in a very loosely defined sense—to Eliade's reflections on the encounter with non-European cultures. On closer examination, multiple meanings can be distinguished; they emerge more or less clearly in the course of Chakrabarty's argument, but with inconclusive results, and the formulation is perhaps best seen as a makeshift to be discarded when more specific questions come to the fore. A first and fairly obvious sense of 'provincializing' is indicated in a quote from Gadamer at the beginning of the book, but then noted only in passing and to set off other meanings: it has to do with the global redistribution of power triggered by the first World War and accelerated by the second. But a closer look at this geopolitical provincializing process will show that its historical meaning is neither straightforward nor easily isolated from other contexts. The states which rose to global supremacy in the wake of the 'European civil wars' were—historically speaking—parts of the broader domain of European modernity, but their growing strength drew attention to distinctive features and deviations from European patterns. As is well known, the European connections of Bolshevism weakened in the course of Soviet state- and empire-

building, and links to a different historical legacy became more vis-
ible; with regard to the United States, the problem must evidently
be posed in other terms, but we can safely say that the fin-de-
siècle triumph of the American superpower has reactivated the
question of its affinities and contrasts with Europe.

Moreover, the rise of power centres with a European pedigree or
a record of Europeanizing projects was from the outset accompa-
nied by conjectures about further shifts, especially in the direction
of 'Asian' dominance. The Chinese challenge to Soviet Communism
was often seen in that light; more recent but now muted expecta-
tions of an irresistible East Asian bid for economic power should
also be mentioned. Huntington's speculations about a possible Sino-
Islamic alliance against the West are one of the last variations on
this theme. That the scenarios of 'Asian' resurgence have failed to
materialize is less relevant to present purposes than their ideological
implications. Although they were only intermittently spelt out in civ-
ilizational language (the dichotomy of East and West has often over-
shadowed more specific contrasts, and visions of an 'Asian century'
could focus on abilities to beat the West at its own game), the main
point is that relatively clear-cut changes to the configurations of
power (and extrapolations of observable trends on that level) gave
rise to much less conclusive debates about their cultural meaning.
The controversy does not come to an end with current models of
a North-South division, where North America, Japan and a more
or less integrated Europe constitute a northern core which might yet
incorporate Russia and China. Claims in this vein rest on strong but
mostly unstated assumptions about the globalizing processes that have
supposedly brought the northern centres together in a new kind of
unity and transcended their traditional divergences.

In short, there are interpretive and ideological sides to the geo-
political upheavals, and this point is of some importance to the next
step of the argument. Chakrabarty wants to separate his project from
the question of European power and its declining global role: 'The
Europe I seek to decenter is an imaginary figure that remains deeply
embedded in *cliched and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of
thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to
address questions of political modernity in South Asia' (ibid.: 4). The
South Asian connection will be discussed in due course; as for the
'imaginary figure', there is no reason to disagree with Chakrabarty
on the significance of an entrenched and formative image of Europe,

resistant to historical critique and capable of functioning as a historical force in its own right. But the question of differentiation must be posed, not only on the level of historical realities obscured by the interpretive imagination, but on the very level of the 'imaginary figure': it might turn out to be more open to pluralization than Chakrabarty's formulation would suggest.

The first mention of the 'imaginary figure' is followed by a reference to 'political modernity—namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy and capitalist enterprise', and to the impossibility of thinking about it 'anywhere in the world' without relying on European concepts and traditions (ibid.: 4). This definition of political modernity bypasses some central problems. The almost uncontested acceptance of capitalist enterprise as an integral and invariant part of political modernity is a recent development. From a more long-term perspective on modern history, dissenting views and strategies must be given their due. The most articulate modern tradition of imagined alternatives was, first and foremost, opposed to capitalism, but the rejection of a supposedly self-destructive economic order was linked to a less theorized critique of state and bureaucracy. When ideological offshoots of this political counter-culture were adapted by movements and regimes outside the European core, the outcome was a radical reorientation of the original project: a massive strengthening of states and bureaucracies went hand in hand with a systematic—but inevitably incomplete—abolition of capitalist institutions. The policies pursued in the name of universalist blueprints for an alternative modernity were at the same time rooted in specific traditions which had—in response to Western expansion—combined state-building efforts with a more instrumental attitude to economic innovation. As has been indicated at various points in the preceding discussion, these metamorphoses of the socialist idea must be analyzed in civilizational contexts. But there are some further implications to be noted. Before the turning-point of the 1980s, the problematic status of capitalist enterprise was often reflected in liberal discourse; defenders of political liberalism could avoid any unconditional commitment to capitalism and accept at least the possibility of more or less mixed economies within an overall liberal order. This widespread questioning of capitalism and its claims to define modernity was of major importance for ideological formations in the non-Western and non-Communist 'third world' (as it came to be called at a time when such homogenizing labels were

becoming less and less adequate). Anti-colonial nationalisms could draw on the critique of capitalism and affect more distance on the ideological level than in the context of practical policies; the economic ideology of the modernist currents in Indian nationalism, as well as of the post-colonial Indian state, is an obvious case in point.

In short, the 'imaginary figure' has—during most of its history—been essentially and internally contested, and the logic of the controversy is linked to civilizational differences, as well as to the geopolitical dynamics mentioned above. A properly thought out strategy of 'provincializing' would have to enter into these questions. But to clarify the issue at a more basic level, we must consider the hermeneutical premises of Chakrabarty's project. He makes it very clear that there can be no blanket rejection of European traditions: they are 'both indispensable and inadequate' (ibid.: 16) when it comes to theorizing the historical experience of non-European regions or societies, and the question to be raised by provincializing critics is how they 'may be renewed from and for the margins' (ibid.: 16). But if the main aim is to contribute to an intellectual renewal from the margins, it is not obvious that 'provincializing' is the best way of expressing the programmatic intentions. In a sense, the envisaged outcome would be the opposite: an effort from or by the margins to overcome the provincial status imposed on them, and to transcend the very divide between metropolis and province. As for the substantive assumptions behind the label, one might want to add that Europe has its internal margins and peripheries as well as the external ones, and reflection on their experience might yet result in major corrections to the dominant images of modernity and the theories built around them. East Central Europe, peripheralized in various ways from the early modern to the post-Communist phase, is a particularly salient example. To quote a recent work on the most central part of this region: 'From the vantage point of London, or Paris, or New York—or, not so very long ago, Moscow—it is possible to identify history with progress, to ascribe to it providence, directionality and meaning. It is possible to write modernity in the singular, and to prattle about 'the end of history'. Such fables are believable precisely so long as the Bohemias of this world are forgotten' (Sayer, 1998: 17). But the vicissitudes of internal margins highlight a more general point: The critique of Eurocentrism should be accompanied by a pluralization of the idea of Europe—in the sense of distinctions between aspects of the European experience,

each with its specific historical dynamics; regional patterns and civ-
ilizational constellations within the European world; and successive
overall configurations from the early modern Atlantic world and
beyond. This brings us back to the question of divergences within
the 'imaginary figure' and their relationship to diverse historical back-
grounds. It has not been in the forefront of postcolonial debates.

There is nothing unsound about the idea of rethinking from the
margins. It is certainly not alien to the present project, and the same
could be said about some of the theorists on whose work it draws;
that applies, in different ways, to both Castoriadis and Eisenstadt.
But nothing is gained by coupling the idea with a metaphor which
obscures its meaning and encourages confusion with less promising
approaches. As suggested above, the rhetoric of 'provincializing' is
open to such objections. However, to tease out more concrete impli-
cations, we must examine the specific directions of the argument.
Chakrabarty's critique of Eurocentrism, accompanied by a program-
matic reworking of themes from European traditions, foreshadows
two main lines of questioning; one of them comes closer to the *prima
facie* meaning of 'provincializing' and is therefore vulnerable to ide-
ological overstretch, whereas the other lends itself much less easily
to subsumption under the same metaphor and would—if taken a
few steps further—suggest a very different formulation.

The first perspective anticipates 'a history that does not yet exist'
(ibid.: 42) but would 'aim to displace a hyper-real Europe from the
center toward which all historical imagination currently gravitates'
(ibid.: 45). The objective is, in other words, a systematic revision of
the narrative frameworks and explanatory models which have served
to justify the over-centring of global history on Europe or the West.
Eurocentrism is to be unmasked even where it is least visible on the
surface, as in nationalist ideologies opposed to European domination
but reliant on European projections of the nation-state as a univer-
sal category. The need for such a reinterpretation is beyond dispute;
as I have tried to show, one of the main reasons for the revival of
civilizational analysis is that it can make a distinctive and decisive
contribution to this project. But an ideological anti-Eurocentrism can
become as dogmatic and aprioristic on the level of historical inter-
pretation as its adversary, and the 'provincializing' strategy—with
the implicit or at least possible suggestion that no centrality of Europe
should be acknowledged in any context—risks conflation with views
of that kind.

Andre Gunder Frank's recent account of 'a holistic universal, global, world history—as it really was' (Frank, 1998: 340) is a prime example of the approach that strives to 'provincialize' Europe in the most literal sense. As Frank sees it, Europe (and later the West in a broader sense) has always been part of a world system, Afro-Eurasian before 1500 and global thereafter, and its temporary ascendancy was not due to any strengths of its own making: 'the Europeans did not do anything let alone "modernize"—by themselves' (ibid.: 259). More precisely, Frank argues that Europe first benefited from Asian prosperity and then took advantage of Asian decline—as if this raised no questions about the internal factors that enabled European powers to exploit both conjunctures. The claim is about as convincing as it would be to say that no analysis of the internal dynamics of Islam is needed, because it took advantage of the crises of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. In even more sweeping terms, Frank invokes holistic principles to invalidate comparative analysis as such: '. . . the comparative method itself suffers from inadequate holism and misplaced concreteness . . . At best, Western observers (alas, including also some from Asia and elsewhere) compare "Western" civilizational, cultural, social, political, economic, technological, military, geographical, climatic—in a word *racial* "features"—with "Oriental" ones and find the latter wanting on this or that (Eurocentric) criterion. Among the classical writers, Weber devoted the greatest study to the comparisons of these factors, and especially to embellishing the Marxist notions about Oriental "sacred customs, moral code, and religious law"' (ibid.: 324–25). In other words, Max Weber was not only a racist, but a Marxist to boot. Aberrations of this calibre are relatively uncommon, and they should not be allowed to discredit the critique of Eurocentrism. One way to quarantine them is to avoid aprioristic labels for the 'history that does not yet exist' and to highlight specific directions of a critique in progress. If we limit the discussion to the Eurasian context, four main thematic foci may be distinguished.

The first set of questions (in chronological order) has to do with the medieval emergence of Western Christendom. As noted above (with particular reference to Benjamin Nelson's work), civilizational analysis has stressed the importance of contacts with the other post-Roman worlds—Byzantine and Islamic—for the eleventh and twelfth-century transformation of Western Europe, but also the distinctive twists given to cultural borrowings and reactivated traditions in the

Western Christian context. A broader perspective focuses on 'Western Europe as a Eurasian phenomenon' (Moore, 1997), i.e. the significance of the Eurasian macro-region and its multi-central dynamics for developments on its Western periphery. These contextualizing viewpoints relativize the 'rise of the West', but do not prejudge the question of internal changes which might have begun at the less visible levels of social life (such as agricultural innovations) but ramified into more complex processes at later stages: rather, the guiding idea is that the European dynamic must be analyzed in terms of changing combinations of internal and external factors, and that the external ones may involve long-distance interconnections.

The second problematic is now one of the most salient and controversial topics of comparative history. The question of 'early modernities', emerging in various parts of Eurasia and in some cases perhaps preceding the developments commonly taken to define early modernity in the West, has been debated by historians and sociologists (for a representative sample, see Eisenstadt et al., 1998), and the results so far suggest that more sustained work could lead to significant reinterpretations of historical backgrounds to the modern world. Chronological landmarks are no less debatable than the substantive issues, and they vary from case to case. It is widely accepted that we can speak of early modern transformations in Japan from the sixteenth century onwards, and Anthony Reid's work on Southeast Asia (1988) points to similar conclusions. But the earliest and most seminal analysis of early modernity outside Europe, Naitō Konan's work on Song China, underlined crucial developments during the tenth and eleventh centuries (Fogel, 1984). Others have argued, on a more general level, that the question of early modernity has to do with developments in Eurasia from the twelfth century onwards (Wittrock, 1998).

The comparative study of early modernities has drawn attention to structural, institutional and to some extent ideological parallels between Eurasian societies in different geographical and historical settings: processes of state formation, as well as their interconnections with socio-economic dynamics and with changing forms of collective identity are central to the arguments of those who try to establish macro-regional patterns. Such attempts seem—so far—to have been more successful in the field of East Asian history than elsewhere. But growing interest in cultural transformations has gone hand in hand with new comparative geo-cultural perspectives; for

example, Sheldon Pollock's analyses of the rise of vernacular lan-
guages and cultures in India and Europe during the first half of the
second millennium AD have highlighted both similarities and diver-
gences which affected the overall patterns of early modernity (Pollock,
1998). On the other hand, the discussion has also moved from par-
allels to interconnections on a more or less macro-regional scale.
The most familiar theme in that context is the worldwide but locally
diversified impact of the trading networks that grew out of the
European conquest of the Americas; the decades-old but unfinished
debate on the 'seventeenth-century crisis' and its different effects in
various parts of Eurasia has thrown some light on this early global-
izing process. But more recent work suggests connections of a less
tangible kind. Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2001) compares millennarian
ideologies and movements from the fifteenth to the seventeenth cen-
turies and argues that they add up to a 'millennarian conjuncture
on the Eurasian scale' (at least from the Iberian peninsula to the
Ganges plain—East Asia does not seem to be included). More
specifically, his analysis highlights the role of 'political millennialism
as a dominant ideology, foundation of empires and stimulus to impe-
rial ambitions' (ibid.: 52). This is one of the most intriguing offshoots
of the debate on early modernities.

A third set of problems links up with the question of early modern-
ities. The search for Eurasian parallels and interconnections is bound
to change conventional views of Western hegemony as a vehicle of
modernization. As Subrahmanyam (1998: 99–100) puts it, the Eurasian
perspective implies 'that modernity is historically a global and *con-
junctural* phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to
another'. It is, however, not obvious why we should not—to use the
same metaphors—think of it as both a conjuncture and a virus: the
acknowledgement of multiple and to some extent interrelated early
modernities is perfectly compatible with the view that a particular
condensation of the global (or at least Eurasian) modernizing dynamic
in one region led to breakthroughs and upheavals which affected the
course of history on a global scale, deflected local trends in one place
after another, and imposed new frameworks for further develop-
ments. It can, in other words, still be argued that Western expan-
sion gave a specific and decisive twist to the global transition from
early to advanced modernities. But the chronology and the opera-
tive dynamics of this process are matters of debate. Recent research
suggests that the turning-point of European ascendancy should be

dated relatively late, and that it should be explained in terms of successive historical constellations, rather than linear trends unfolding from the beginning of overseas expansion. Two well-developed arguments in that vein should be noted. With regard to economic power and productivity, doubts have been raised about any significant European lead over the other major Eurasian civilizations before the industrial revolution; Kenneth Pomeranz's comparative analysis of Chinese and European economic development quoted in the preceding chapter, is the most detailed and systematic work of this kind, but several authors (e.g. Perlin, 1993) have also stressed the economic strength of pre-colonial India. If the 'great divergence' (Pomeranz, 2000) becomes visible at the end of the eighteenth century, it seems logical to look for crucial factors in the context of the period. As Pomeranz argues, this applies to local preconditions for the industrial revolution, as well as to the results of conquest and colonization across the Atlantic. On the level of political and military power, a similarly late phase—the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—is now increasingly seen as the crucial stage of European expansion and empire-building: the definitive turn of the tide against the Ottoman Empire, the consolidation of British rule in India, and the growth of colonial power in Southeast Asia changed the global pattern of geopolitics. But the dynamic of Western expansion interacted with transformative trends inside the Islamic imperial formations: 'The rapid commercialisation of large parts of the Indo-Islamic world in the seventeenth century had created societies which the great empires and their military nobilities proved unable to control. New classes of gentry, literati and merchants had emerged and these provided the basis for the regional states of the eighteenth century' (Bayly, 1989: 188). Where Western powers—including the trading companies that took on some attributes of Western statehood in overseas environments—were most active on the ground, they competed with other claimants to post-imperial power and had to integrate some of them into the new colonial elites. In brief, the progress of Western expansion during its most decisive phase can only be understood as a result of complex interactions across the boundaries between civilizational complexes.

Finally, the question of colonial modernity has become increasingly important for the critique of Eurocentrism; as explained above, the Indian case is more significant than any other, and the following discussion will therefore focus on it. The debate on Indian pre-

cursors to postcolonialist theorizing is a convenient starting-point. For the historians who launched the project of 'subaltern studies', political modernity in colonial India was a 'historical paradox, an autocracy set up and sustained in the East by the foremost democracy of the Western world', and therefore unable to 'assimilate the civil society of the colonized to itself'; to sum up, its character was best defined 'as a *dominance without hegemony*' (Guha, 1997: XII). The Gramscian connotations of this thesis are obvious, and the research programme that took off from it drew on unorthodox Marxist sources. At a later stage, postcolonialist critics claimed affiliation with this source but shifted the focus of analysis to discursive formations and adapted to metropolitan versions of the post-mode. They have been criticized for losing sight of the original social-historical agenda (Sarkar, 1998). But it seems possible to adopt a position that would differ from both sides to the controversy. If we abandon the Marxist conflation of class and state power, the paradox of the modern colonial state can be analyzed from another perspective: with a stronger emphasis on the autonomous dynamic of state formation, as well as on its civilizational context.

As Sudipta Kaviraj (2000: 141) puts it, 'the state is utterly central to the story of modernity in India'. In the context of the debate on early modernities, we might say that the colonial state became the main vehicle of transition between earlier and later phases of modernity. Its structural logic clashes with—but must also build on— a very different indigenous configuration of social power. Within this framework, 'what is called *political* in our modern language is distributed across levels and layers of the social formation in a very unfamiliar manner' (Kaviraj, 1997: 230). The most important layers in question were caste groupings, regional kingdoms and short-lived imperial formations; as we have seen, inbuilt cultural meanings are crucial to the power structure that rests on these foundations. But a closer analysis of the colonial state and its genealogy must also take note of the most recent state-building processes that had unfolded against the background of much older structures. The decomposition of the unprecedentedly powerful Mughal empire and the strategies of regional contenders for the succession gave a specific twist to the early colonial constellation. British rule in India was thus embedded in a complex legacy of long-term processes. To quote Sheldon Pollock (1996: 103), 'India's past confronts us with real dreams of power as well as with real power', and in both regards, it is relevant

to the understanding of colonial modernity. This historical dimension was neglected—and sometimes emphatically disregarded—by the anti-Orientalist critics who credited the colonial rulers with a wholesale invention of Indian traditions. Ironically they thus reproduced—by disconnecting the colonial world from the precolonial one—the very dichotomy of tradition and modernity which they had set out to deconstruct.

At the same time, the formation of the colonial state in India must be seen as an important episode in the history of the British imperial state. Recent historical research has highlighted the innovative character and exceptional strength of the military-fiscal state that took shape in eighteenth-century Britain, as well as the accompanying rise of British nationalism. Seen in connection with this domestic background, British imperial strategies appear less piecemeal and improvised than liberal historians tended to think. As C.A. Bayly (1989: 250) argues, a new 'constructive authoritarian and ideological British imperialism' emerged around 1800 (after a late eighteenth-century crisis and partly in response to perceived threats at home); this led to a more systematic imposition of the military-fiscal state on overseas territories, most importantly on India. The colonial despotisms created during the new phase of expansion and reconsolidation interacted with metropolitan state structures, and could to some extent serve to mitigate domestic conflicts. But there was another side to this interpenetration of centre and periphery. The colonial state brought with it 'two rather different types of ideas and practices: the first, the idea of state sovereignty; the second, which in part runs contrary to the absolutist demands of sovereignty, the idea of "spheres" of social life, only one of which was in the narrow sense "political"' (Kaviraj, 2000: 142). In the Indian context, these two sets of orientations were bound to become more divergent than in the original setting. On the one hand, the sovereign colonial state was—because of its limited socio-cultural reach—unable to fully overcome the traditional marginality of the traditional Indian state; on the other hand, the imported notion of social pluralism—translated into a varying range of policies—opened up public spaces that could to some extent be utilized by nationalist movements. This complex legacy was inherited by the postcolonial Indian state and is still reflected in its structural problems.

To conclude, a few words should be said about the other main component of Chakrabarty's project: the theoretical reflection that

singles out incomplete breakthroughs and unfulfilled promises of the
European tradition, and goes on to confront them with unfamiliar
historical experiences. Marx and Heidegger are, from this point of
view, the two most representative figures. Since the Heideggerian
connection involves a more specific and foundational claim, it seems
best to begin with that part of the argument. Heidegger stands for
the hermeneutical analysis of lifeworlds, and—more emphatically—
for the idea of 'engaging seriously the question of diverse ways of
"being-in-the-world"' (ibid.: 21). This proposal is clearly on the same
wavelength as the present project: as I have tried to show, civiliza-
tional analysis—at least in its more ambitious and conceptually artic-
ulate versions—is very much about taking seriously the idea of diverse
ways of being-in-the-world, and it does so with reference to a broader
range of historical experiences and theoretical traditions than post-
colonial thought has hitherto been willing to consider. As for the
distinctively philosophical aspect of the problematic, it is enough to
note in passing that the phenomenological and hermeneutical reflection
on lifeworlds went beyond Heidegger, and that some later landmarks
are highly relevant to the point at issue. Merleau-Ponty was briefly
mentioned in an earlier chapter, but his work has so far not been
among the most favoured sources of postcolonial theorizing.

   To stress the wide scope of civilizational analysis is also to admit
the underdeveloped and provisional character of its current theoret-
ical models. Extensive rethinking is needed, and there is no reason
to doubt that it can benefit from closer contact with some of the
work being done under postcolonial auspices (all the more so if the
latter avoids the ideological excesses criticized above). In this regard,
the particular importance of the Indian experience has already been
acknowledged. The other side of Chakrabarty's attempt to think with
Europe against and beyond Europe—the Marxian connection—is
perhaps best understood in that specific context. Marx stands for a
social science which 'fundamentally attempts to "demystify" ideology
in order to produce a critique that looks toward a more just social
order' (ibid.: 18). But he is also—notwithstanding his notoriously
Eurocentric account of British rule in India—cited as a pioneering
critical analyst of Western expansion. On both counts, Marx's most
trail-blazing insights must be disconnected from his strong but not
unqualified tendency to theorize capital as a 'totalizing unity' (ibid.:
47) and linked to more adequate understanding of historical differences
(including, as we might add, civilizational ones). This reading of

Marx has obvious affinities with some recent European work (e.g. Deutschmann, 1999). However, in the context determined by Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian perspectives on lifeworlds, as well as by the distinctive postcolonial variation on that theme, Marx seems most important as a theorist of economic power—in its specific abstract—capitalist form—and its transformative impact on historical ways of being-in-the world. From this point of view, his work—even more than Heidegger's—invites comparison and combination with other thinkers. Master keys to the understanding of power and its interconnections with cultural patterns are to be found in the works of Max Weber and Norbert Elias; Foucault could be added to the list, although his approaches will seem less original when Elias' work is given its due; Elias Canetti's unique insights into opaque forms of power, still largely unassimilated by social theory, should at least be mentioned.

To sum up, the two lines of inquiry—linked to Marx and Heidegger—combine to stress the dynamics and metamorphoses of power structures within the context of historical forms of human being-in-the-world. The long interaction of European domination with a very complex civilizational legacy marks India out for particular attention. But it is not obvious why this project should be subsumed under the idea of provincializing Europe. Rather, the logic at work leads to the generalization and radicalization of European but intrinsically cross-cultural perspectives through the interpretation of other historical experiences. To round off this discussion, it may be useful to consider the two critical moves which Chakrabarty singles out as central to his argument: the rejection of historicism, defined as the postulate of a 'single homogenous and secular historical time', to be used 'as a measure of the cultural distance . . . between the West and the non-West' (ibid.: 15,7), and the claim—against an a priori secularist sociology of religion—that gods and spirits are 'existentially coeval with the human', and 'that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirit' (ibid.: 16).

'Historicism' is an intractably polysemic term, and the view at issue here would be better described as evolutionistic. As such, it is at odds with the most basic assumptions of civilizational theory. The line of argument pursued throughout this book should have made it clear that the civilizational perspective can provide a distinctive and indispensable grounding for the critique of evolutionism. The second point also lends itself to a civilizational reading. If it is for-

mulated in less confessional terms (as it ought to be for the purposes of comparative study), a Durkheimian language would seem appropriate: the locations, meaning and experiential configurations of the sacred vary from one social-historical constellation to another, and in more radical ways than Eurocentric approaches or intra-European comparisons would suggest. Diversity on that level calls for civilizational analysis. Inasmuch as the formations known as secular religions (not only the totalitarian ideologies among them) involve specific mutations of the sacred, the comparative framework would also cast doubt on secularist visions of European modernity. But these questions must be reserved for another instalment of the present project.

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