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

2.2   *Max Weber: The comparative history of civilizations*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This brief outline should suffice to illustrate the originality of Borkenau's argument as well as its affinities with other variations on the same theme: although this unfinished account of the Christian origins of the West has so far gone virtually unnoticed by those who continue to debate the issue, it calls for comparison with better-known interpretations, and it is easily defensible against the objections often raised in order to discredit the very idea of a genealogy centred on religious sources. More specifically, there is nothing essentialistic about Borkenau's approach. He stresses the internal plurality of the Christian tradition as well as the importance of historical situations which brought different currents into contact and conflict; the maturation of a distinctive religious culture in the West appears as a long-drawn-out process which combined inputs from different regions and traditions, and unfolded in close connection with changing power structures; a particularly formative episode (the ninth-century consolidation of the papacy on doctrinal, institutional and political levels) is linked to a conjuncture which did not last but left a legacy that could be reactivated in new circumstances. In all these regards, Borkenau opened up lines of inquiry which suggest further analysis of historical contexts and trajectories.

The two other themes to be noted can be treated more briefly. On the one hand, Borkenau's reflections on the origins of individualism in the Western tradition raise questions which have some bearing on more recent approaches to this problematic. His speculation on linguistic evidence for the rise of 'individualism of an activist type' (ibid.: 200) must be left aside; they touch upon a whole range of issues which cannot be explored further without interdisciplinary contact of a kind so far untried. We are on somewhat safer ground when it comes to social and cultural preconditions. If we accept that the equation of individualism and modernity is untenable, and that premodern patterns of individuality and processes of individualization may have long-term implications for the constitution of modern forms, there are good reasons to take a closer look at post-Roman and early medieval developments. Borkenau's analysis of this part of the road to Western civilization centres on the consequences of collapse and disintegration. As he sees it, the conventional view of medieval civilization as a synthesis of Roman and barbarian legacies has obscured another side of the picture: the mutually reinforcing dynamics of decomposition on both sides, affecting the tribal order (already modified by prolonged contact with the empire) as

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

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

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

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