

# MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH? ON THE HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF WORLD IMAGES

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What would the scholarly world look like if Karl Jaspers had never existed, and his writings about the axial age and the axial revolutions in human history had never seen the light of day? And what if Max Weber had never written a word that was aimed at scholars, and had instead taken up a career in, for example, the German beer industry? These sorts of thoughts flitted through my mind as I spent many hours reading – with much interest – this very lengthy book.<sup>1</sup>

Vittorio Cotesta is a distinguished sociologist who has written various studies of long-term civilizational dynamics in Eurasia. In this large tome (600 pages plus), inspired by the great *oeuvres* of Max Weber and Karl Jaspers, he does what is suggested in its subtitle. That is, he sets out the contours of Graeco-Roman, ancient Chinese, and early and medieval Islamic understandings of “the world”, broadly construed, encompassing theorizations of the universe, the terrestrial Earth, and the human-inhabited world.

He does this mostly by devoting specific chapters to individual thinkers who operated within each of these three intellectual-cultural traditions or civilizational clusters. They are exactly those one might expect to be dealt with in such an endeavor. The pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato and other well-known Greek philosophers are covered, as are the Greek and Roman Stoics, as well as the major Greek and Roman geographers, and the Greek historians, from Herodotus through to the analyst of the burgeoning Roman empire, Polybius. It is the latter’s account of proto- or quasi-globalization that Cotesta, along with various other scholars, lays particular emphasis on, understanding him as a pioneer of a novel, cosmopolitan form of social science. A shorter part of the book is given over to the Chinese philosophers, cosmologists, and political thinkers, encompassing the various major streams of thought in this direction like Confucianism and Taoism, as well as the history writing, comparable to that of Herodotus, of Sima Qian. Islamic world visions are traced out from the early days of the faith, through the various philosophical elaborations thereof by the likes of Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi, through mystical forms of opposition to rationalizing and Greek-influenced thought currents, to the broader forms of thought pursued by Avicenna and others, and to the more concrete investiga-

1 Vittorio Cotesta, *The Heavens and the Earth Graeco-Roman, Ancient Chinese, and Medieval Islamic Images of the World*, Leiden: Brill, 2021, pp. 637.

tions of the globe and history by Al-Biruni and various other scholars. There is also consideration of major thinkers of the Western part of the medieval Islamic world, especially Ibn Khaldun, whose achievement as a pioneer of an emergent sociological vision of history Cotesta endorses, again in line with various other modern proponents of this thinker.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare has the title character say that there are more things in heaven and earth than in his friend Horatio's limited philosophy. No such charge can possibly be made against Cotesta's approach, as it is so voluminous and comprehensive in its grasp of the main philosophical, theological, political, and geographical world images of the three traditions under study. But precisely because the book covers so much terrain, working as a kind of compendium of the relevant issues, it is open to (facile) criticism because of what it does *not* cover, including Judaic and Christian world images, and how these relate to those visions of the world covered in the book..

One could also note that the treatment of specific thinkers tends towards straightforward exegesis of the main – and therefore already well-known – aspects of their thought, and much less on divergent viewpoints on the nature and significance of their thinking developed by later interpreters. As a specialist on Polybius, for example, I appreciated the comprehensiveness of the coverage of that thinker, but I looked in vain for new insights into what he was doing or what significance his work has for us today. Relatively few, and sometimes quite old, references are explicitly cited, although many more are in the reference list. One therefore does not primarily read the book if one is looking for new understandings of specific thinkers or intellectual traditions. The presentations of individual thinkers could also have been edited down, to sketch in more lightly both biographical details and more background issues of general ontology and epistemology.

The main value of the book involves putting in one place, and then juxtaposing, ideas and preoccupations from the three traditions covered, considering overlaps and contrasts. Sometimes specific figures from the different civilizational complexes are explicitly compared, as in the case of Herodotus and Sima Qian. A conclusion chapter draws out some of the similarities and differences between the three civilizational worlds, and forms of influence from one to the others are considered where appropriate. But that concluding chapter is only 15 pages long, out of a text that has more than 560 pages of substantive text. That chapter, plus a brief introduction section, and an Intermezzo – that quickly covers some convergences between Chinese and Greek thought, some brief thoughts on the Eurasian world-system, and some succinct reflections on changing meanings of axially after the classic formulations of Jaspers – are

too limited to bring the various elements at play together in a systematic way. These comparative sections are too brief really to be able to carry out the full task involved in considering the three traditions in relation to each other, either in terms of analytical comparisons, or considering how they have empirically related to and affected each other within the context of thousands of years of pan-Eurasian socio-cultural contact and conflict. Having written a more compendium-like volume, Cotesta could write a more synthetic sequel, which deals further with matters both of formal comparison, and of empirical trans-civilizational connectivity.

Cotesta's avowed approach is to have a "sociological look" (p.11) at these compendious matters. The sociology now needs developed further. The avowed reference points are Jaspers and Weber, and the sociology could develop more in relation to each thinker.

In the first place, I wonder what difference would be made, both to this book, and to the broader study of civilizational constellations, if Jaspers had not written as he did, and therefore if scholarship today was not frameable by reference to, or driven by, Jasperian concepts of axial periods and revolutions. Would we have different, perhaps better, understandings of ancient and medieval world images if axiality was not invoked as the starting point for investigations? How might historical sociology of the matters covered here becomes less beholden to Jaspers?

Another historical sociological reflection was prompted by Cotesta's treatment of Islam. Given that the concept of the axial age has already had to be extended from the 1st millennium BCE into the first millennium CE, so as to encompass Islam along with earlier thought formations, why is it that social conditions across Eurasia come to be such that axiality seems to finish after Islam is up and running?

More concentration on developing Weber's general sociology of intellectual production would be welcome in pursuing a distinctive sociological take on the genesis, production, and dissemination of world images. Tantalizing glimpses of some of the concepts of some of Weber's followers, both direct and indirect, already appear sporadically. Sometimes there is a hint of Wallerstein in allusions to both more core and more peripheral locations of intellectual production within particular civilizational entities. The reader is occasionally reminded of Eisenstadt's Weber-derived focus on the struggles between more orthodox and more heterodox sorts of intellectual producers within specific intellectual fields (à la Bourdieu, another Weberian), some struggles lasting for many centuries. Especially, but not only, in the case of Islam, Galtung's distinction between, and identification of struggles ongoing among, 'hard' and 'soft' read-

ers of sacred texts would augment Cotesta's remarks on the cosmopolitization of thought-systems. Consideration of how the production of world images is both reflection of, and contribution to, regional and trans-regional civilizing processes, would bring Eliasian themes more explicitly into focus.

How world images produced by specific thinkers and thought systems were bound up with patriarchal, and more broadly gendered, social relations and structures, would also be a necessary move, in order to understand the social usages of the images in particular contexts, for example in the shape of cosmological justifications for the subjugation of women. Relatedly but vice versa, how social inequalities and forms of oppression in the social order were put into, and expressed through, world images, would also be a productive focal point for further investigation. The same sorts of thoughts apply beyond women to other oppressed groups, such as the peasantry, slaves, ethnic minorities, and conquered peoples.

This book is a major work, and it will be, and will have to be, cited by anyone working in the field it covers in the future. Cotesta, as a major scholar of such issue, is very well placed indeed to pursue and push these matters further, perhaps with the further aid of Weber's ghost, and with or without the axial baggage that Jaspers has bequeathed to modern scholarship.

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