Interpretations and Counterarguments: Replies to my interlocutors

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I wish to thank all contributors to this issue for their thoughtful engagement with my work and for picking up loose threads that I had left undeveloped. Because of limited space, I will not respond to each paper separately; instead, I will focus on key themes more or less common to several authors and try to discuss them in a logical order.

Modernity, normativity and historical experience

It seems best to begin with questions regarding the deficits or conceptual short circuits in my theory of modernity; they are most forcefully raised by Antje Linkenbach and Peter Wagner. One of the basic issues, possibly the likeliest source of controversy, is the distinction between normative and non-normative perspectives; or, perhaps more precisely, the very possibility of such a distinction. It is obviously true that I insist on treating the concept of modernity as a non-normative category. Modernity is neither an unfulfilled project, nor a culturally grounded promissory note, nor the culmination of an evolutionary logic. New forms of social inequality, great power politics (including colonial expansion), global wars and totalitarian regimes are integral parts of the modern world; and I unreservedly agree with Peter’s concluding statement about modernity being on the brink of failure. This view is fundamental to my comparative historical analyses. But it does not mean that my approach is wholly non-normative. Compared to theorists like Habermas or Honneth, the normative element in my work is minimalist and inherently self-critical, yet not insignificant. It may best be described as a version of the position that Castoriadis indicated but did not take the trouble to spell out. To be brief, it begins with the point that the quest for articulate understanding is guided by a normative orientation: the regulative idea of an autonomous effort to make sense – reasoned sense, to be more explic-
That commitment to autonomy implies an elective affinity with certain forms of social life; the autonomy of thought comes to full fruition when it finds expression in critical deliberation about institutions and practices. In that broad but basic sense, the normative primacy of autonomy entails an option in favour of democracy. A further articulation of the democratic imperative leads to a defense of pluralism, in a sense that calls for closer elucidation. The development of democracy presupposes the constitution of a political sphere as distinct from other dimensions of social life, but also – to a historically varying degree – capable of intervention across the borders thus established. This perspective should not be confused with a priori assumptions about the necessity and universality of functional differentiation. The pluralism in question is both more elementary, inasmuch as it posits no specific relationship between the spheres, and more far-reaching, because they represent universes of meaning in their own right.

As will be seen, these successive steps of articulation can sustain choices between alternatives within modernity, though not a normative turn in an overall interpretation. But there is a rub. Each of them is ambiguously structured and permanently open to admixtures that can only be countered in ongoing and inconclusive ways. The quest for reasoned understanding can be subsumed under prescriptive and restrictive modes of reasoning; efforts to broaden the scope call for learning processes, not least through encounters with other cultures. The institutional consolidation of political autonomy tempts to identify democracy with particular arrangements and neglect its most radical source, irreducible to definite models. Awareness of existing, interacting and thinking in multiple realities – experienced as spheres of social life and as culturally grounded articulations of the world – is a significant enrichment of the human condition; but it is also entails exposure to a fundamentally conflictual situation. Max Weber was on the right track when he emphasized the inescapable and untranscendable conflict of values as a modern predicament. He did not, as some interpreters of his work would have it, see this as an exclusively modern phenomenon; rather, it represented an exacerbated version of trends apparent but less developed in other civilizations. Another common misunderstanding should be corrected: Weber did not claim that value conflicts were a matter for decision pure and simple; he admitted the possibility of discussion about values, but rejected the idea of a final and systematic reconciliation. However, in this context as in others, it is a legitimate question whether Weber did not overstretch the “language of values”. The alternative to be considered is a more hermeneutical perspective, with an emphasis on meaning, interpretation and the conflict of interpretations. A closer look at the “life orders” listed in Weber’s much-quoted Zwischenbetrachtung suggests that conflicting interpretations within each of them should be added to the picture.
Such interpretations entail normative claims, and in that context, the notion of aspirational concepts is widely applicable. Freedom and equality are prime examples, central to the trajectories of the political sphere and to its impact on other domains. I do not think that I underestimate the historical impact of these projects; there is, admittedly (as Peter Wagner notes) no detailed discussion of that question in *The Labyrinth of Modernity*, but that has more to do with the essayistic character of the book, and the strict word limit imposed by the publisher, than with any inclination to belittle the matter. As for the specific issue of equality, I do not disagree with Peter’s distinction between comprehensive and partial conceptions of equality, and we probably agree on the point that no comprehensive version has proved practically viable. Nor would I dispute that this record should be seen in a global context. I am no less interested in world sociology than Peter, but our preferred approaches to the field differ. Attempts to concretize the idea of world sociology will always reflect a particular focus on some regional constellations and trajectories (implicit preferences of that kind are even discernible in the works of scholars who propose a great leap towards the level of world system or world society). Peter’s primary focus has been on Africa and Latin America, more specifically on South Africa and Brazil, whereas I have been more interested in East Asia and written more on Japan than on China. One obvious consequence of these varying choices is that there will be different perspectives on colonialism. Brazil and South Africa are cases of societies strongly marked by colonial legacies, and also illustrative of the differences that result from the timing and circumstances of decolonization. East Asia is the region where Western colonialism was most marginal. References to China as – during a certain period – a de facto or informal colony are misguided; Chinese statehood was never extinguished, and ambitions to regain a former position of eminence were always present. Moreover, this region saw a unique rise, breakthrough and fall of a non-Western imperialist project, doomed to spectacular failure on its own terms but very effective in accelerating the downfall of Western colonial power in Asia. For analysts of modernity, the Japanese empire is – for several reasons – a crucially important theme: as an example of mimetic rivalry with the West, a key actor in global geopolitics during the first half of the twentieth century, and a forerunner of the developmental state that was to prove decisive for the exceptional dynamic of Japanese capitalism after World War II.

The above considerations bring me to the more general question of colonialism and its place in the global and comparative history of modernity. As Antje notes in her paper, this is an underdeveloped theme in my writings, and I do not disagree with the comment that more should be said on this subject. But I would insist on contextualizing it; more specifically, colonialism
should be discussed in close connection with other aspects of European – or, more precisely, Euro-American – expansion, seen as a complex long-term process. There are four other aspects to be taken into account. The spread of scientific knowledge and technological innovations, though linked to the broader context, is irreducible to any of the other factors; so are the global ramifications of capitalist development, which can neither be seen as the sole driving force behind colonial empire-building, nor as a by-product of the latter. A third trend of major importance is the adaptation of European institutions and practices in response to European threats or pressures; Japan is the pioneering and exemplary case. The most extreme interpretation of these developments is Wolfgang Reinhard’s thesis that Europe invented the state and exported it to the rest of the world. Such views are incompatible with the results of scholarship on the varying patterns of state formation in different cultural and geopolitical environments; but there is no doubt about massive European influence on processes of political change in the global arena. In that context, a fourth aspect should be singled out: the non-Western appropriation of oppositional ideologies first adumbrated in the West, reoriented to suit the purposes of external struggle against the dominant Western order. The outstanding case in point is the rise and expansion of Communism during the twentieth century, ending in multiple mutations rather than a straightforward collapse. Debates on modernity and its varieties have taken far too little note of this experience.

My interpretation of Communism and its destinies has developed over a long time and found expression in successive publications; much of the argument set out in *The Future that Failed* (1993) is in my opinion still valid, except that it says too little about violence, the civilizational perspective is still rather inchoate, and the chapter on China now seems a bit unsatisfactory (there is more on that subject in *The Labyrinth of Modernity*, published in 2020). Mikhail Maslovskiy has reconstructed my views on these matters very carefully, and I have no objections to his interpretation. His survey of recent sociological and sovietological work underlines the lack of contact between two domains of scholarship that would greatly benefit from closer mutual engagement, and this applies to both sides. Historical analyses of the Soviet trajectory are obviously in need of more input from the sociological discourse on modernity; but comparative historical sociology can also learn more than a little from the work of some prominent scholars in Soviet studies. Stephen Kotkin’s case study of Magnitogorsk as a centre of Stalinist industrialization, mentioned by Maslovskiy, is a masterpiece that has much to say on questions regarding the civilizational dimension of modernity. Given the lamentably anglocentric bias of international scholarly debates, it seems appropriate to
mention that important work on the Soviet experience has also been done in other languages. Here I will only mention the outstanding German historian Manfred Hildermeier, whose 1200 pages long history of the Soviet Union has hardly been equalled by any anglophone scholar. His more recent and much shorter work on Russia as a backward great power is also of major importance.

The above remarks on Communism and different perspectives on its place in modern history may also be read as a detour towards the case I want to make against postcolonial or decolonial approaches (I have yet to see a clear demarcation of these two labels). To the best of my knowledge, no postcolonial or decolonial author has so far written anything of substance about the Communist phenomenon. It is hard to see how anybody could make sense of twentieth-century history without engaging with that crucial part of it. But this failure is part of a more general problem. Postcolonialists (I will henceforth use the term to refer to the decolonial variant as well) tend to focus on the colonial experience (or, rather, their image of that past) to the exclusion of everything else. The much-repeated and variously worded mantra that the modern is the colonial modern is as reductionist as were Marxist claims that the modern is the capitalist modern, or the pseudo-Weberian notion that the modern is the rational modern. This obsessively monofocal approach then translates into proposals to de-colonize everything under the sun, from critical theory to multiculturalism and from classical antiquity to sinology. I do not think that the theory of modernity needs decolonizing. What it needs is re-equilibrating, and that means – among quite a few other things, such as those mentioned above – taking into account the very diverse historical patterns of colonial rule, anti-colonial movements, decolonizing processes and their (on the whole sobering) results. Postcolonial regimes are responsible for some of the worst massacres of the twentieth century (Indonesia 1965, Cambodia 1975-1979, Rwanda 1994). But that part of the story is not a popular topic in postcolonial discourse.

The French historian Henry Laurens, an internationally acknowledged authority on modern Middle Eastern history, has suggested that postcolonialism could be described as the last stage of Eurocentrism. He did not develop this idea in adequate detail, but it is worth serious consideration. Negative Eurocentrism might be an appropriate label. The fixation on European (or Euro-American) colonialism as uniquely evil and at the same time uniquely revealing of global historical truths lends support to that judgment. The dominant trend in postcolonial scholarship is markedly hostile to comparison and contextualization; an example that comes easily to mind is the sanctimonious irritation aroused when somebody dares to compare European and Islamic histories of slavery. For those of us who accept the principle that to think is to compare, this attitude is unacceptable.
Another reason to stress the Eurocentric character of postcolonialism is the obvious (almost mimetic) affinity to earlier European visions and projections. The search for righteous and truth-bearing victims is reminiscent of Marxist mythologizing about the proletariat. And if we put the issue in a more concrete historical context, the expectation of world-saving initiatives by postcolonial actors has an ancestry that counsels caution. In the beginning was the promise of proletarian revolution, formulated in classic terms in the *Communist Manifesto*; then there was the promise that the destruction of capitalism and imperialism would be initiated by a revolution at the weakest spot in the chain, namely Russia; when that hope turned out to be groundless, the next station was an uneasy mix of Maoism and Third-Worldism, now defunct. So far, I see no good reasons to expect a better performance by postcolonial candidates. Much of the writing in their praise is based on a wilful ignorance of the practical and visible results of decolonizing processes. Finally, it does not help that the most vociferous advocates of postcolonialism, whatever their ethnic origin, are established scholars who have mastered the skills and tricks of the Western *homo academicus*.

To sum up and repeat, I admit that my reflections on modernity have so far not dealt adequately with the vast set of questions concerning colonialism, its impact and its sequel. But I am a good deal less ready to admit that I can learn from really existing postcolonial and decolonial thought. I know too little about the Zapatistas to be able to respond to Antje’s very favourable comment. But the question that now must first of all be raised concerns their relationship to the political changes in Mexico after the last presidential election. I think the jury is still out on the policies of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (universally known as AMLO); I have not found any information on his relations with the Zapatistas, and there is nothing in Antje’s paper. My impression, for what it is worth, is that there is a kind of standoff or truce, leaving the Zapatistas in peace as a local venture without countrywide resonance.

**Eisenstadt and the axial background**

Contested claims about the meaning and multiplication of modernity are of course related to several other issues. The view of modernity as a new civilization draws on Shmuel Eisenstadt’s arguments in that vein, and they are not unrelated to his more widely discussed reconceptualization of the Axial Age (a historical epoch first defined in philosophical terms by Karl Jaspers, and commonly identified with the middle centuries of the last millennium BCE). On both counts, Eisenstadt’s ideas have sometimes been misunderstood, but
even if such errors are corrected, there is still a bit to be said on my qualified acceptance of key theses. The main points are raised – with different connotations – by Chris Hann and Toby Huff.

The most basic connection between Eisenstadt’s work and mine is the idea of a civilizational dimension of human societies, defined as the intertwining of cultural perspectives on the world with the institutional arenas of social life. I do think that Eisenstadt’s formulation of this approach represents a fundamental insight and a necessary starting-point for further development of civilizational analysis; the idea of a civilizational dimension provides an analytical foundation, different from all intuitive notions of civilizations as observable entities. To this extent, it is true – as Chris Hann observes – that I have remained “respectful” of Eisenstadt’s argument. But there is more to be said on the subject. I have adopted the concept of a civilizational dimension with several qualifications. In the first place, I place greater emphasis on the non-programmatic character of cultural patterns than Eisenstadt does; this may appear as a nuance rather than a substantive difference, but it does affect the whole interpretive range of civilizational approaches. Even in late writings, Eisenstadt sometimes used the concept of a cultural program; it reflects a lingering influence of the views he held during his structural-functionalist phase, and concedes too much to a cultural determinism which I reject. In my opinion, it is more appropriate to speak of a cultural problematic. That term also alludes to a further point of divergence. The unity of a problematic is not to be mistaken for harmony or homogeneity; in general terms, Eisenstadt agreed with that, but I tend to take more seriously the cases of limited compatibility between cultural premises of civilizational formations. To what extent the resultant tensions translate into a differentiation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (a theme of great interest to Eisenstadt), and whether that kind of polarization leads to confrontation of social alternatives, are questions for comparative historical inquiry.

If these contrasts seem primarily matters of emphasis and relative weighting, there are two additional consideration that amount to a more categorical distancing. Eisenstadt’s conception of the civilizational dimension draws on Max Weber, and I obviously have no quarrel with that; but I think that for a more complete picture, it is necessary to add the aspect stressed by Durkheim and Mauss: the understanding of civilizations as “families of societies”, formations that encompass multiple societal units and their variations on common cultural and institutional themes (this French source is discussed in greater detail in the book on anthropology and civilizational analysis, which I edited with Chris Hann). We might describe Eisenstadt’s formulation as relating to an internal side of the civilizational dimension and the perspective outlined by
the French classics as a reminder of the external one. And it should be added that the relationship between internal and external aspects is subject to historical variations.

The other point of disagreement is that I do not share Eisenstadt’s view of the axial age as the single and unparalleled revelation of a previously latent civilizational dimension. It is more plausible, and more in line with historical scholarship, to distinguish several epochs and areas where such a manifestation of the dimension(s) in question has occurred. Obvious cases in point are the archaic civilizations of the ancient Near East; late antiquity, defined as the period from the fourth to the seventh century CE; and the high Middle Ages of Western Christendom. A quick comparative look at these examples suggests that developments of that kind tend to provide partial rather than comprehensive access to the civilizational dimension (and the partial perspectives need not always be of the same type).

This does not imply any doubts about the historical significance of the axial age; the question is how it should be defined. The revived debate about this issue is documented in several publications, and it will be obvious to any reader that there is no emerging consensus; nor is it the case that Eisenstadt’s views and mine have converged. A shared interest in the axial age was one of the things that brought us together (another was the interest in Japan), but in the course of the debate, our interpretations moved in opposite directions. I think it is fair to describe Eisenstadt’s line of thinking as a maximalist one; he shifted the emphasis from civilizations of the axial age to a supposedly axial type of civilizations, including the much later Christian and Islamic ones, and used the concept of axiality as a general category, referring first and foremost to a radical distinction between the transcendental and the mundane dimensions of reality. By contrast, I have abandoned these generalized notions. The fact that the term “axial civilizations” appears in the title of a book which I co-edited should not be misunderstood; it reflects the problem that each of the three editors had his preferences, and the only solution was to defer to the most senior scholar, who was obviously Eisenstadt.

My view is that the idea of the axial age remains relevant, but as a description of an historical epoch of very radical and interestingly contemporaneous cultural transformations; but I take a minimalist line in the sense that it seems difficult to find a common denominator that would amount to any kind of cultural model or organizational principle (the latter in the Habermasian sense). The most recent formulation of these arguments is to be found in my Blumenberg lectures, published in 2019; as argued there, the most adequate characterization of the axial age seems to be that it saw fundamental changes to the relationship between religion and the political sphere, which in turn paved the
way for cultural innovations in other domains. This is in line with my attempts to theorize the religio-political nexus as a particularly important articulation of the civilizational dimension. But the changes that it underwent during the axial age are not reducible to a common pattern.

In this context, it should be added that Eisenstadt did not – to the best of my knowledge – use the term “secondary revolution” to describe the Jewish invention of monotheism and downgrade it in comparison to the Greek innovations of the axial age. He did for a while use the concept of a secondary breakthrough in connection with major later transformations of traditions originating in the axial age, including the emergence of Christianity and Islam. One of the things agreed on at the Firenze conference on the axial age was that it would be best to abandon this concept; it did not do justice to the originality of the transformations in question.

A stronger emphasis on diverse historical experiences during the axial age entails some rethinking of geopolitical and geocultural contexts. There is no doubt that Jaspers wrote his book on the origin and goal of history as an attempt to overcome Eurocentric preconceptions, and Eisenstadt continued in the same vein; but they can both be criticized for over-focusing on the two cultures commonly regarded as the main sources of European traditions, ancient Greece and ancient Israel. It would be anachronistic to call this one-sided approach Eurocentric; no European identity can be attributed to the ancient Greeks (in their imaginary, Europe was only a geographical category), and even less to the Jews. But some corrections to the Mediterranean and Near Eastern bias are necessary, and in that regard, the Chinese case is particularly challenging because of its geographical and cultural distance from the primary foci of Jaspers’s and Eisenstadt’s work. Three aspects of the Chinese experience seem especially noteworthy. In the first place, I agree with Christoph Harbsmeier’s view on the chronological framework: there are good reasons to talk about a Chinese “axial millennium” (in strict terms, the period in question is even a bit longer than a millennium). On one hand, traditions associated with the Zhou dynasty that came to power late in the second millennium BCE and lost it very gradually from the eighth century BCE onwards were more important for Chinese thought (most notably for Confucius and his followers) than any comparably ancient source was for axial pioneers further to the west; on the other hand, a systematic selection from the massive intellectual legacy of the Warring States period (commonly dated from 475 to 221 BCE) was carried out under the Han dynasty that ruled (with a short interval) from the late third century BCE to the early third century CE. Nothing comparable happened in any other civilization with an axial record. There was, admittedly, a selection and synthesis of sorts when an already Hellenized Christianity became the of-
Official religion of the Roman Empire; but that was a much more contingent and less systematic process than the Han codification.

Secondly, the long-term formative influence of the axial legacy was vastly more continuous and comprehensive in China than elsewhere. It is true that Chinese history saw several breakdowns of imperial unity, leading to renewed state building in changed circumstances, but the vision of a united and universally dignified empire, going back to the axial millennium, survived one crisis after another. Imperial rulers of Inner Asian origin repeatedly left their mark on Chinese society, but although the idea of ongoing assimilation into Chinese culture has been refuted, the conquerors were sufficiently interested in Chinese statecraft and its ideological underpinnings for a basic continuity to be retained. Nobody would now claim that the centuries between the beginnings of Confucian thought and the completion of imperial unification were the only creative phase in Chinese intellectual history, but it remains true that the work done then has been more directly and lastingly relevant to later reflections and debates than any axial tradition in the West (India is probably somewhere in between). It might be objected that ancient Greek thought has enjoyed a similar position in Europe; but the long and comprehensive dominance of Christianity imposed a dividing line that has no parallel in China.

The third issue to be considered from a Chinese angle is the question of transcendence, discussed at some lengths in Geir Sigurðsson's paper. This is a complex problem, often additionally confused by mutual misunderstandings, and it may be useful to start with a survey of different meanings. The least emphatic is the one invoked by Benjamin Schwartz when he described the axial age as an age of transcendence; for him, transcendence meant simply "a way of standing back and looking beyond"; there are no ontological implications. The criticism by Hall and Ames, cited by Geir, seems unfair in that they read too much into this idea. Another approach, found in the writings of philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, conceives of transcendence as an elementary anthropological structure, a way of human being-in-the-world and relating to other phenomena encountered in the world. That meaning is obviously trans-cultural. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there is the strong meaning that refers to a higher level of reality; this is the concept of transcendence used by Jaspers and Eisenstadt, although with stronger religious connotations in Jaspers's interpretation than in Eisenstadt's; both were aware of differences between Greek, Jewish and Indian versions of transcendence, Eisenstadt more so than Jaspers. Geir is very doubtful about the applicability of this concept in the Chinese context, and so am I.

There is yet another idea of transcendence that may be more useful. It is Jan Patočka's conception of a “double transcendence”, horizontal and vertical
(he may have borrowed the expression “vertical transcendence” from Albert Camus, but he gave it a distinctive philosophical meaning). Horizontal transcendence is the ability to imagine changes – not necessarily revolutionary but including such alternatives – to existing forms of social life; vertical transcendence is the ability to articulate ways of relating to the world, and it can be radicalized into visions of moral or metaphysical principles superior to all worldly experience. This paradigm is an offshoot of the phenomenological tradition. It allows for varying forms and degrees of the horizontal as well as the vertical dimension, as well as different ways of combining them. As a comparative frame of reference, it seems well suited to making sense of Chinese traditions, both the cosmological ones that do not fit Eisenstadt’s scheme and the political ones that could (as Thomas Metzger argued against Eisenstadt) give rise to tensions between Confucian literati and imperial rulers.

The history of Confucianism in pre-modern, pre-Communist modern and Communist China, as outlined by Geir, is too complex for an extensive discussion to be possible in the present text. We can probably agree that Confucian thought was a continuing but not immutably dominant factor in civilizing processes, with particular emphasis on the cultivation of rulership and the rationalization of hierarchy. I confess to some scepticism about the classical sources of Mao Zedong thought. Mao’s so-called philosophical texts – On Contradiction and On Practice – are first and foremost a rehash of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, as codified by Stalin. As an ideologist, Mao lacked the autonomy and originality that he showed as a political strategist.

Having clarified my reservations concerning the civilizational dimension and the axial age, I will briefly turn to other questions about Eisenstadt’s work. He did not use the concept of social imaginaries, but an occasional reference to Castoriadis suggests that he was not averse to it; on the other hand, he once said in a conversation that Castoriadis’s Imaginary Institution of Society was strong on the imaginary, but weaker on the institution. It seems clear that he had in mind the power component of institutions; it is of course legitimate to problematize the connection that is at the very core of social-historical being. Chris Hann invokes the tradition of British social anthropology and argues that institutions matter more than imaginaries. It is tempting to suggest that this is a chicken-and-egg issue, not altogether unlike the Marxist distinction between basis and superstructure; as the more sophisticated Marxists had to admit, the superstructure is always already inside the basis; and for the most consistent among them (Castoriadis par excellence), this opened up a road beyond Marx. Analogously, the imaginary is always already inside the institution. The strength of an institution vis-à-vis some aspects of the imaginary depends on other aspects of the latter. Conversely, the imaginary component may be
more or less capable of transcending its institutional framework, and that capacity may find expression in projects of alternative social orders or in an enhanced variety of cultural perspectives on the world. In short, the questions to be asked about interrelations of imaginary and institutional patterns have to do with changing forms of their intertwining, rather than a unilateral primacy of one or the other, and call for comparative historical analysis, rather than a general and definitive judgment.

I do not think it is fair to accuse Eisenstadt of neglecting concrete historical inquiry. The texts listed in Toby Huff’s bibliography are a somewhat one-sided selection; Eisenstadt’s introductory contributions to the SUNY volume on civilizations of the axial age do not fully reflect his familiarity with the historical record that was in this case left to other authors (it should be added that there exists a much more extensive multi-volume German publication of papers on this subject, where the historical grounding of Eisenstadt’s views is more visible). His writings on China and India are also to be considered. And last but not least, his major work on Japanese civilization certainly cannot be accused of neglecting history. As I have made clear in my writings on Japan, I disagree with Eisenstadt’s key thesis: the idea of Japan as a non-axial civilization does not withstand scrutiny. But there is much to be learned from his detailed analyses.

That said, I do not deny that there are some blank areas and underdeveloped themes in Eisenstadt’s civilizational analysis, and in some such cases, the approach initiated by Benjamin Nelson and further developed by Toby Huff is a helpful corrective. That applies, in particular, to the problematic of intercivilizational encounters. Nelson placed a much stronger emphasis on this aspect than Eisenstadt, but his main interest was in large-scale contacts – one-sided or mutually sustained – contacts between whole civilizational complexes. Further exploration of the field would have to distinguish more systematically between different types, levels, and settings of encounters. In the temporal context, we should note the difference between long-term interconnections and short-term but sometimes transformative events. On the spatial level, there are both intercivilizational processes that affect large areas and localized points of intensive contact. From a structural point of view, there is one specific case that deserves particular attention: the combination of intercivilizational and inter-imperial encounters. The two forces at work in such situations are not co-extensive. Some civilizations are more prone to empire-building than others; some empires are more civilizationally defined than others; civilizations can cross imperial borders, and empires cross civilizational ones. The interaction is, among other things, reflected in particular socio-cultural phenomena of border zones; the Greek Catholics and the Uyghurs discussed in Chris Hann’s paper belong to that category. It may be difficult to assign a civilizational iden-
tity to these ethno-religious groups, but it is much easier to show that they are products of historical processes involving imperial as well as civilizational factors. The study of “borderlands”, particularly important in Eurasian history, has hitherto mainly focused on inter-imperial dynamics; there are good reasons to bring in a civilizational perspective.

Another theme that remained under-theorized in Eisenstadt’s work was the European transition from the medieval world to early modernity. It is, in particular, true that he had little to say on both the legal revolution of the Middle Ages and the beginnings of the scientific revolution. Toby Huff’s paper contains interesting and important reflections on these matters (and more can be found in his published work); the whole problem is too complex and ramified to be discussed at length in this brief comment, but two points should be made, one in agreement with Huff and the other less so. There is no doubt that the transformations of the high Middle Ages were crucially important for the breakthrough of early modernity in Europe and for the advantages that European spearheads of modernity gained over other parts of the world. Huff’s work on the origins of modern science is supported and complemented by recent scholarship on the medieval background. On the other hand, I am thoroughly sceptical about the notion of a “deep structure of modernity” having taken shape in late medieval times. The very term suggests a coherence and a programmed direction that sits uneasily with the experience and the diversification of modernity, as I see it. Moreover, the complex of high and late medieval changes is better understood as a prelude to further transformations than as a pre-structuring process.

The Prague connection

Finally, I would like to thank L’ubomír Dunaj for his accurate and sensitive excavation of my intellectual roots. There is far more of them in Prague than anywhere else. I have no significant disagreements with L’ubomír’s analysis of the Czechoslovak (and broader East Central European) background, but a few clarifying remarks on two subjects may be added: the two Czech philosophers whom he rightly identifies as major influences on my work, and the particular problems of post-Communism in the successor states of the Czechoslovak republic.

My intellectual encounters with Karel Kosík and Jan Patočka were very different. I read Kosík’s *Dialectics of the Concrete* immediately after its publication in 1963, and I think that was my most eye-opening reading experience. It completed my transition from orthodox Marxism to a critical neo-Marxism, interested in dialogue with other traditions and opposed to the key dogmas.
of official Soviet-style ideology. More specifically, Kosík’s work introduced me to phenomenological Marxism, which became a fundamental reference for my thinking during the following years. The discovery of Patočka’s philosophy was a much more gradual process. Of course, I knew of him during my stay in Prague (for one thing, his book on Aristotle, his precursors and his heirs, was published in the mid-1960s). But it was not until later, especially after my move to Australia in 1975, that I began to get a more adequate understanding of his complex and multi-faceted work. Some important texts were made available by Czech publishers in exile, and when the Prague publication of Patočka’s collected writings began after 1990, a closer engagement became possible. But some obstacles also became more visible. Patočka was a thinker who explored a wide range of themes and approaches, often without completing the task foreshadowed at the beginning; there are affinities and partial convergences between the various paths of thought, but it is very difficult to fit them all together into a comprehensive project. Obviously, this had something to do with the circumstances in which he worked. One of his most interesting unfinished projects is the analysis of modernity as a civilization and its division into moderate and radical versions. The evidence now available suggests that this was written in the early 1950s (not after 1956, as I once thought and argued in a Czech publication on this subject). I first read it sometime in the 1990s, after its publication in the first volume of the Collected Writings. It was probably the first attempt to theorize modernity as a civilization of a new type (a super-civilization, as Patočka called it); Eisenstadt developed that idea from the late 1970s onwards, but without any knowledge of Patočka’s work. The concept of a civilizational schism was an attempt to make sense of the Communist phenomenon, by an author who had first-hand experience of it; not that Patočka identified radical super-civilization with Communism, but he saw the Soviet model as the most ambitious and uncompromising expression of an older cultural current. I would like to add a few comments to L’ubomír’s description of the two modernities; that will help to explain why I consider Patočka’s interpretation, incomplete and in some ways outdated, as still relevant to debates about the modern world.

As L’ubomír notes, one of the defining characteristics of moderate super-civilization is its ability and willingness to make place for traditional sources of meaning; the global overpowering and undermining of older civilizations is, as it were, mitigated by a certain cultural receptivity to their ways of articulating the world. But this is not a matter of a traditionalist admixture to modern dynamics. For Patočka, the appropriate modern attitude to traditions was to engage with their modes of responding to problematicity, and this was the reason why he had such a strong preference for the Greeks; they had taken
“life in problematicity” further than any other premodern civilization. As for the radical version of super-civilization, and more specifically its Communist version, it did indeed proclaim the sovereignty of human reason and idolize it as a universal source of meaning; but this self-understanding was not the whole story. In the paradigmatic Soviet case, it was translated into a comprehensive world-view (Marxism-Leninism), presented as the only scientific one and endowed with jurisdiction over all domains of social and cultural life. On top of that, the institutionalized and monopolistic world-view was embodied in a closed sequence of quasi-prophets, the “classics of Marxism-Leninism” (Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin). This completed the formation of a secular religion (Patočka did not use that term, but it seems compatible with his line of argument), and – by the same token – a reconnection with traditional patterns, but in a way very different from the moderate version of modernity, as described by Patočka.

The other matter to be briefly mentioned concerns the aftermath of early post-Communist illusions and phantasms of a promised future. Failures of liberal prescriptions in the East Central European region have been convincingly analyzed by Krastev and Holmes (cited by L’ubomír); but this general diagnosis needs supplementing by closer accounts of problems and predicaments arising within each particular country. These obstructive situations differ from case to case, not least because of varying historical backgrounds and trajectories that have resurfaced in a new context. In the case (or the two interconnected cases) that I have followed most closely, developments in the Czech and Slovak republics still reflect unsettled – and some would say imponderable – after-effects of the breakup of a common state in 1992. It is now widely argued that the Czech and Slovaks (probably a majority on both sides) who continued to support the idea of a common state had incompatible ideas about its shape, and that separation followed by policies of good relations was a better option than continuing tension and acrimony. Even if these claims are accepted (and there is some room for debate), the implications for collective memory and political culture should not be overlooked. In the Czech case, the end of the Czechoslovak state was inevitably perceived as a historical failure and a relegation to a weaker position within the European context, all the more so since the reference to the first Czechoslovak republic had played a significant role in the culture of dissent. The breakup resulted in a marked deterioration of political culture. In Slovakia, the move to independent statehood evoked troubled memories of the only precedent, the satellite of Nazi Germany whose formal independence lasted from 1939 to 1945; it could neither be adopted as a legitimate predecessor nor written out of Slovak history, and it has remained a shadow companion of right-wing nationalism. There is, however, no doubt that in
the first instance, more Slovaks than Czechs made positive sense of the split; whether that will ultimately translate into a more solid relationship between nation and state remains to be seen.

The return of unsettled historical legacies is of course not confined to Czech and Slovak politics. In fact, recent Hungarian and Polish experiences of that kind have attracted more international attention, which is not to say that they are better understood. There are still good reasons to foreground the image of East Central Europe as a perpetual crisis region burdened with a particularly problem-ridden history, for that very reason eminently instructive for scholars is search of comparative perspectives beyond Western horizons, but not as widely recognized in that regard as it deserves. For those who have developed a strong interest in this part of the world (including the present writer), the widespread neglect is an additional incentive to keep up the connection.

Author Bio

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