This paper argues that more conceptual clarification and a more equal development of comparative history are needed before we can attempt a synthetic interpretation of the early second millennium CE. In conceptual terms, the debate centres on the idea of formative historical phases, characterized by major and lasting innovations on the levels of cultural patterns and/or power structures; but the dynamics of such phases can only be analyzed in relation to long-term processes of two kinds: those that precede the episodes of accelerated change and those through which their consequences unfold. This problematic is briefly explored with reference to classical as well as contemporary sources. As for historical analyses and controversies, there are good reasons to regard the period in question as a phase of formative changes in various fields and in different parts of the Eurasian macro-region, but there is also a broad spectrum of conflicting interpretations, more structured in some cases than others. The two most thoroughly analyzed cases—and the clearest examples of transformative dynamics—are Western Christendom and Song China.

Preliminary Reflections: Long-term Processes and Formative Phases

Let us start with some reflections on the categories and perspectives of historical sociology. The latter (whether understood as a new branch or a comprehensive reorientation of sociological inquiry) is frequently defined in terms of a focus on long-term processes—or, in other words, a processual approach to the longue durée. This interpretation, most closely associated with Norbert Elias and his disciples, is one-sided in that it bypasses a problematic which goes back to classical sociology and becomes more explicit in the works of later authors, even if a selective emphasis on separate aspects tends to obscure the connections: the question of the relationship between long-term processes and formative phases. The latter term is, in brief and without touching upon issues to be discussed later, used to refer to relatively short periods of comprehensive, condensed and decisive change.
The sociological classics did not pose the question in general terms, but evidence of sensitivity to both aspects can be found in some of their most seminal texts. The *Communist Manifesto* combines an account of the rise of the bourgeoisie as a long-term process with a particular emphasis on the more recent, abrupt and revolutionary transformations that have—as the authors see it—completed the story and created preconditions for a new beginning. In a very different vein, Max Weber analyzed the long-term rationalizing process involved in the "rise of the West", while at the same time stressing the importance of the more revolutionary innovations embodied in the medieval city; the second theme was neglected by some of the most influential interpreters of his work, but a brief reference to a whole sequence of revolutionary episodes—in the context of comparing China with the West—shows that he intended to tackle this question in a more systematic way. As these two examples suggest, revolutions are particularly revealing keys to the interrelations between different dimensions of history. Sociological reflections on revolutionary change go beyond the commonsensical view in two respects: through a broader idea of historical upheavals as formative phases rather than events or sequences of events, and through the reconstructive perspective that highlights a longer prehistory. Although it would be absurd to posit a precise chronological criterion, the distinction is not wholly arbitrary. Revolutionary phases may be defined in terms of centuries (see R. I. Moore’s contribution to this volume, as well as his book on “the first European revolution”), but nobody would describe the millennial dynamic of the long Middle Ages—as analyzed by Norbert Elias—as a revolution. Both categories are contextual, and chronological dimensions vary from one specific context to another.

The history of theoretical debates on revolutions shows that it is not easy to balance the two perspectives. With regard to the paradigmatic political revolution of modern times, Tocqueville’s analysis of the ancien regime and its unintended achievements was rediscovered as an antidote to the dominant images of rupture. This became the starting-point for a new (still unfinished) round of controversy about the relative importance of long- and short-term frames of reference. Similarly, interpretations of the American revolution entered a new phase with the now widely accepted argument that the eighteenth century represents a turning-point in English state formation, with different ramifications and...

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