

# THE AXIAL AGE AND MODERNITY: FROM MAX WEBER TO KARL JASPERS AND SHMUEL EISENSTADT

*Vittorio Cotesta*

## *Abstract*

*This essay highlights the theoretical relations between Weber, Jaspers and Eisenstadt on the issue of the axial age and modernity. For Weber Modernity is an “axial age” but also an event in the history of Western rationalization. So we can’t say which is his idea on this topic. For Jaspers the axial revolution took place at the same time in China, India, and Greece. Modernity can’t be an “axial age” because it took place in the West and only after in these three civilizations. For Eisenstadt, on the contrary, modernity is a second “axial age”. He thinks the XX and the XXI century as an era of multiple modernities.*

## Introduction

Jaspers was one of the students closest to Weber. Maybe only Paul Honigsheim was closer. Weber appreciated him. We all know how cutting his judgments could be. In his essays on the Sociology of Religion, where he may have been addressing Stefan George, he exclaims: “Anyone who *wants ‘visions’ should go to the cinema!*” but, in a note immediately following this he hastens to add that “this does not refer to *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* by K. Jaspers (Weber 1988 (1920), *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, I, p. 14). It is to him that his last letter was addressed. A small gesture of kindness. Weber had received a book from Jaspers and wrote to him saying:

Esteemed Mr. Jaspers, thank you for your much appreciated book (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). I shall be able to “read it” in August. In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Vorbemerkung, Kap. I., §1) I have already quoted your *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* and you know how much I appreciate it. Kindest regards/ Max Weber. (Weber 2012, p. 1101)

After Weber’s death, Jaspers remained very close to the widow Marianne Weber. Both were anxious lest something Weber had written (a report he had drawn up for the doctors) might fall into the hands of the Nazis. Frau Weber gave this report to Jaspers who, afraid he might not be able to keep it safe,

gave it back to her. Frau Weber then destroyed it in agreement with Jaspers.<sup>1</sup>

In her memoirs Marianne Weber tells a friend how she attended two lectures on Max Weber by Jaspers: “he spoke of him as a politician, researcher and philosopher, placing him at the highest level. When I told him that he had certainly positioned Max Weber within the framework of his philosophy and somehow changed something [regarding Weber’s positions], he seriously pointed out: ‘No, on the contrary. I fashioned my idea of the philosophy of existence according to Max Weber’s mold’” (Weber 1948, p. 160). This is indeed a moot point: Jaspers is, albeit mildly, accused of attributing his philosophical positions to Weber. During a confrontation with Hans Rickert this position was confirmed. Rickert, in fact, contrary to what Jaspers held, believed that, at philosophical level, Weber was an amateur (in Green 1974, p. 288).

These were only skirmishes, however. Weber’s widow was seeking an *authentic* interpretation of her husband’s position; the philosopher, while willing to attribute every greatness to his friend, denies his philosophical ability. Who was right? Did Jaspers *annex* Max Weber to his philosophy of existence? Or were his statements founded on truth, while the others – Weber’s wife and his friend – failed to understand Weber’s philosophy?

In contemporary scholarly discourse regarding globalization, the most popular expressions drawn from Jaspers’ works are “axial revolution” and “axial period”. The question we wish to address here is the following: in public discourse regarding globalization are Jaspers expressions only current or, taking his statements seriously, are we all Weberians in some way without even knowing it? In other words, by using Jaspers’ terminology do we assume Weberian positions too? And if this is true in some way, was it simply about issues of the philosophy of history that Jaspers was thinking when he coined those terms (1949), or do these concepts also permit us to understand what is happening in contemporary history? In the pages that follow we shall try to answer these two questions. First we shall deal with Jaspers’ theory of axial revolutions as related to Weber’s works; then we shall examine Shmuel Eisenstadt’s recovery of these concepts and the issue of the interpretation of modernity as a new global era.

1 Perhaps there is some exaggeration in this. But if we consider what Johannes Haller said about him in 1944/45 we can understand Jaspers and Marianne Weber’s caution. Haller accused Weber of being periodically addicted to alcohol, to be unknown, with reason, to the younger generation, etc. Johannes Haller was a Catholic historian whom Weber met in Rome during the winter of 1901-1902 and even went to the trouble to help him, to praise and commend him to Troeltsch in an effort to get him a professorship at Heidelberg. Over time, however, Haller became a Nazi and expressed his hatred for the Social Democrats and the Liberals, whose foremost target was Weber (Schmitt 2012, p. 110).

## Jaspers' Axial Age and Weber's comparative sociology

First of all, it is opportune to recall a fundamental fact: neither Weber nor Jaspers wrote as if they lived in another world, a perfect world devoid of passion, conflict, contradictions, struggles and interests. Their work should be read, though not only, in relation to their lifetime, to the society of which they believed they were active members, in agreement or in strong disagreement – as is nearly always the case – with the decision-making élites of their times. Examining the debate regarding the axial society, on the contrary, one has the sensation that the topic centers on ideas that stem from ideas that encounter or agree with other ideas. On the contrary, it is necessary to make an effort to grasp the strong link between the historical situation, individual situations and theoretical production.

At this level, it is important to point out the considerable analogy existing between the time when Weber was writing and that when Jaspers proposed his theory of the axial age. Furthermore, the discourse of the one and the other are homologous in structure. Weber conducted a global geopolitical analysis and looked to the fate of Germany within the ambit of relations between the major world powers. Like other German writers (Simmel, Scheler, for example) he claimed that Germany deserved to occupy a place among similar major powers. For this reason he approved of the war. Then, when the outcome of conflict appeared to be compromised and a catastrophe had taken place, he felt great pain when contemplating the wretched destiny of Germany within the context of worldwide geopolitics. The war that had been lost provided one consoling feature at least. If world hegemony was now solidly in the hands of the United States of America, it had prevented Russia from asserting itself and Germany had not fallen under the yoke of the Russian bear.<sup>2</sup> The question regarding the factors that led to the uniqueness and universality of the West posed at the beginning of the *Vorbemerkung* of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*

- 2 In 1918 (on the 24th. November), in a letter to Friedrich Crusius, he outlined a brief analysis of the world's geopolitical situation: "The self-discipline demanded by truth obliges us, obviously, to say that the political role of Germany at *world* level is a thing of the past; the worldwide supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons – ... – *is* a given fact. It is immensely disagreeable and yet: *we* have foiled something *far* worse – *Russian* tyranny. This glory shall remain ours. American supremacy of the world was inevitable... I hope things *may remain* so and that it does not have to share it with Russia. *This* for me is the aim of our future world policy, because the Russian threat has been foiled only for the moment, not forever ..." (Weber 2012, p. 320). A month later (on the 26th. of December 1918), he wrote again to Crusius: "I fear we shall have civil war and invasion. We shall put up with these too, however hard and terrible. Because I believe in the indestructibility of this Germany, *never has being a German seemed such a great gift from heaven as in these grim days of its disgrace ...*" (Weber 2012, p. 381).

was addressed on the occasion of their publication in 1920. It is not present in the 1904/1905 edition of *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. He worked on his analysis of Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism and ancient Judaism from 1911 onwards. The fruit of this work was published in *Archiv für Sozial und Politik Wissenschaften* – in 1916 Confucianism, in 1917 Hinduism and Buddhism and, in 1918, ancient Judaism. One can reasonably assume that Weber meditated on the identity of Europe, the West and modernity at the very time when he saw the possibility of Germany's finally becoming a great power denied and catastrophe looming for his country.

Jaspers's situation appears different. His theoretical postulates stand on a plane where civilizations are compared, detached from political concerns. His theoretical reflections on civilization emerge after an even greater catastrophe, that of the Second World War. His patriotism never gave rise to nationalism and that for a very personal reason: his wife, Gertrud Jaspers, was Jewish, and he was always highly sensitive to the issue of anti-Semitism. It was no chance that, disappointed with German society and intelligentsia, he concluded his academic life in Switzerland, in Basel. Yet, like Weber, if not more so and with greater awareness, he was concerned about the fate of Europe. The passionate debate regarding the axial society fails to recall the lecture Jaspers held in Geneva as part of the *Rencontres internationales* in September 1946 on *L'esprit européen*. Jaspers published the text of his lecture also as *Europa der Gegenwart* (1947b) and *Von Europäische Geist* (1947c). That year the *Rencontres* were dedicated to Europe, its history, identity, past, present and future. Papers were presented by Julien Benda, Georges Bernanos, Karl Jaspers, Stephen Spender, Jean Guéhenno, Francesco Flora, Denis de Rougemont, Jean-R. De Salis and Georg Lukacs<sup>3</sup>. The number as well as the cultural and scholarly level of the participants gives one an idea of how the problem of Europe's destiny preoccupied the French, German, Swiss and Italian intellectuals of the time. Jaspers' paper (unfortunately we cannot talk about the others) centered on three points: 1) what is Europe? 2) what is the worldwide situation? 3) what direction, capable of inspiring European awareness, can we take?

The point of departure of his reasoning is that “today, the world center of

3 The minutes of the conference (tome I) contain a list of the participants (in some cases the surnames only are provided): Jean Amrouche, Ernest Ansermet, Robert (?) Aron, Baldacci, Julien Benda, Georges Bernanos, François Bondy, Umberto Campagnolo, Rene Dovaz, Maurice Druon, Francesco Flora, Max-Pol Fouchet, Rene Gillouin, Antoine Goléa, Goldman, Jean Guéhenno, Jeanne Hersch, Karl Jaspers, Jean Lescure, Georg Lukacs, dr. Mayer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michaëlis, Fernand Müller, Andre Oltramare, Marcel Raymond, Reininck, Denis de Rougemont, André Rousseaux, Jean-R. de Salis, von Schenk, Renee Schidlof, Sokoline, Stephen Spender, Jean Starobinski, Vigorelli, Jean Wahl.

gravity of Western humanity is moving away from Europe, to the plains of America and Asia.” (Jaspers 1947a, p. 366). Later he adds: “You have to live with the globe before your eyes. Europe has become small indeed” (Jaspers 1947a, p. 382). This is the main topic on Germany’s everyday agenda since 1918, Jaspers recalls, referring to the title of a book by Oswald Spengler, *Der Übergang des Abendlandes*. At that time, Spengler had become a celebrity. His methods were criticized, but the findings which drove his analysis were not questioned. Max Weber spoke about this with Spengler in a seminar and then in a long meeting held in his house. Overall he felt sympathy towards Spengler but as far as scholarship was concerned he considered him a “brilliant amateur”. He rejected his method. His analyzes in the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* reveal equal awareness of the crisis, if not of the end of the West. Jaspers’ thinking was similar.

It may seem surprising, but in his Geneva conference Jaspers enounced his fundamental thoughts on the axial revolution. I cannot say whether on this occasion he pre-announced what he later stated in his *The Origin and Goal of History*, or whether he simply expounded ideas he had already prepared for the book. The fact is that the conference was held in 1946 and the contents published in 1947; on the other hand, *The Origin and Goal of History*, was published for the first time in 1949. It is likely that during the conference he presented ideas and theories he had already prepared for the book, though here he expounded them in a shorter and simpler form.

First of all, Jaspers considers an important theoretical point:

Europe today – says Jaspers – becomes aware of its identity thanks to comparison and for this fact alone it loses its absolute character. Its technical and military supremacy becomes a simple episode of history. (Jaspers 1947a, p. 366-367)

Comparison with other civilizations brings awareness of the relativity of one’s own existence in the world. Any kind of absolute character is now impossible. In actual fact

Seen from the point of view of the millennia, all human greatness, from China to the West, appears to us to be of equal value. (Jaspers 1947a, p. 367)

All civilizations, in Jaspers’ opinion, are equally valid. None of them is superior to another. Their histories are common or analogous, at least. In actual fact, says Jaspers,

The parallelism existing between the three greatest independent spiritual evolutions, in China, in India and in the West, is obvious. For the Christian faith Christ is the axis of universal history. The course of events goes towards

him and comes from him, until the day of the last judgment. But from an empirical point of view – which is not necessarily in conflict with religious faith – the axis of universal history is the period between 800 and 200 BCE, the years from Homer to Archimedes, the era of the great prophets of the Old Testament and of Zarathustra, the era of the Upanishads and Buddha, the era that goes from the songs of Shiking, to Lao Tzu and Confucius and up until Zhuang Zhou. (Jaspers 1947a, p. 367)

As we can see, this is the core of the theory of the “axial” revolution or “axial” age. In *The Origin and Goal of History* it is expounded better and in greater detail. But here there is one reference missing from the book: an essential reference to the work of Max Weber. Jaspers continues his dialogue with the public recalling what, in his opinion, are the characteristics of the axial revolution. In that period – 800-200 BCE. – “all the fundamental thinking of successive cultures was acquired”. One always returns to this period “by means of Renaissances, in China, in India and in the West. Everywhere it presents common features: in extreme situations of the human condition, the supreme issues are addressed; man discovers his finitude, and, at the same time, creates images and thoughts that permit him to go on living despite everything. The religions of salvation are born; rationalizing begins: and in the three fields of culture, man comes up against the decline of an epoch seen as critical, marked by the emergence of great despotic empires ... When these three worlds met they could understand each other, because, despite all their differences, for them it meant the same fundamental questions of the human condition.” (Jaspers 1947a, p.367-368) Besides these common features, however, there are also differences between these worlds. In fact, “over the millennia every one of them has developed differently. Particularly over the past four centuries a radical difference between Europe on the one hand, and China and India, on the other, has emerged: universal science and technology that gave Europe supremacy, a transient world hegemony whose actual goal is to make technology and science ... the determining forces of the world’s destiny.” (Jaspers 1947a, p.368)

Here – says Jaspers – are

the questions that may be asked of universal history, the fundamental questions which inspire Max Weber’s great work: what element is common to all three great cultures? what is the specificity of the West? why did a particular kind of development occur here? why have we capitalism in the West? from where do rationalization and its content stem? from where universal science? from where the conception of morality that makes it possible to calculate and foresee the vital principle of all works opposing traditionalist behavior? (Jaspers 1947a, p. 368)

If we compare this list of questions with that contained in Weber's *Vorbermerkung* to the essays in the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, it is possible to detect a difference in time, but, in actual fact, Jaspers reiterates the topics addressed by Weber. He compresses Weber's eleven traits of the West into the three chief characteristics he attributes to Europe: freedom, history (or rather: awareness of world historicity), science.

As to me, I hold that Jaspers' adherence to Weber's thinking may go even deeper and that he may rightly claim that his philosophy of existence was inspired by Weber and hold, contrary to Rickert, that Weber was a great philosopher. If one imagines Weber's work as a multi-floor building and proceed from the top down, from the roof to the foundations, one can see what the basic question from which all the others stem, was. Weber's work may be read diachronically, from its beginnings to its development through the author's lifetime, inter-relating the questions he poses regarding Germany, Europe and the world while also seeing it as a grand theoretical opus whose logic and epistemological structure it is possible to track. It is well to note that these modes of interpretation are not alternative but complementary. We should not repeat Parsons's mistake and read Weber's work *only* in terms of the contribution it made to sociological theory, or do as Friederich Meinecke (1927), Arthur Mitzman (1970) and Martin Green (1974) did, that is, *reduce* Weber's work to a mere expression of the problems he faced at personal and family level and those of the historical period in which he lived. On the contrary, Weber, on the basis of his own life, of the history of his time, formulated a question of fundamental import to humanity: why does human suffering exist? Why are some people happy and others unhappy? Why does life smile on some while for others it is only an endless series of catastrophes?

This is the question from which disenchantment stemmed, the end of all and any naive view of the world, the end of emotional religious faith and the beginning of a quest for reasons why the world is thus and not otherwise, and at the same time, the beginning of endless attempts to make it work differently from the way it does. This problem, according to Weber, common to the ancient Jewish, Chinese and Indian worlds, generates different solutions, leads to different rationalizations and different *theodicies*.

Jaspers grasps this dimension, if only because, like Weber, all his life he had to deal with pain, suffering and disease. The important point is not, however, the personal aspect of the issue, but the introduction of a general problem that affects humanity at all times and in all places. For the Jewish culture the question is that of Job: Why do these things happen to me, lord, only to me? How have I sinned? Maybe I have not loved you enough? The answer to this

fundamental question has given rise to diverse justifications regarding the existing human order or reasons for challenging it and for attempting to build another world, better than the existing one.

We have to make it clear that Jaspers was not a commentator of Weber's but one of his original interpreters, one who drew inspiration from Weber to create his own personal view of humanity. This is what emerges from an even minimal examination of the concept of axial revolution. The aspects enounced above are more fully expounded in *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949; English tr. 1953). The *axis of history* is an empirical datum, "a fact capable of being accepted as such by all men, Christians included. This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity; its character would have to be, if not empirically cogent and evident, yet so convincing to empirical insight as to give rise to a common frame of historical self-comprehension for all peoples for the West, for Asia, and for all men on earth, without regard to particular articles of faith. It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deep-cut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short, we may style this the 'Axial Period.'" (Jaspers 1953, p.1)

The demarcation point between the earlier and later societies should be identified, above all, in their *self-educational capability*, in their ability to reproduce and train their members, *according to a plan independent* of natural or magical or divine forces "As a result of this process, hitherto unconsciously accepted ideas, customs and conditions were subjected to examination, questioned and liquidated. Everything was swept into the vortex. In so far as the traditional substance still possessed vitality and reality, its manifestations were clarified and thereby transmuted." (Jaspers 1953, p. 2)

A central question is, which societies or which areas of the world were affected by this revolution of the foundations of human life? Not unlike what Weber had done at analytical level, Jaspers proceeds, by almost bringing his complex work to a synthetic philosophical head. Just as Weber had analyzed Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism and ancient Judaism – continually making comparisons with Christianity and Islam to which he was unable to devote specific analyzes – so Jaspers found in these civilizations the traits of the axial revolution. "What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations." (Jaspers 1953, p. 2) Man's *age of innocence* ends in this period. "He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical

questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 2)

Unlike Weber, however, Jaspers insists on distinguishing between pre-history and history. The axial revolution, in this sense, is the watershed between the previous stage of human existence – which he calls prehistory – and the following one, history proper. From the axial period on, notwithstanding a few differences, Jaspers believes that China, India, Islam and the West continue at the same pace until 1500 CE. Then the West begins moving more quickly. Why on earth? What happened? To answer these questions we need to return to Weber’s discourse concerning the identity of the West<sup>4</sup>. In the above-cited *Vorbemerkung* to the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* Weber indicated the fundamental features of the West, its identity, as it were. They are: 1) science at its current stage of development; 2) the arts: music, architecture (Gothic); 3) printing as a means of diffusion of news and periodicals; 4) the private and the public sector availing of professional executives; 5) politics, the state, the constitution, parliament; 6) capitalism as a “rational capitalistic organization of (formally) free labor “; 7) separation between domestic administration and enterprise, enterprise free of family; 8) “rational” socialism; 9) the bourgeoisie; 10) the proletariat; 11) the close link between science, technology and production (Weber 1988 (1920), I, pp. 1-4 for all the quotations)<sup>5</sup>.

- 4 Weber nearly always uses the term “West” by which he wishes to speak of Europe, and from a certain moment on, of Europe and America. Jaspers, on the other hand, uses “West” to indicate Europe and, from a certain moment on, America from a cultural point of view; “Europe” and “America”, on the contrary, are used to indicate these areas from a historical-political point of view.
- 5 I realize that I have simplified the list of Western traits drawn up by Weber. A more detailed list would be the following: 1) “‘science at a state of development which we consider valid today’. Certainly the others also achieve a lot, but *only* in the West have the characteristics of *science* as a ‘rational’ procedure been established : in fact, Babylonian and other astronomies ‘lacked’ (*fehlten*) the mathematical bases drawn up by the Greeks; Indian geometry lacked (*fehlte*) ‘rational’ proof: another product of the Hellenistic spirit that helped create mechanics and physics; no cultural area had a ‘rational’ chemistry; history did not possess Thucydides’ pragma; their doctrine of the state is devoid of Aristotelian systematics and concepts; the legal system, despite Indian Mimamsa, is devoid of the juridical schemata and forms of Roman thought and of the western juridical schools ; finally, they lacked a legislative form like canon law 2) the arts: music; architecture (Gothic) [this has been contested, though, because the pointed Gothic arch seems to derive from the ogival Arabic one] 3) the printing press: only the West, although the system was invented in China, availed of *the press* as a means for the diffusion of news and creations of periodicals; 4) public and private administration: the professional executive is the corner stone (*Eckpfeiler*) of the modern state and the modern

In short – and to simplify – these traits may all be linked to the economic, political and cultural spheres. It may seem strange, but Weber does not indicate religion among the traits of European identity. Maybe, because he assigns it the role of principal causal factor of *modern* capitalism. At the top of his list of traits he places science and the end the close relationship between science and technology. In chapter 6 of *The Origin and Goal of History* Jaspers assigns the role of causal factor of the construction of *modern* Europe to science and technology. As far as the various areas of the world are concerned – he claims – “The differences are already present in the Axial Period, the time at which the greatest similarity existed between the various cultural zones from China to the West, before divergent lines of development carried them apart. Notwithstanding this subsequent parting of the ways, a resemblance between the great provinces of culture can be perceived until as late as A. D. 1500.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 61) From this moment on, the *great divergence* between the West and the other areas begins. In the period between the 1500s and 1800s, “however, a single phenomenon that is intrinsically new in all respects has made its appearance: science with its consequences in technology.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 61) So for Jaspers, like Weber, science and technology are among the hallmarks of Western identity. But there is a radical difference between their two positions, because, when all comes to all, Weber sees the Protestant ethic as the root of the rise of European and Western capitalism and of modernity, while Jasper attributes this role to science. “It has revolutionized the world inwardly and outwardly as no other event since the dawn of recorded history. It has brought with it unprecedented opportunities and hazards. The technological age, in which we have been living for a bare century and a half, has only achieved full dominion during the last few decades; this dominion is now being intensified to a degree whose limits cannot be foreseen. We are, as yet, only partially aware of the prodigious consequences. New foundations for the whole of existence have now been inescapably laid.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 61). However, like Weber, he attributes “universal” value to the features of identity “The origin of science and technology lay with the Teuto-Romance peoples. With it these peoples accomplished a break in history. They began the really universal, the planetary history of mankind.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 61)

economy [the professional executive and the public examination are Chinese ‘inventions’]; 5) politics, the state, the constitution, the parliament; 6) capitalism as a ‘rational capitalistic organization of (formally) free labor’; 7) separation between ‘domestic and enterprising administration’; independence of enterprise; 8) ‘rational’ socialism; 9) the bourgeoisie ; 10) the proletariat; 11) the close bond between science, technology and productive activities” (Weber 1988 (1920), 1, p. 1-4; for all these quotations).

While Weber recognizes that capitalism was *imposed by violence upon* India and China – thus escaping, to some extent, the accusation of “Eurocentrism” – Jaspers candidly claims that “Only those peoples who make Western science and technology their own, and thereby take upon themselves the dangers to humanity which are bound up with this Western knowledge and skill, are still capable of playing an active part in determining the destiny of man.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 61)

Finally, in true Max-Weber style he asks why science and technology were born in the West only. “If science and technology were created by the West, we are faced with the question: Why did this happen in the West and not in the two other great cultural zones? Can some peculiar element have already been present in the West during the Axial Period, which has only had these effects in the course of the last few centuries? Did that which finally manifested itself in science already exist in embryo during the Axial Period? Is there some quality specific to the West? The sole entirely new and radically transforming development that took place in the West must have its roots in some more comprehensive principle. This principle cannot be apprehended. But there may perhaps be certain pointers to the nature of the quality specific to the West.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 61-62) He also asks whether “the sole entirely new and radically transforming development that took place in the West must have its roots in some more comprehensive principle”, a causal factor of the entire process. (Jaspers 1953, p. 62) But a similar “principle cannot be apprehended.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 62) There must be some traits “specific to the West”: 1) the geographical structure of Europe, jagged and peninsular; China and India, on the other hand, are compact continental territories; 2) political freedom; 3) the model of rationality invented by the Greeks; its application to the study of nature and society in modern times: “The attempt was made to confer the maximum degree of calculability upon the daily life of society through the legal decisions of the State based on the rule of law. In economic undertakings exact computation determined every step” (Jaspers 1953, p. 63); 4) the reflexivity achieved by the Jewish prophets, the Greek philosophers, the Roman statesmen; 5) “the world in its reality as that which he cannot circumvent.” (Jaspers 1953, p.63) “The West knows, with unique forcefulness, the postulate that man must shape his world. He feels the meaning of the world’s reality, which represents the unending task of accomplishing cognition, contemplation and realization within and from the world itself. The world cannot be passed over. It is within the world and not outside it that Western man finds his assurance” (Jaspers 1953, p.63); 6) “like all cultures, the West realizes the forms of a universal. But in the West this universal does not coagulate into a

dogmatic fixity of definitive institutions and notions, neither into life under a caste system nor into life under a cosmic order. In no sense does the West become stabilized” (Jaspers 1953, p.64); 7) the West devises an *exclusive claim* to truth; a claim, that it, of being unique in truth; 8) the West is the civilization of extreme tension and conflict; 9) “this world of tensions is perhaps at one and the same time the precondition and the outcome of the fact that nowhere but in the West have there existed, in such amplitude of character, autonomous personalities. These personalities range from the Jewish prophets and the Greek philosophers by way of the great Christians to the outstanding figures of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries” (Jaspers 1953, p. 65) only in the West there have been, with a similar wealth of characters, *autonomous personalities*, “ranging from the Jewish prophets and Greek philosophers to the great Christians to the figures of the Sixteenth-Eighteenth centuries.” (Jaspers 1953, pp. 90-94)

There is no doubt, here, that Jaspers yielded somewhat to his *Eurocentrism*. But the relevant point, at least for this essay, is the conception of modernity. Science and technology – and to this regard too there are some serious reservations – have produced a new civilization. Therefore, it is necessary to ask whether we are facing a *new* axial revolution. Meanwhile, it is opportune to note that the concept, once enunciated, has undergone temporal and geographical expansion. Drawn up for three “zones”, India, China, the West, and for the period between 800 and 200 BCE., it reached its peak in the Sixth-Fifth centuries BCE., it is later applied also to Christianity and Islam. It is true that to some extent these two religions *founded* a civilization elaborating on the Jewish tradition (Christianity) and on the Jewish and Christian traditions (Islam). But if this be the case, then the determination of time makes no sense and axial revolutions might occur at any time. If, however, as Jaspers’ definition hastens to emphasize, the changes he analyzed occurred in the three civilizations *contemporaneously*, one may reach another conclusion, making Christianity and Islam *events* within the already consolidated structure of the axial revolution. The issue of modernity is analogous. Given the features attributed to modernity as a *new* civilization, it is legitimate to ask oneself if we are facing a *new* axial revolution. In actual fact, Jaspers asks himself whether “Europe’s exceptional spiritual achievements from 1500 to 1800” (Jaspers 1953, p. 75) may be considered as the beginning of a new axial period. By comparing what happened during the first axial revolution and modernity’s gestation period, however, he reaches a negative conclusion. Modernity, created by science and technology, above all, is however a, “purely European phenomenon and for that reason alone has no claim to the title of second axis.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 76) In reality, the first axial revolution was a spiritual movement which took

place *contemporaneously* in China, India and the West. The scientific and technological revolution, on the contrary, is an exclusively European phenomenon. In actual fact, Jaspers holds, “to be sure, these centuries are the most fruitful period for us Europeans; they constitute the indispensable fundament of our culture and the richest source of our intuitions and insights. But they do not represent a universally human, world-embracing axis, and it is improbable that they might become such in the sequel.” (Jaspers 1953, p.76) Not only. Today the worldwide spread of “European” science and technology – Jaspers claims – is accompanied by the decline of Europe. “The world has become European through the adoption of European technology and the European demands of nationalism, and it is successfully turning both against Europe. Europe, as the old Europe, is no longer the dominant factor in the world. It has abdicated, overshadowed by America and Russia.” (Jaspers 1953, p. 76-77) And here we grasp a note of sorrow, like that already expressed by Weber at the end of the First World War. But Jaspers, besides his “Westward shift” of world hegemony, foresees a return of the great “powers” like China and India. So, he concludes his reflections on the axial period by stating, as he did at the Geneva conference of 1946, that Europe has become “small”, that is no longer the “queen of civilization”, but a minor co-protagonist. And this, one might add, due to its own choices and its power politics. This is a clear instance of how the narcissistic and egoistic assertion of the self can lead to perdition.

## The Axial Age and modernity in Shmuel Eisenstadt

Shmuel Eisenstadt’s mature reflection presents itself, instead, as a major attempt at grasping the world’s new geopolitical situation. In particular, his concept of *multiple modernities* appears as the best description of the relationships existing between the civilizations of the third millennium. He contributes towards the dismantling of the Old-European and Eurocentric presumption whereby, until only a few decades ago, Europe and the West presented themselves as the center of the world. Modernity – Eisenstadt holds – though born in Europe, assumed, as a process of worldwide diffusion, different traits in different societies and civilizations, so that today we have a family of “modern societies”. European and Western modernity is just one of the diverse forms that modernity has taken on over the past two centuries.

Eisenstadt’s approach to the interpretation of the axial society and modernity

belongs to the strand developed by Weber and Jaspers<sup>6</sup>. To a certain extent, his interpretation of the axial age and modernity might be considered as a “reform” of Weber’s thesis and an integration of Jaspers’ position.

Many of Eisenstadt’s essays deal with the axial age and modernity. It may be useful to refer to one of his latest works, published in 2012: *The Axial Conundrum between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations. Constructive and Destructive Possibilities* where we find what seems to be the latest summary of his thinking<sup>7</sup>. Here we also find his preoccupation, similar to that of Jaspers, with the destructive effects of modernity, and, above all, akin to that perception of the tragedy of modernity expressed by Max Weber in his final years. The “axial age” appears to Eisenstadt as an emergence of a process of reflexivity capable of rendering one’s own cultural premises hegemonic. As we have learnt already from Jaspers, this process featured in Ancient Israel, in the Second Judaic Alliance, in Christianity, in Ancient Greece, in Zoroastrianism in Iran (in part), in early imperial China, in Hinduism and Buddhism and, later, in Islam. Unlike Jaspers whose vision, according to him, “however implicit, was strongly imbued with strong, if only implicit, evolutionary notions”, Eisenstadt believes that forms of reflexivity and of axial conceptions can emerge without becoming either hegemonic or institutionalized. The historical process is substantially open and whether an axial age given vision is achieved or not depends on a variety of factors. Furthermore – and this had already been stated by Jaspers – the contents of axial processes vary from civilization to civilization. The Axial Age seems, furthermore, to be characterized by two general tendencies:

The first tendency was the radical distinction between ultimate and derivative reality (or between transcendental and mundane dimensions, to use a more controversial formulation), connected with an increasing orientation toward a reality beyond the given one, with new temporal and spatial conceptions, with a radical problematization of the conceptions and premises of cosmological and social orders, and with growing reflexivity and second-order thinking, with the resultant models of order generating new problems (the task of bridging the gap between the postulated levels of reality is one example). The second tendency was the disembedding of social activities and organizations from relatively closed ascriptive, above all kinship or territorial, units or

- 6 The reference may be simply instrumental but it must mean something that in Eisenstadt’s *Comparative Civilizations & Multiple Modernities* (Eisenstadt 2003) Weber is the author quoted most frequently (79 citations). Durkheim and Jaspers are quoted 11 times; Eduard Shils 13; Marx 9; Tocqueville 7, Antonio Gramsci 4.
- 7 A summary of his thinking regarding the axial age and modernity is also found in his *The vision of modernity and contemporary society* (Eisenstadt 2001, pp. 25-47).

frameworks; the concomitant development of “free” resources that could be organized or mobilized in different directions gave rise to more complex social systems, creating potential challenges to the hitherto institutional formations. (Eisenstadt 2012, p. 278-279)

This is a revolutionary process which questions the established order and emphasizes the accountability rulers have towards a superior order: god, divine law, justice. With the axial age the epoch of the god-king comes to an end with the conception of the social as part of the cosmic order, and the possibility to demand that rulers answer for their actions emerges, however much they may still retain some sacral characteristics. The “axial” characteristic of this revolution concerns the world view, the cultural premises, the organizational structure, the political system of a society and a civilization. In short, according to Eisenstadt, the common features of the Axial-Age world-view may be summarized as follows:

*a broadening of horizons*, or an opening up of potentially universal perspectives, in contrast to the particularism of more archaic modes of thought; an *ontological distinction* between higher and lower levels of reality; and a *normative subordination* of the lower level to the higher, with more or less overtly stated implications for human efforts to translate guiding principles into ongoing practices. In other words, the developing Axial visions entailed the concept of a world beyond the immediate boundaries of their respective settings – potentially leading to the constitution of broader institutional frameworks, opening up a range of possible institutional formations, while at the same time making these formations the object of critical reflection and contestation. The common denominator of these formations was their transformation into relatively autonomous spheres of society, regulated according to autonomous criteria. (Eisenstadt 2012, p. 279)

More than that, at the basis these processes a fundamental distinction is at work: a separation between this and another world, between a transcendental and an earthly vision of the world. This distinction is *radical* to Eisenstadt’s thinking. He criticizes Weber for not having recognized this in Chinese society (Eisenstadt 2003, pp. 281-303). Weber, on the contrary, he holds, saw *only* the process of adaptation and legitimization of the existing order. As regards the emergence of reflexivity and the distinction between the worldly and transcendental orders, a divergence emerges between Eisenstadt and Weber. Weber questions the world on the basis of the problem of human suffering seen as unjust. He departs, therefore, from the *empirical* fact of the existence of the suffering of individuals. Only *later*, he posits, is it possible to draw up a vision of a world of happiness, where the individual can find salvation. In brief, it seems that Weber departs from a *universal* phenomenon – pain and human

suffering – while Eisenstadt begins thinking from a successive level, using the distinction between the transcendental and worldly orders as his basis. Weber and Eisenstadt claim that the intellectual élites of every civilization are those who produce visions of the world that justify or contest the existing order in the name of a transcendental order. In Weber, however, the distinction between these two worlds takes place *afterwards*, in answer to the universal problem of suffering. *Primary* to this mode of thinking is the issue of why pain and suffering and not the happiness of the world, exist; or, why some people are happy or consider themselves such, while others, on the contrary, suffer; the issue of whether and how to distinguish between the worldly and transcendental orders is not primary here. To respond to or try to solve the question of pain and suffering experienced as unjust, intellectuals draw up distinctions between the two worlds and the idea of contesting the earthly reality by referring to a transcendental one.

Eisenstadt's analysis seems to converge on Weber's on several issues. It is the Weberian idea of linking religion with classes and social groups that becomes, as it did with Weber, the method used by Eisenstadt to identify the driving forces underlying the social dynamics of the axial civilizations. Indeed, his application is more extensive, given the variety of societies and civilizations he studied. In particular, following Weber in this and sometimes recalling the work of Antonio Gramsci, Eisenstadt focuses on the formation of coalitions and intellectual cultural policies: the prophets of ancient Israel, the literati of China, the Indian Brahmins, for example. So, he identifies a dialectic and conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy as the basis of clashes between different and opposing views of the world.

It is intellectuals who draw up visions of the transcendental world by means of which the existing earthly world is subjected to radical criticism; it is intellectuals who create visions of the world alternative to the existing reality. From these tensions, contradictions and clashes between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and their combinations with the power structures, economic interests and specific social classes within an axial society, that new possibilities of social change and transformation are born. If I interpret the thought of Eisenstadt correctly on this point, it appears, for example that, in China, the combination of the intellectual élite (men of letters), a special form of orthodoxy (the tightening of Confucian doctrinal schemata and formal precepts), and particular groups of proprietors at local and central level, gave life to the *imperial form*, which, through an endless series of adaptations and transformations, of dynastic changes and absorption of new external dominant groups, of expansion or contraction of state territory, made imperial stability millennial. The empire

thus appeared as a cultural, economic, social and political constellation capable of harnessing the dynamics of the Chinese axial society. Weber had previously seen in the Roman Empire and in the Chinese Empire, born in the second century BCE, complex structures capable of freezing dynamics that might have led to *modern* capitalism. In philosophical terms, Jaspers says the same thing. (Jaspers 2013, pp.85-135; especially pp. 129-135)

Within the ambit of Western Christianity – that is: in Europe – a combination of this type led to the transformations that generated early modernity. It was not Calvinism – therefore – but the formation of a complex coalition of heterodox cultural and religious orientations, a new intellectual élite, their welding to new power structures (the nascent nation-state) and new economic interests, that ushered in *modern* capitalism. By means of this proposition Eisenstadt seeks to emend Weber's thesis of the origin of *modern* capitalism. (Eisenstadt 2003, pp.577-611; in part. pp. 582 e 595) This critique which might have been made against the Weber of 1904, of the first edition of his *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, but not against the Weber of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie. Die protestantische Ethik* itself, after his studies regarding Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, was integrated with a series of explicit comparative references to India and, above all, to China. The theoretical-methodological grid contained in the *Vorbemerkung* and in the *Zwischenbetrachtung* provides a more complex and multi-directional idea of the interpretation of the origin of *modern* capitalism and modernity on the whole.

Eisenstadt's idea of the worldwide diffusion of modernity is undoubtedly original. He rereads Weber's idea of modernity and outlines its basic traits. His version of the "modernity program" is an interpretation and an update of the vision of modernity presented by Weber in his *Zwischenbetrachtung* of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. While Weber inevitably stops at a comparative analysis of societies and civilizations as they appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, Eisenstadt views them as they are at the beginning of the new millennium. On several occasions he formulated his concept of the "modernity program". Here we refer to his essay *The Civilizational Dimension of Modernity: Modernity as a Distinct Civilization* (Eisenstadt 2003, pp.493-518). According to Eisenstadt,

The modern project, the cultural and political program of modernity as it developed first in the West, in the Western and Central Europe, entailed distinct ideological as well as institutional premises. It entailed some very distinct shift in the conception of human agency, of its autonomy, and of its place in the flow of time. It entailed a conception of the future in which vari-

ous possibilities which can be realized by autonomous human agency – or by the march of history – are open. The core of this program has been that the premises and legitimation of the social, ontological and political order were no longer taken for granted; there developed a very intensive reflexivity around the basic ontological premises as well around the bases of social and political order of authority of society – a reflexivity which was shared even by the most radical critics of this program, who in principles denied the legitimacy of such reflexivity. (Eisenstadt 2003, pp. 494-495)

It means, as he says, a change in the cultural premises of society: a different conception of man, of his ability to act as an independent agent, the conception of the future not as a repetition of the past, as in traditional societies, but as a time open to different life possibilities. A new and independent reflection on the ontological foundations of society, on the conception of society as a conscious human construction is born. It is paradoxical that these characteristics of modernity paradox are also shared by the traditionalists: think of a Joseph de Maistre or an Edmund Burke, who reject the concept of man as autonomous and as a rational agent. In order to combat modern conceptions they are obliged to make their cultural premises their own. If they did not accept the idea of man's rational capacity, their arguments would be flawed by a fatal fallacy.

At the core of the cultural program of modernity stands the idea of man's autonomy.

[His] emancipation from the fetters of traditional political and cultural authority and the continuous expansion of the realm of personal and institutional freedom and activity, and of human ones. Such autonomy entailed several dimensions: first, reflexivity and exploration; and second, active construction, mastery of nature, possibly, including human nature, and of society. Parallely, this program entailed a very strong emphasis on autonomous participation of members of society in the constitution of social and political order and its constitution; on autonomous access, indeed of all members of the society to these orders and their centers. (Eisenstadt 2003, p. 496)

The program of modernity contains contradictions, antinomies and conflicts between cultural orientations. On the one hand, there is a tendency “perhaps in the first time in the history of humanity, to the belief in the possibility of bringing the gap between the transcendental and mundane orders, of realizing through conscious human actions in the mundane orders, in social life, some of the utopian, eschatological visions”. On the other, there is a counter-tendency, consisting “in the growing recognition of the legitimacy of multiple individual and group goals and interest and of multiple interpretations of the common good” (Eisenstadt 2003, p. 497). In the history of European and Western mo-

ernity, these two tendencies have given rise to opposing social and political systems. The first tendency gave birth to totalitarian revolutionary political forms that sought to impose their own conception of man, not without some degree of success (fascism and communism) in the twentieth century; the second gave rise to pluralist, liberal, liberal democratic social and political systems.

At this point it is possible to make a comparison between Weber's, Jaspers' and Eisenstadt's conceptions of modernity. We have already discussed the contents. Now the task is to relate these conceptions of modernity to the idea and theory of society or axial period. Eisenstadt has no doubts. For him modernity was a second global Axial Age (Global Second Axial Age). He sustained, in fact, that "it was the combination of awareness of the existence of different ideological and institutional possibilities with the tensions and contradictions inherent in the cultural and political program of modernity that constituted the core of modernity as the Second Global Axial Age. This combination gave rise – through the activities of multiple cultural and political activists who promulgated and attempted to implement different visions of modernity in their interaction with broader strata of society, and through continual contestations between them – to the crystallization of different patterns of modernity, of multiple modernity." (Eisenstadt 2003, p. 501) Modernity, therefore, is a new axial age, the second, actually.

Jaspers, before Eisenstadt, had asked himself the same question. In *The Origin and Goal of History* he asked himself, whether "Europe's exceptional spiritual achievements from 1500 to 1800" might constitute a new axial period. The comparison between the first axial period and modernity brings noteworthy differences to light. The first period had a "purity and clarity" which we cannot find in modernity which, in turn, provides possibilities that the first could not. "On the other hand, however [- in the modernity -], possibilities are open to the second axis that were unknown to the first... [and, as we have seen] above all ... it is a purely European phenomenon and for that reason alone has no claim to the title of second axis." (Jaspers 1953, p. 76) Therefore, modernity, as an *exclusively* European phenomenon, cannot be a second axial period. Jaspers remains faithful to the approach whereby the axial revolution, in order to be such, *must occur contemporaneously* in the three areas where it took place the first time: China, India, the West (including Christianity and Islam). According to Jaspers, in actual fact – and we have already noted this -, with modernity "the world has become European through the adoption of European technology and the European demands of nationalism, and it is successfully turning both against Europe." (Jaspers 1953, p. 76-77)

Both Jaspers and Eisenstadt resume Weber's thinking regarding this issue: modernity was born in Europe and from Europe it spread to the rest of the world<sup>8</sup>. It is, however, controversial whether Weber saw modernity as a second axial era. As far as the first axial revolution is concerned, even if he lacks the concept as such, Weber certainly *described* the different processes of rationalization which occurred in China, in India, in ancient Israel and in the West. As we have already stated, the issue shared by these three worlds is human suffering seen as injustice. The response provided by the reflections of the great world religions consisted in giving rise to complex forms of theological, economic, institutional, cultural and symbolic rationalizations that, in time, produced the different civilizations. But the problem for Weber involved trying to understand why those worlds, despite having created some of the conditions necessary to the rise of *modern* capitalism, took different historical routes<sup>9</sup>. He held that in China and in Rome it was the formation of empires that prevented pre-capitalism from becoming capitalism in the modern sense. He sees how "cultural codes" or as he puts it, "economic ethics" impede or favor economic transformation in the modern sense. The Protestant economic ethic, between 1500 and 1800, favored the birth of *modern* capitalism in Europe. There is no doubt that for Weber it is a question of a *revolution* both *within the* West, and with respect to other civilizations. Not even in this case, however, does he avail of concepts that make one think of an axial revolution. In short, his theory of modernity, while presenting all the features found in the theories of Jaspers and Eisenstadt, does not avail of the terms "axial", "axial revolution" or "axial period." It is as if he had paved the way for a theory to which others affixed labels. However he remains ambiguous. The Protestant Revolution is an *event* within Christianity. There was no relinquishment of the fundamentals of the Christian religion. If anything, there was a different theology of salvation, a different conception of the relationship between man and God -more direct and without the forms of intermediation foreseen by Catholicism – a rediscovery of the true Christian faith. And so we might legitimately hold that, for him, modernity is not an axial revolution. At the same time, however, in his works he provides an interpretation of modernity in its overall form, of its internal

8 It is necessary to point out that the idea that modernity and *modern* capitalism were born in Europe is not such an original one. All authors who address the issue of modernity are convinced of this. One of the ideas of modern reflexivity is the coincidence between Europe and modernity.

9 It is to Talcott Parsons (1966, 1971) that we owe the resumption of this topic. He demonstrates how the "cradle cultures" contained some, though not all, of the conditions that might have led to modernity, so that no generalization of the factors that lie at the base of modern society occurred.

structure, its tensions and conflicts so that one might be equally legitimized to imagine an “Axial Revolution”. In this sense, Jaspers and Eisenstadt placed at the basis of their conception of the axial revolution, not the creation *ex nihilo* of a new society, but the construction of a new social, political and cultural order which also availed of elements of pre-axial societies. It may be said, perhaps, that within the structure created by the first axial revolution, there was a radical change such as to lead to a new axial formation where elements of the previous structure were set in a new context, thus acquiring meanings different from those of before. This would make Modern Christianity a new fulfillment of the word and doctrine of Jesus.

The most significant divergence between Eisenstadt, Jaspers and Weber regards modernity. If one looks at the overall design, at the “program of modernity”, the differences in conception between the three authors may be considered minimal. Jaspers, for example, strongly emphasizes the role of technology, already present in Weber’s conception. Eisenstadt refers to the different civilizations as Weber had done before him. The idea that the various civilizations were the outcome of a process of rationalization of the problem of human suffering perceived as unjust is linked to the concept of a plurality of forms of rationality. Furthermore, the Weberian conception of diverse spheres of value, in a state of tension and possibly of conflict between each other, harks back to the idea of a form of pluralism existing within every kind of civilization. Yet, Eisenstadt’s conception of modernity has an originality of its own. Previously, Weber, during his journey to America, had noticed that American capitalism was at a more advanced stage than that of Europe as far as organization, and, due to this, the structure of the whole of society were concerned. American and European capitalism did indeed share traits but, at the same time, they presented conspicuous differences. But Weber does not generalize this observation. He limits himself, so to say, to a statement tout court. Eisenstadt, on the contrary, thanks to his comparative studies of civilizations, bestows theoretical weight on his empirical research. On the one hand, he asserts that capitalism and modernity are compatible with the world’s great religions, on the other, he sees this as the result of selection carried out by each of the single civilizations. It is true that capitalism and modern society were born in Europe but it is equally true that their worldwide diffusion did not take place in a vacuum, but within social systems in themselves very complex. Capitalism and modernity are separated from their historical, religious and cultural backgrounds and “adapted” to different “local” traditions. Even in Europe, Eisenstadt observes, modernity and capitalism were not born everywhere at the same time and did not share the same characteristics. Even more so, the process of selection

implemented by the different civilizations leads to different forms of modernity. Eisenstadt summarizes the formation process of multiple modernities as follows:

While the common starting point of many of these developments was indeed the cultural program of modernity as it developed in the West, more recent developments gave rise to multiplicity of cultural and social formations which go far beyond the very homogenizing aspects of this original version. All these developments do indeed attest to continual development of multiples modernities, or of multiple interpretations of modernity – above all the de-Westernization of decoupling of modernity from its “Western” pattern, of depriving, as it were, the West from the monopoly of modernity. It is in this broad context that European or Western modernity or modernities have to be seen not as the only real modernity but as one of multiple modernities – even of course it has played a special role not only in the origins of modernity but also in the continual expansion and reinterpretation of modernities – becomes fully highlighted. But at the same time these developments constitute illustrations of the different potentialities inherent in the Axial, especially global Axialities, as they unfold on the eve of the twenty-first century. (Eisenstadt 2003, p. 517-518)

It is on this general position that Eisenstadt builds his interpretation of the contemporary world. On the one hand, at theoretical level and availing of a concept of Wittgenstein's, he identifies a “family” of *modern* societies. As in the case of a family, all its members resemble each other to some extent, but no one is identical to any other, except perhaps monozygotic twins; in the same way, societies bear some resemblance to each other, though each one is different from all the others. On the other hand, Eisenstadt analyzes the internal structure of all modern societies and the relationships between them. He examines, in particular, how modernity conjugates with civilization, produces tensions and, in the long run, conflict between civilizations. It is true that he does not give much credence to Huntington's theory of history as a product of clashes between civilizations, though this conclusion cannot be discarded once it is introduced into the analysis the realm of civilization.

It is true, in actual fact, that *competition* between civilizations does exist. Each one has its *own* program for modern human society. The release of the tensions internal to each one does not take place according to a generally given pattern. The same IT systems are availed of to achieve different, if not opposite, ends. The specific form assumed by modernity, interwoven with the diverse religious, cultural, political and social traditions, has generated *new* images of the human being. Competition between the various civilizations is becoming keener and keener (especially on the part of Islam, China and India) and generating

different “programs for humanity”, to paraphrase Eisenstadt. All told, several traits common to the various forms of modern society remain; it is equally true, however, that it is the differences that are asserted more and more threateningly, in a context where the positive reasons for dialogue are clouded over by haughty claims to difference. Human values are established in the name of a “gracious and merciful God,” as opposed to that *secular* conception of man typical of the West; Asian values are asserted as being a part of or an alternative to Western human values. Faced with so much clamor and emphasis on diversity, it seems increasingly difficult to recognize the common traits of humanity. The risk is that the revitalization of worldviews may lead to loss of awareness of humanity’s common membership.<sup>10</sup>

## Bibliography

- Eisenstadt, S. N. 2001. *The vision of modernity and contemporary society*, in Ben-Rafael, E. and Yitzak Sternberg (eds). *Identity, Culture and Globalization*, Leiden-Boston-Köln, Brill, pp. 25-47.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. 2003. *Comparative Civilizations & Multiple Modernities*, Leiden-Boston, Brill.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. 2012. *The Axial Conundrum between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations. Constructive and Destructive Possibilities*, in Bellah, R. N. and Hans Joas (eds). *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, Cambridge (Ma) and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 277-293.
- Green, M. 1974. *The von Richthofen Sisters*, New York, Basic Books.
- Jaspers, K. 1947a. *L'esprit européen*, in J. Benda, G. Bernanos, K. Jaspers, S. Spender, J. Guéhenno, F. Flora, D. de Rougemont, J.-R. De Salis, G. Lukacs. *L'esprit européen*, Rencontres Internationales de Genève, Tome I, Neuchâtel, Les Éditions de la Baconnière, 1947 (1946).
- Jaspers, K. 1947b. *Europa der Gegenwart*, Wien, Amandus-Edition.
- Jaspers, K. 1947c. *Von Europäische Geist*, München, R. Piper & Co. Verlag.
- Jaspers, K. 1949. *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. München, Piper Verlag; English translation by M. Bullock: *The Origin and Goal of History*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1953.
- Jaspers, K. 2013. *Socrate, Buddha, Confucio, Gesù. Le personalità decisive*, Roma, Fazi editore.
- Meinecke, F. 1927. *Max Weber*, «Historische Zeitschrift», Band 135. Now in König, R. e J. Winkelmann (eds). *Max Webers zum Gedächtnis*, special issue of «Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie», 1963, 7. pp.143-47.
- Mitzman, A. 1970. *The Iron Cage*, New York, A. A. Knof.

10 Translation from the Italian by Kay Mc Carthy.

- Parsons, T. 1966. *Societies. Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, Englewood Cliffs (N.J.), Prentice-Hall.
- Parsons, T. 1971. *Societies. The System of Modern Societies*, Englewood Cliffs (N.J.), Prentice-Hall.
- Preyer, G. 2016. *Struktur und Semantic Map: Zur Soziologischen Theorie Shmuel N. Eisenstadt*, Berlin, Springer Verlag.
- Schmitt, S. 2012. *Max Webers Verständnis des Katholizismus*, Rom, Deutsches Historisches Institut in Rom.
- Spengler, O. 1918 (2006). *Der Übergang des Abendlandes*, München, DTV.
- Weber, M. (Marianne) 1948. *Lebenserinnerungen*, Bremen, J. Storm.
- Weber, M. 1988 (1920). *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, I, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck.
- Weber, M. 2012. *Briefe 1918-1920*, 10, 1, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck.
- Weber, M. 2012. *Briefe 1918-1920*, 10, 2, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck.

Vittorio Cotesta  
Professore di Sociologia  
Università degli Studi Roma Tre  
Dipartimento di scienze della formazione  
Via Milazzo 11 B  
Roma, Italy