



Vytautas Kavolis

Civilization theory and collective identity in the postmodern–globalized era

"My anticipation of simultaneous thrusts toward revitalization of tradition and toward orientation to humanity poses special problems for the West and Islam." In a prescient essay from 1988, the late Lithuanian sociologist Vytautas Kavolis argues for the centrality of the concept of "civilization" in debates on postmodern global conditions.

Sociologists who have taken civilizations rather than nation states, world–systems, communities, or interacting individuals as their units of analysis have all been deeply concerned with contemporary life. Indeed it was through their efforts to explain the distinctive characteristics of contemporary life that they were led to the comparative study of civilizations. Without it, in their view, contemporary life cannot be sufficiently understood.

In locating our efforts to understand contemporary conditions in this intellectual tradition, we need to ask, first, how civilizational sociologists conceive their object of study — civilizations — to be constructed, how they account for their distinctiveness; and, second, what their theoretical accounts of civilizational structures contribute to the empirical study of the issues we find most compelling.

Construction problems

How have the major civilizational sociologists understood the controlling principles and dynamic potentialities that distinguish one civilization from another?¹

Pitirim Sorokin comes close to viewing the generally recognized civilizations merely as locations within which universal processes of socio–cultural change occur. Differences between civilizations emerge only in his observations that the West has been repeatedly undergoing radical oscillations of cultural mentalities — "ideational" and "sensate"; that Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist cultures "have been throughout their long existence, predominantly ideational (not, however, without some, though slight, fluctuations)"; and that the Egyptian and Confucian traditions have been "mixed." In Islam, the ideational has been, "all in all, the principal system", with two periods of "its comparative weakening in favour of the truth of [the] senses".²

The West is defined by extreme sociocultural changes, India and Islam by a one–sided stability with only a "slight" amount of the same type of changes as in the West, and China by a balanced coexistence of what are in the West successive phases of a cycle — the ideational (Taoist) and the mixed

(Confucian).

This difference between civilizations might explain, in Sorokin's terms, why the West has been more continuously creative, in different ways, over time: once the limits of what is possible within one cultural mentality are reached, a switch to the other mentality takes place, changing the direction of creative enterprise and revitalizing its sources. But why does the West possess the switches which other civilizations lack? What do these switches consist of?

It remains unexplained why what the general version of Sorokin's theory seems to require of all civilizations — the perpetual Ideational–Sensate oscillation — occurs only in a greatly attenuated form in India, China, and Islam; why the European sequence remains the only "normal" case from which Sorokin's theory not only has been derived but to which alone it fully applies. In terms of this system, the rest of the world has distinctiveness only in the ways in which it is, by the standards of Western history, "abnormal" — that is, fails to approximate the dynamic character of the West. And this distinctiveness cannot be explained by the theoretical system.

This is what I call Sorokin's "ambush" — an approach to the comparative study of civilizations in which civilizations retain some empirical distinctiveness but cease to possess theoretical significance.³ Some sort of controlling principle appears to be embedded in the structures of particular civilizations, but it is subsidiary and unexplained, hence unfruitful. Civilizations are marginal to a universal science of social behaviour.

For Louis Dumont, the distinctiveness of a civilization arises from its dominant ideology — "the set of ideas and values that are common in a society (=global ideology)".⁴ The controlling principle of this ideology is the conception of the relationship of the individual to the social whole, a relationship which is for him is always, in a stabilized structure, one of hierarchic complementarity.

There are two types of ideologies. In the "normal" traditional one, holism encompasses individuality. In the "abnormal" modern ideology, individuality encompasses holism, each individuality — whether of person or of nation — being a self-sufficient whole.

Among traditional civilizations, Dumont has studied only those of India and medieval Europe. He has found them similar in possessing a sociocultural structure in which, on what for him is the superior level of cultural theory, ideology encompasses power as subsidiary to itself, and simultaneously, on the inferior level of social practice, power and ideology are differentiated as opposites, as in the structural distinction between the priest and the ruler in India and between church and state in the medieval West.

What are opposites, capable of disruptive conflict, on the inferior level, become integrated into a part-whole identity on the superior level. Dumont takes this to be the "logical formula" that guarantees cultural stability wherever it occurs. But the modern egalitarian ideology fails to understand the principle of hierarchic complementarity.

Where this principle is lacking in modern civilization, logical "incoherence" arises.⁵ It is responsible for the threat of totalitarianism, an "artificialist" response to incoherence. Dumont's approach allows him to criticize — on the grounds of intellectual deficiencies from which adverse practical consequences follow — only the modern West.

In this respect, his is the opposite of the usual Western-centred approach evident in both Sorokin and Max Weber (and in such enterprises as the world-systems theory). For Dumont, the model of the "universal case", of theoretical norm-setting, is not the West but India. This case has, more than any other, shaped his general notion of the structure of civilizations.

There are three key elements to be considered: the logical formula guaranteeing cultural stability wherever it can be found, the general difference between the modern and all traditional ideologies, and specific cultural designs shaping the social structures of particular civilizations. In the case of India, it is the principle of group purity and pollution and its dynamic version, the dialectic of being-in-the world and world rejection. In what is coherent in their social structures, each civilization is decisively controlled by a cultural principle of its own.

Dumont's approach does not identify the transformative potential of a traditional civilization. He has addressed this issue only in discussing the "rise of individualism" in medieval Europe, which led to its transition to modern civilization. His general explanation is that both the initial symbolic design and subsequent historical choices (by elite individuals, mainly religious leaders and various kinds of theoreticians) have been important in this process.

Since, according to Dumont, the modern West differs from today's India more than the medieval West differed from India in their initial symbolic designs, it must be that the individual choices that have shifted the basic categories of the symbolic design constitute the explanation of transformative change. But why one civilization has allowed transformative choices while others have not remains unexplained.

Instead of a controlling principle, one finds in Max Weber's sociology only a "not alone, but more than anything else" principle.⁶ In contrast to Dumont and Sorokin, the cultural principle does not control the social structure but is, together with a series of other identifiable factors, co-determinative of it.

The principle is not, as for Dumont, the "common" ideology of a society. For Weber, it is the ideology the culture-defining strata have found congenial to their spontaneous dispositions and have also employed as a resource in the struggle for power.⁷

A civilization, in Weber's view, is characterized less by intellectual coherence than by struggles between groups, conjunctions ("elective affinities") of groups, forms of social organization, and ideologies, and the relatively durable, routinized conditions established by resolutions of such struggles and as results of such conjunctions. Coherence is a property not of a civilization as a whole but only of the organization of the life of its culture-defining strata.

The durable conditions, while charismatically authorized and imposing normative restraints, to a greater or lesser extent, on their upholders and beneficiaries, are also, in part, coercively maintained and therefore resented by those deriving fewer advantages from them. From this, a potential for change — or at least rebellion — arises in any civilization.

A successfully accomplished civilizational transformation — such as the initial breakthrough to modernity — requires a combination of elements that rarely occur together: ethical prophecy, newly active social groups to whose sociohistorically shaped imaginative dispositions and practical interests the

prophecy speaks, an accumulation of facilitating circumstances in the economy, legal system, community organization, the kinship structure, and interstate political and economic relations.⁸

In contrast to every other major civilizationist, Weber's working conception of what is essential in a civilization is not constant but, in accordance with his methodology of "ideal types", depends on the problem being investigated. Weber can identify the distinctiveness of a civilization, for particular analytic purposes, in purely organizational terms, without reference to the content of ideology which, in discussing other issues, he regards as more important "than anything else". He can write: "All in all, the specific roots of Occidental culture must be sought in the tension and peculiar balance, on the one hand, between office charisma [that is, the organization of the Church] and monasticism [that is, monastic communitarianism], and on the other between the contractual character of the feudal state [that is, voluntaristic particularism] and the autonomous bureaucratic hierarchy [that is, coercive political universalism]." What is essential to the West are tensions between two kinds of religious organization and two kinds of political organization.

If "the Occidental Middle Ages were much less of a unified culture (*Einheitskultur*)" than other civilizations, it is, in Weber's view, because in other civilizations one institution attained more complete control than has been the case in the West,⁹ defined as it was by "tensions and balances". In this respect, the West is sociologically "abnormal" already in its traditional — Medieval — foundations, when, by Dumont's cultural criterion, it is still in line with the "normal" experience of traditional humanity. This suggests a priority of social structure over cultural design in the modernization of the West.

When Weber's whole corpus of civilizational studies is kept in mind, his conception of the structure of civilizations becomes identical with his theory of their dynamic potentials. The same types of variables, in different combinations, explain structure and change. The distinctiveness of each civilization arises from its unique linkage of dominant ideology with a variety of practical arrangements, none of which is completely explained by the dominant ideology itself. What changes are possible within a civilization also depends on this linkage, the conflicts which arise among its elements, and the methods employed for responding to these conflicts.

For Weber, a civilization is not an hierarchically controlled totality, as it is, so far it is understandable, for Dumont, but a conjunction of interacting, yet analytically independent elements, each with its own logic of action (but not all of equal importance). Dumont would presumably regard this not as a description of the theoretical structure of all civilizations, but as an expression of the empirical condition — and therefore cognitive disposition — of the "abnormal" modern civilizations, which is then projected, as "scientific" analysis, on other civilizations.

While in Weber's thought the particular elements of a civilization are precise and some of them coherent, a civilization as a whole has something of the overall appearance of an assemblage of unequally weighted parts. As soon as it loses this quality, through the "master trend" of modern rationalization, it becomes a prison house, that is, acquires a state unnatural to itself as a major locus of human existence.¹⁰

If we are right in inferring from the conclusion to *The Protestant Ethic* that for Weber the normal state of civilization is a less rationalized one than that of western Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, then resistances to rationalization — whether traditionalist, anti-modernist, or "postmodern" — can be expected to persist. But Weber provides no theoretical ground for a reconciliation of rationalization and resistance to it. The battle must therefore go on.

In contrast to Dumont, Weber lacks a theoretical conception of cultural stability. What is lacking is not social explanations of particular cases of the empirical occurrence of relatively stable conditions but an intellectual device capable, by virtue of its structure, of constituting stability in the sociocultural order.

The absence of a stabilizing principle seems related to the theoretically unintegrated character of the whole body of Weber's work. And this is what makes it not merely a scientific perspective usable in diverse ways, but (if one puts aside his theory of rationalization and his analytical classifications) a peculiarly authentic expression of the "postmodern" consciousness in contemporary Western civilization as well.

What Sorokin leaves as an unexplained greater Western tendency to change directions and Dumont apparently sees as the result of choices which civilizations make possible, Weber analyzes in detail as "highly particular historical constellations"¹¹ and carries to the threshold of general theory.

What Weber has traced out through a series of careful case studies and analyses of part-relationships in comparative perspective, S.N. Eisenstadt aims to state in general theoretical form covering all possibilities.¹² For Weber, civilizations are individual cases that need to be understood (though they can be considered from different points of view) in all of their specifics. Eisenstadt generalizes across several cases and defines types of civilizations. It is in locating a case under a general category that he is interested. Any information that cannot be fitted into the construction of a type is dismissed as theoretically irrelevant.

Except for this schematizing quality in Eisenstadt, contrasting with the "concrete" approach of Weber and Dumont, civilizations are conceived in a similar manner as in Weber, as held together by a linkage of a cultural principle with a set of diverse social arrangements. The cultural principle, for all classical civilizations, is more sharply conceptualized than in Weber as the solution evolved by "autonomous elites" of the tension between the transcendental and the mundane order.

There are three solutions of the transcendental tension: by other-worldly contemplative action (Hinduism, Buddhism), by this-worldly ethical action (Confucianism and presumably secular liberalism), and by a combination of other- and this-worldly action (of which there are two variants: the Islamic, in which the this-worldly, political-military focus is "usually segregated" from the "very strong other-worldly emphasis", and the western European, presumably the medieval and early modern, "where the potential for transformation of the social order was highest owing to a tight interweaving of this-worldly and other-worldly foci of salvation)."¹³

The symbolic structures of civilizations are defined entirely by that in them which explains their varying potential for "transformation of the social order".

The transformative potential is determined by solutions of the transcendental tension and increases in this order: other-worldly, this-worldly, mired segregated, mired-interweaving.

In addition to this central (and stable) cultural principle, Eisenstadt relates potentials for transformative change to such generalized (but varying) characteristics of social structure as "a high degree of symbolic and institutional distinctiveness of the centre from the periphery, along with expression of strata consciousness," "a multiplicity of autonomous elites in general and secondary elites in particular," and alliances between different kinds of elites, especially the political and the religious.¹⁴

From his analyses it is not clear to what extent these social-structural characteristics depend on the mode of solution of the transcendental tension, but they must have some measure of independent variability. Indeed, though Eisenstadt does not address this issue, the divergence between the "segregative" Islamic and the "interweaving" Judeo-Christian solution of the transcendental tension could, in his terms, be more easily explained by subsequent socio-structural developments than by differences in the original symbolic designs of the two traditions.

Thus the transformative potential of a civilization depends on a stable cultural principle in conjunction with potentially variable features of social structure. But from Eisenstadt's statements it appears that in determining transformative potentials the cultural principle greatly outweighs in importance the social-structural features and cannot be outweighed by any conceivable combination of them. It is unclear whether this characteristic of civilizational construction persists in advanced industrial societies.¹⁵

A development issue

By "development issues" I refer to the major types of social change and of responses to them in particular times and places. To what extent can they be explained by civilizational theory? What understanding of major types of social change is gained when they are interpreted as products of the controlling principles and the transformative potentials of the civilizations in which they occur?

These are the types of change generally conceptualized as economic and technological advances, democratization and totalitarianism, cultural secularization and so on. One or several of the four sociologists considered here — and many others — have sought to explain such changes. I am going to ask what each of them contributes to an emerging issue on which much less theoretical work has been done. The issue is whether — or in what form — the collective identities of particular civilizations (and, by extension, of their national components) will maintain themselves in the course not only of modernization in general, but of its latest phase specifically, for which "globalization" and "postmodernity" constitute alternative interpretative models.

Briefly stated, the postmodern is a mode of interpretation of experience which stresses its collage-like, decentered, fragmentary, simultaneous, multiperspectival, "transparent" qualities; the emphasis is on one's own (uprooted Western intellectual's) experience. Globalization theory analyzes the processes by which the world is becoming a "single place", a frame that has to be taken into account in acting and interpreting; the emphasis is on

relationships of others — distant others — to oneself.¹⁶ Both are versions or aspects of *Gegenwartskunde*.

The literature on postmodernity (which is sometimes, but not consistently, distinguished as a social condition of postmodernism as a cultural programme) is immense, intangible, frequently cultist, or self-indulgent. The only constant in the various accounts of "postmodernism" is self-conscious rejection of "modernism" with its tendencies toward dualistic thought, hierarchy of values, universal forms, master narratives encapsulating the meaning of history, and efforts after a not yet forgotten coherence.¹⁷

Sorokin provides no guidance to understanding anything specifically modern. For him only the recurrent has reality. His conception of the distinctiveness of civilizations is weak. He thus contributes little to elucidating the problem of identity maintenance in current inter-civilizational encounters.

Will civilizations in close interdependence continue to retain the kinds of distinctiveness they maintained in relative isolation? Or will they merge into a global civilization? It is not, for Sorokin, a major theoretical issue. He leans toward expecting "convergences" around an "integral" culture,¹⁸ but suggests for us no questions beyond those he has himself formulated.

Eisenstadt so far has not been much more helpful on these questions. This is partly because his variables are pitched on such a high level of generality that they seem to explain any politically relevant development that has happened or continues to be happening, but cannot throw light on what innovations are still to come. Related to this is lack of a sense of direction — or of alternative directions — to be anticipated "beyond modernity". What Eisenstadt has said about "the shifting premises of modern civilization" reduces itself to observations on "tendencies toward segregation of institutional spheres" and the like.¹⁹

The most probable implication of Eisenstadt for the issue of maintaining civilizational identities in a globalizing world is that the distinctive characteristics of particular civilizations should persist. The social-structural components in Eisenstadt's conception of civilization permit more variation in responding to globalization than Sorokin, but it remains unclear to what extent such responses will be primarily determined by the traditional controlling principle of each civilization — its solution of the transcendental tension.

But — to take up only one case — does the contemporary West still adhere to the "mixed interweaving" solution, or has it shifted to a predominantly this-worldly solution similar to that of historic China? Has the central problem changed (from the transcendental to the global tension perhaps), or must it be viewed as "incoherent," lacking a sufficiently binding direction on this — for Eisenstadt — crucial matter?

Or does a late modern civilization require a central tension less than classical and early modern civilizations did? More generally: to what extent do generalizations derived from the study of classical civilizations hold for the new kind of civilization modernity is still shaping?²⁰

Like most social scientists, Max Weber has such a strong sense of the universalizing thrust of Western modernity that its primary implication for other civilizations can only be a challenge to their distinctive identities. In Weber's perspective, the rationalizing tendency in its modern form is likely to

affect everyone sooner or later (and, in his view, in some major aspects of the organization of social life, for the worse), imposing the same "iron cage" of uniformitarian bureaucracy everywhere. The only question is whether to the same extent.

"No one knows [...] whether at the end of this tremendous development [in the West] entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification."²² Thus Weber defines the possible alternatives. They should hold for other surviving civilizations as well, if they modernize along Western lines.

One of Weber's "postmodern" alternatives is a reassertion of the traditional designs of civilizations and cultures. A "rebirth" of cultural tradition in a globalizing world — even more than the earlier "renaissances" — cannot be a reconstitution, a mere infusion of new potency into what was. Thus Bernard Lewis writes: "Among fundamentalist circles is Iran, Egypt, and elsewhere, a new Islamic political language is emerging, which owes an unacknowledged debt to the westernizers and secularists of the past century and their foreign sources, as well as to prophetic and classical Islam. Much will depend on their ability to harmonize these different traditions."²³

But we need to go beyond Weber to ask: What must be retained by a civilization in the globalizing stage in order for a cultural identity to continue to exert its integrative thrust? Must a controlling principle, in the sense of Dumont or Eisenstadt, persist, or is perhaps the continuity of a set of interrelated languages with literatures perceived as "one's own" sufficient for the survival of a civilization in the postmodern world?

The first is the structural, the second the historical definition of collective identity. In classical civilizations, the historical definition circumscribes the unit of analysis, the structural definition explains what holds it together. But will what has been holding continue to hold? Can a civilization endure without a controlling principle? This issue may become relevant in all advanced industrial parts of the world, East Asia as well as the West.

Consistently, with his treatment of the classical civilizations, Weber might answer that a present-day civilization can retain its identity as the conjunction of a particular (and expandable) set of ideologies with a particular (and expandable) set of groups and institutions. But must there be limits, if not to the set of ideologies, then at least to the set of institutions that a civilization, however "syncretistic", can accept?

The Hellenistic world seems to have been capable of incorporating any religion present in its environment, but it subjected the Oriental religions to an *interpretatio graeca*, and it operated within a shared set of institutions — the royal cult, the cities, religious pluralism.²⁴ This interpretive-institutional definition of collective identity, not by a delimitation of the ideological contents it can admit, but by a characteristic mode of interpreting any contents and by a particular set of institutions (or, perhaps more important, a particular form of relationship among the major institution) may hold for the somewhat comparable present age of inter-civilizational encounters as well.

Again following Weber, "entirely new" ethical prophecies may emerge as responses to modernization and, we would add, globalization. The new prophecies may energize existing civilizations, or fragment them, or establish new cultural complexes transcending the boundaries between traditional

civilizations. Weber offers guidance on these issues only by insisting that we always look into the group and institutional sources and uses of these rebirths of tradition and prophetic innovations.

Louis Dumont may have provided the most useful intellectual categories for thinking about the manner in which civilizational (and national) identities will maintain themselves in a globalizing world. He suggests that each modernizing culture evolves its own version of the modern ideology by synthesizing elements of its traditional holism with components of the individualistic ethic emanating from its historical centres — France and England. This conception is based, however, mainly on evidence from the peripheral European countries — Germany, Russia — and it is uncertain whether the process will proceed to the same extent beyond the confines of the extended West rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions.

Dumont sees this as a process wrought with great dangers, since from pseudo-syntheses of individualism and holism totalitarianism results and could indeed overwhelm modern ideology. The "pseudo" quality arises from efforts to abolish the for his theoretically essential distinction between individuality and totality — either by dissolving totality into individualities (as in the Calvinistic tradition and its derivatives) or by homogenizing individualities into a totality (as in totalitarian states). But even while posing such dangers, this is the process by which the collective identities of civilizations and cultures maintain themselves in the course of globalization, if the solutions are locally evolved, not imposed by some imperial power.

In analyzing the dangers in the versions of the modern ideology emerging in the "developing countries", Dumont is led by a desire to understand how a stabilizing degree of intellectual coherence may be attained within the framework, or movement, of modernity. It is this that the West, in his non-ethnocentric conception of modernization, needs to learn from the traditional civilizations at the same time that they absorb from the West elements of the modern ideology. Traditional civilizations do not have solutions for the modern age (even for themselves as participants in the modern age), but they have understood the foundational problem of culture construction that modernity still needs to grasp clearly.

The intellectual predicament of modernity can only be resolved, along Dumont's lines, by moving toward a global symbolic design in which humanity as a whole is understood as the practical value encompassing the tradition-modernity syntheses that all modernizing civilizations (and national cultures within them) will, in their own distinctive ways, elaborate. In global terms, on the superior level of practical values humanity is to encompass civilizations, while on the subordinate level of mythology the particular civilizations are to remain opposites with conflicting perspectives.²⁵

The global design constitutes an inversion of the structure which Dumont sees as integrating particular civilizations. Within a civilization, cultural meaning encompasses social practice. In the world as a whole, discourse about practices encompasses commitments to mythologies. A symbolic framework is superimposed upon the others, which, however, continue to operate as themselves even while responding to the added overlay (again, in their own ways).

On the premises of this theory, drives toward revitalization in an updated form of the central mythologies of particular civilizations (and of their national

components), can be anticipated — as can pressures toward their relativization, on some level, to a more universal discourse of humanity.²⁶

With regard to the revitalization of tradition, there may be a difference between early- and late-modernizing civilizations. On the basis of Japanese experience, Yasusuke Murakami has suggested that "the overall situation in the postwar world tends to allow new late-developers much more leeway and time to adapt their indigenous traditions to the imperative of industrialization [...] they will [therefore] incorporate more of their traditions into the framework of industrialism [than the early modernizers did ...] the identity of each society will be given more attention." And, furthermore: "a society based on democratic individualism [such as the United States] will present a difficult problem of integration."²⁷

My anticipation of simultaneous thrusts toward revitalization of tradition and toward orientation to humanity poses special problems for the West and Islam. More than other civilizations, the contemporary West faces a problem of intra-civilizational structuring. Its more intensive modernization, the coexistence of strongly developed religious and secular cultures, the profuseness of forms of artistic experimentation, the challenges of feminism, and a generally self-critical intellectual tradition, add up to the question: to what extent (and for whom) is the contemporary West "traditional" in the sense that it still can retain, and to what extent (and for whom) is it "postmodern" in the sense that by now it must gather, the structural foundations of what it can accept as its own identity?²⁸ This needs to emerge as a major issue in Western art, especially literature. But a similar situation is developing in the most modernized (or globalized) layers of other civilizations as well.

Islam poses the most serious difficulty for anticipations of a trend toward putting humanity first. The problem may not be insoluble in the long run if, under the influence of the general processes of globalization, Islam comes to accept itself as a part of the world, rather than as a self-sufficient entity or as the key metaphor of the whole yet to be attained. Self-sufficiency is clearly impossible. Identification of a particular tradition with the universal purpose seems likely, under present conditions, by reducing its adaptability, to decrease even the capacity of this tradition to attain its own purposes, as the history of Marxist societies has demonstrated.

What might be called "the discourse of humanity" is unlikely to be a system (even a system designated as a "cosmopolitan ideology" or the "world civil religion"), or to be derived from a system, whether religious or secular. In our projection of the global world, symbolic systems remain on the subordinate level of particular mythologies. The superior level can only be conceived of as a world-wide practical discourse entailing moral, political, scientific, and literary orientations as its ever-present constituents. On this point Dumont may even meet Habermas.

It is the emergence of a global component of consciousness — a mutually understandable and politically not wholly ineffective mode of taking differences into account added to one's own and alien modes of discourse — that distinguishes the present age from earlier so-called "syncretistic" periods with which it is otherwise in many significant respects fruitfully comparable.²⁹ The globalization of the mass media is one of the technical bases of this process. The development of universal languages concerned with environmental, economic, medical, nutritional, peace, and human rights issues provides its firmest intellectual elements. The efforts at cooperation among the

religious traditions contributes not so much to these languages as to their popular acceptance.

The "postmodern" (or, in Jean Gebser's sense, "integral")³⁰ perceptual form of the collage could be the mode of integration of the global discourse (while sub-global sociocultural configurations will continue to be integrated in their own more definite ways).³¹ Postmodernism may indeed prove to be most significant as the generator of the early form — not of most of its contents — of global discourse, which, in its most characteristic literary manifestations, could be described as decontextualized signifiers floating in neutral space, eager for contact, however fleeting, with anything capable of signifying (and perhaps prevented by its "schizophrenic" qualities from sustaining contact).³²

We shall note that the postmodern disposition, quickly moving over a great many things, dizzying in its effects, devoid of a sense of at-homeness, cannot generate society and must therefore remain a mode of discourse detached from (and, on the global level, superimposed on) concrete organizations of life. Society is a set of people — living, dead, and yet-to-be-born — held together by an energizing set of meanings and reliable habits of cooperation in the practical concerns of survival. A civilization is the largest comprehensible mode of discourse capable of generating societies. This is the ultimate ground for predicting the continued survival of particular civilizations.

While in its later stages postmodernism may yet work out a critical stance toward its own spontaneous dispositions, the problem, as with everything "postmodern", remains — to what extent is this more than a facade, facile verbalism? Will it hold up when serious emergencies arise, or will something else become necessary then?

Since ours is a more dynamic and immediately interdependent world than that of the classical civilizations, the diverse mythological opposites on the sub-global level will not be able either to rest in a posture of self-sufficiency or undergo the kinds of confluence that have been occurring in syncretistic ages before the rise of monotheism and exclusivist thought. Under current conditions, the particular mythologies will have both to give an account of themselves, in terms of their practical consequences, to the world-wide network of discourse, and to subject the presuppositions and tendencies of this discourse to a vigorous critique from the standpoints of their own traditions.

The "universal" can no longer be conceptualized from within one tradition. It has not only to arise from, but also to exist as, an open-ended series of encounters between the traditions in which each learns, on one level, to keep itself distinct but, on another level, to respond to the claims, though not necessarily at the same time, of all the others.³³

Many tensions can be anticipated along this axis of organization of the "postmodern" world, a great deal of cultural, and even of political, vitality expected to focus on it. It will be possible for intellectuals to locate themselves on many different points along this axis.

Dumont's approach, from which these anticipations have taken off, is one that allows for enduring distinctiveness, recognizes modernization, and requires a critique of modernity in the light of the accumulated experience of tradition.

It reconciles, in its construction, Western and non-Western perspectives, as no other major civilizational theory, at least in the social sciences, does. All it

lacks is a conception of the social mechanisms that make what is needed possible (or impossible). For what Dumont lacks, Weber remains the best guide. The opposite is equally true.

-
- 1 A civilization (or at least a classical civilization) is best defined as the largest functioning sociocultural organization, encompassing several states and languages, held together by a literate tradition maintained by full-time students of theoretical writings central to it.
 - 2 Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, New York: American Book Company 1937, Vol. I, p. 682; Vol. II, p. 156.
 - 3 Nations, in Sorokin, do not have even empirical distinctiveness.
 - 4 Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 279. On his earlier work, see Vytautas Kavolis, "Civilizational Paradigms in Current Sociology: Dumont vs. Eisenstadt," *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, 7 (1986), pp. 125–140.
 - 5 Sorokin has also been concerned with coherence — or "logico-meaningful integration" — but he ascribed incoherence not to modern civilization as such but to all cases of the recurring phase of breakdown of sensate mentality, to late Hellenism as much as to modernity.
 - 6 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 89.
 - 7 Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); *Ancient Judaism* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1952), pp. 78–80.
 - 8 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, op. cit.; *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (New York: The Free Press, 1951).
 - 9 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 1192–1193.
 - 10 "[...] the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order... is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism [...] with irresistible force [...] an iron cage [...] of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity.'" Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, op. cit., pp. 182–183
 - 11 Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: The Free Press, 1958), p. 343.
 - 12 Kavolis, op.cit.
 - 13 S.N. Eisenstadt, "Cultural Orientations, Institutional Entrepreneurs, and Social Change: Comparative Analysis of Traditional Civilizations," *American Journal of Sociology*, 85 (January, 1980), pp. 852–853. In the twentieth century, parts of the Islamic world have moved closer to the "interweaving" solution than at any time since the ninth century. "The merger of religion and politics may be a classic Islamic ideal but only in the recent era are they actually brought together [by neo-Muslim movements]." I.M. Lapidus, "Islam and Modernity," in S.N. Eisenstadt, (ed.), *Patterns of Modernity*, Vol. II (New York: New York University Press, 1987), p. 107. Does this portend greater dynamism in the modern as it did, for Eisenstadt, in pre-modern periods?
 - 14 Eisenstadt, "Cultural Orientations," op.cit., pp. 850, 864.
 - 15 Eisenstadt's observations on the twentieth century suggest mainly social-structural, not symbolic, transformations. Cf. S.N. Eisenstadt, "This Worldly Transcendentalism and the Structuring of the World: Weber's 'Religion of China' and the Format of Chinese History of Civilization", in Andreas E. Buss, (ed.), *Max Weber in Asian Studies* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), pp. 58–61. Others have described changes in the mode of solution of Eisenstadt's transcendental tension as well. Cf. n. 13. A great deal of work is still needed on this issue.
 - 16 On globalization theory, see Roland Robertson and Frank Lechner, "Modernization, Globalization and the Problem of Culture in World-Systems Theory," *Theory Culture Society*, 2, 3 (1985), pp. 103–117.
 - 17 Among the more sober accounts, see Richard E. Palmer. "Postmodernity and Hermeneutics," *boundary 2*, 5 (Winter, 1977), pp. 363–393; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986). For a wider, see Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Charles Jencks, *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987). When sociologists employ the terminology of postmodernism, they

tend to rely excessively on its meaning in literary discussions. There are by 1988 signs that fashionable–cult aspects of postmodernism are subsiding; architects, in any case, are being advised not to bother with it. But this should only facilitate a more sober assessment of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon.

- 18 Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Basic Trends of Our Times* (New Haven, Connecticut: College University Press, 1964).
- 19 S.N. Eisenstadt, *Revolution and the Transformation of Societies: A Comparative Study of Civilizations* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), pp. 322–323.
- 20 Social Philosophies on an Age of Crisis
- 21 The assumption that generalizations derived from the classical civilizations are immediately applicable to modern civilization has reduced the relevance of most earlier civilization theory — reviewed in Pitirim A. Sorokin, ²⁰ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951) — to the interpretation of contemporary conditions. These theories generally do not take acceleration, greater interdependence, and differences in both productive equipment and symbolic design into account. Weber, who distinguished perhaps only too sharply between the "traditional" and the "modern", is not subject to this criticism.
- 22 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, op. cit., p. 182.
- 23 Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 116.
- 24 Julien Ries, "Gedanken zur Hellenisierung der orientalischen Kulte," in Hartmut Zinser, (Hrsg.), *Der Untergang von Religionen* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1986), pp. 51–64.
- 25 I develop this theme in "Contemporary Moral Cultures and "The Return of the Sacred", *Sociological Analysis*, 1988.
- 26 On the relativizing effects of globalization, see Roland Robertson and JoAnn Chirico, "Humanity, Globalization, and Worldwide Religious Resurgence: A Theoretical Exploration," *Sociological Analysis*, 46 (1985), pp. 219–242.
- 27 Yasusuke Murakami, "Modernization in Terms of Integration: The Case of Japan," in S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Patterns of Modernity*, Vol. I (New York: New York University Press, 1987), pp. 71, 87.
- 28 The emergence of current notions of universalism out of Western particularity has, on the one hand, promoted Western cultural hegemony but, on the other hand, it has depleted the sources of Western particularity, reduced commitment to the culturally specific roots of universalism precisely among those most committed to it. This has resulted in experiences such as a mother's anxiety about her children described by Anne Roiphe: "[...] will they join other tribes or will they be so universal, such citizens of the world, that they will be bland, ineffectual, gracious but ridiculous, like the meetings of the United Nations? In their universalism will the furnishings of their souls look like Olympic stadiums?" *Generation Without Memory: A Jewish Journey in Christian America* (New York: Linden Press, 1981), p. 214. Globalization may help Westerners to perceive this problem more sharply — and therefore come closer to solving it.
- 29 On some political effects and limitations of this global mode of discourse, see Edward Peters, *Torture*, (New York: Basic Blackwell, 1986). Ch. 5.
- 30 Jean Gebser, *Ursprung und Gegenwart*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags–Antstalt, 1966).
- 31 Each contemporary civilization incorporates a postmodern element, globality is postmodern *in toto*. Within the particular civilizations, the postmodern layer provides the perspective, for some, for looking at the "traditional contents" of that civilization as well as on elements from other traditions and from contemporary mass culture. But the traditional contents continue to serve as a grounding for the emergence of a set of standards for evaluating what postmodern perceptions, in their global reach, bring up.
- 32 "[...] one of the constituents of a Post–Modern culture is the license to talk about anything in the context of anything else [...]" Gerald Graff, "Preface", in Charles Newman, *The Post–Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. II. On the "schizophrenic" qualities of postmodernism, see Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in Foster, *The Anti–Aesthetic*, op. cit., pp. 119–120. For Jameson, schizophrenia is "breakdown of the relationship between signifiers" and loss of the "experience of temporal continuity". Hence no personal identity is possible (p. 119). And, we would add, no reliable social relations.
- 33 This could be rephrased as the principle that "everything is becoming too important to be left to its adherents alone."

Original in English
Contribution by Kulturos barai
First published in *Kulturos barai* 7/2006
© Vytautas Kavolis/Kulturos barai
© Eurozine