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 vari-
ants 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 con-
cept 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 civi-
lization. Attempts to locate a plurality of civilizations within a cul-
turalist 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 struc-
tures 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 trajecto-
ries, 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 pres-
ence of civilizational elements within strategies and processes of mod-
ernization is equated with the preservation of a whole civilizational
core; the indisputable fact that civilizational legacies remain impor-
tant 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 phenome-
non', i.e. the return to ancestral cultures after a first wave of Western-
izing 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 the-
oretical 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 fur-
ther 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 references 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 modernization 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 character 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 crucial 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 assumptions about Confucian unity and orthodoxy. Rather, the main emphasis 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 prominent 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 framework 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 hierarchy and mobility, as well as the mutually formative and reinforcing 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 strategic 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 question 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 directions of these changes were more indigenous than in other areas affected by global Western domination. Furthermore, the most distinctive 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 communitarian 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 capable 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 tradition 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 contradistinction to teleology, and the corresponding image of human action (including, in particular, the exercise of power) centres on adjustment 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 main-stream 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 civiliza-tional 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 constitu-tional 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' develop-ments), 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 north-ern 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 democratic path to modernity—or at least lent themselves to accommodation with them.

It seems appropriate to pose this question with particular reference 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 prevailed 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 adaptation of caste institutions and democratic procedures. According to Dumont, it is the pursuit of interests through competition for political power and influence that provides an opening for caste strategies 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 temporary 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 critics; 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 convenient starting-point. Given that collective caste identity had turned out to be much less decisive for political choices than Dumont suggested, 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 'coincidence . . . 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 institutions (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 system centred on the sacred authority of a priestly caste. This asymmetric separation of authority and power not only limits the autonomy and dynamism of the secular side, but also obstructs the monopolization 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 fragmentation 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 sub-continent 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 inter-action 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 alter-
native 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 anom-
alous 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 fundamen-
tal and enduring fusion of religion and politics. On this view, Islam
is—or aspires to be—a total way of life, incompatible with any prin-
cipled 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 reli-
gion. The apparent absence of differentiation between the religious
and the political is then taken to entail a series of direct and indi-
rect consequences. It is, most obviously, an obstacle to the rational-
ization 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 uncompro-
mising and all-encompassing character of divine authority set strict
limits to all pretensions of worldly authority, and the Islamic tradi-
tion remained strong enough to maintain the blockage of legitima-
tion when new strategies of state-building had to be devised in
response to Western ascendancy (for a strong and influential for-
mulation 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 envi-
ronment 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 ideological 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 translated memories of conquest into a utopia which negates the distinction between religion and politics, and we can acknowledge the role of this factor in successive historical constellations without mistaking 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 centuries (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 aspirations 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 misleading 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 industrialisation 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 Arabinan 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 promi-
nent in all major civilizational complexes—came to play a more cen-
tral 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 periph-
ery. The multiplicity and mobility of centres were reflected in a
heightened dynamism of the periphery.

   These key features of European civilization have further implica-
tions 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 ante-
cedents 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 con-
trast 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 premod-
ern 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 civiliza-
tion are mainly centred on cultural orientations and their relation-
ship 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 transfor-
mative 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 inter-
vention (Eisenstadt, 2001). The strong emphasis on interrelated cul-
tural 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 viewpoints have been an integral part of recent developments in modernization 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 questions to be asked before proceeding further. In particular, the controversies about real or possible links between civilizational traditions and modernizing transformations call for closer analysis of an underlying issue: the civilizational status of modernity as such. Models and analyses of modernization are based on more or less explicit interpretations of modernity, and the premises posed at the latter level determined the weight given to civilizational aspects of specific modernizing 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 innovations 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 factor 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 civilizational 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 conversion 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 reconquest 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 eminently 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 Western 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 boundaries 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 homogenizing 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 societies, that is, the emergence of civilization in the singular' (Huntington, 1996: 68), the analogy can still be developed in very different directions. 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 modernizing 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 Enlight-
enment, 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 acti-
vate 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 tra-
ditions, 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 mean-
ingless world: they range from reaffirmed or invented traditions to
visions of creative subjectivity and from images of a reenchanted cos-
mos to new forms of collective identity.

At the same time, the contextual meaning of Romantic orienta-
tions depends on their relationship to the above-mentioned struc-
tural components of modernity. The idea of the Enlightenment is
ambiguous in that it refers to cognitive preconditions for the accu-
mulation of wealth and power as well as to the autonomy of indi-
vidual and collective subjects and thus to the anthropo-sociological
premises of democracy. The Romantic diagnosis of the modern cri-
sis 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 break-
throughs of individual and collective subjectivity, but the underlying
affinity does not translate into uniform trends: from a Romantic per-
spective, modern conceptions of subjectivity and autonomy stand
accused of blindness to natural, social and cultural contexts (nation-
alist 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 mutually 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 complex 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 subsumed under the uniform systemic and evolutionary patterns of Parsonian theory; the civilizational angle draws attention to the underlying cultural premises of these different historical trajectories. Cultural projects embodied in power structures thus emerge as the most central 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 horizons and social structures, a permanent capacity to problematize the existing version of order, and a discursive space for divergent interpretations that can be linked to the strategies of social actor power. Eisenstadt avoids the reductionism inherent in conventional elite theories: 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 multiple 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 conceptual 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 culture 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 overshadowed 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-dimensional 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 prob-
lematic 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 inter-
play of these trends is evident in the work of Talcott Parsons, as
well as in later attempts to revise either his action frame of refer-
ence 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 break-
through, 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 struc-
tures 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 perma-
nent 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 consti-
tutive 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 anthropolog-
ical 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 reduction-
ist visions of history. The physicalist view privileges causal explana-
tion, 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 fundamen-
tal objection to the two traditional models is that they share a faulty
premise: they conceive of society as made up of determinate ele-
ments 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, struc-
tured as they are by different configurations of the social historical
world; and the self-creative capacity evident in the ongoing move-
ment from one configuration to another is equally refractory to func-
tionalist 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 con-
stellations 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 his-
tory. 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 individual), 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 connection 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 elaborate 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 context. Conversely, attempts to revive or upgrade the theory of action are based on the claim that it can account for innovative and transformative 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 uncompromising version of systems theory—developed in great detail and increasingly totalizing terms in Niklas Luhmann's work—is best understood 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 functional analysis; for Luhmann, systemic codes, boundaries and distinctions 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 earlier forms of functionalist theory could ever do.

This brief sketch should at least indicate the direction of an ongoing 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 societies 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 context-dependent than the general evolutionary patterns favoured by the functionalist tradition. At the same time, the persistence of civilizational identity—never without ongoing reconstruction and adaptation—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, interested in the diversity of traditions and attentive to their historical legacies.

Another set of questions concerns the problem of collective identity. 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 growing cultural and political importance of identity questions has, however, highlighted the relative neglect of this theme in classical and post-classical sociology. If the construction, maintenance and transformation 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 conceptual blockages rather than conjunctural reasons. Collective identity is relational in a twofold sense: it is inseparable from specific ways of locating society in the world, and it depends on demarcation 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 preference for single-society models—related to the unacknowledged paradigm 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 applicable in the natural sciences. From this point of view functional analyses 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 constructs; this serves to link the social sciences with commonsensical notions of explanation, underline the distance from the natural sciences (or at least from their conventional image), and avoid a restrictive 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 generalizable insights. Rather, the reflexive appropriation and application 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 contextualizing factor in its own right. On the other hand, the 'figurational' paradigm, developed by Norbert Elias and his more or less orthodox followers, centres on the analysis of long-term processes—especially 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 teleological terms; the conflicting trends and forces at work in historical processes do not conform to systemic logics; and the causal interconnections 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