

# 9

## Conclusion

In the first part, I portray civilisational analysis as a two-sided, multidimensional field of the humanities and social sciences. On one side, contemporary civilisational analysis has a delimited set of major problematics and analytics. On the other side, it formed as a wide-ranging field of debate and has remained one. Paradigmatically speaking, several questions are problematised in contemporary civilisational analysis. Both the questions and the provisional answers given to them shape the three specific images I discern in the field. What defines civilisations? What creates them? Is it their materiality, their art or their religious ethics? Are they old and evolutionary, or constituted anew in modernity? How have moderns judged them, or rather *discursively cast* them? What ideological uses are made of the idea of civilisation and how should they be disentangled from archaeological, anthropological, sociological and historical investigation and methodology? Each question is a debating point. Images of the character of civilisation and civilisations underpin the diversity of explanations. Are they entities that can be named as groups of kindred societies – the West, Confucian civilisation, Islamic civilisation and so on? Are they processes of the formation of institutions of power, tempering human conduct and consciousness, or are they discourses? Are they orientations that take shape in momentous encounters with another? It has been argued in the preceding pages that the last image, the relational image, is the most productive and holds the best prospects as a direction of further development. In this Conclusion, I summarise the findings of the book in the wake of that argument before posing some questions of the human condition.

### The argument in summary

The problematic of inter-civilisational encounters is a point of reference for the version of civilisational analysis assembled in these pages. Yet the sociology of encounters between civilisations also has its limits. It has yet to extensively unpack colonial modernities, capitalism and new world and oceanic societies

in the theatres of the Americas and Oceania. The perspectives in post-colonial sociology, Marxism and globalisation analysis examined in Chapter 3 are specialist studies of colonial and post-colonial conditions and capitalism and thus give greater visibility to neglected problematics. Yet they too fall short of considering the specific characteristics of new world societies and oceanic contexts. At the same time, perspectives at the edges of the three paradigms are suggestive of intersections with civilisational analysis – specifically longer historical perspectives on global connectivity, a theory of the imaginary institution of capitalism and its variants, and the illuminating role of connected and relational methodologies in highlighting global patterns of power.

It becomes possible, building on findings in the first part of the book, to take another path: to analytically grasp the connections of different social formations instituted by collective imaginaries. Following Castoriadis's theory of social imaginaries, I have suggested that macro-regional constellations like civilisations are collective creations. Imaginaries institute the development of inclinations and aversions to encounters and engagement in which civilisations are created. Castoriadis's theory of the imaginary institution informs my development of a notion of inter-civilisational engagement in which civilisations acquire meaning *at the point of inter-relationship* with other social, historical and cultural forms; that is, other civilisational patterns, to use Arnason's phrase. To recount, there are four dimensions to this inter-relationship. Interaction occurs through migration, economic relations, cultural exchange and the extension of models of polity and civilisation. The four dimensions of inter-civilisational engagement featured in Chapters 4 and 5 highlight deep connections, including ones that sit outside of social formations traditionally recognised as high civilisations.

Each of the four dimensions is distinct. Migration as engagement has the strongest sense of motion. People move, but so also do their sentiments of belonging, which are often also collective sentiments. In moving, immigrants create new attachments, often also engendering trans-national links between networks or diasporas of their compatriots (Cohen, 2008). Where migrants move under explicit compulsion, links can be severed or actively blocked. Migrants were economic agents, whether as labourers, consumers or traders. Bearing and exchanging goods, however conceived, involved exchanging values, especially when exchanges have been in inter-cultural contexts. The impact of early modern trade can be no less evident than in the example of inter-continental dispersion and circulation of species of flora and fauna stimulated by colonialism. But, then again the length and strength of the chains of connection that finance lubricated – even before the rise of Italian banking – is surprising. Contracts, insurance, money itself: all these were ancient instruments as well as proto-capitalist instruments of greater magnitude. The extent of trust and

tightness of consociation in family-based, religious and mercantile networks is impressive. We can observe how inter-civilisational engagement fostered trust over distances and through various cultural environments via these 'imagined communities' of transport of goods and services, news and information. Do ideas, precepts, doctrines and information travel as easily as goods of trade? Collins's answer is that they do and with greater velocity in and through the centres of culture and knowledge. We can say the results of his historical sociology of the spread of knowledge are replicated in other zones outside the scope of his study – specifically oceanic, coastal and new world connections. My work in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 on the Pacific, Latin America and Japan suggest as much also. In looking at the fourth dimension in Chapter 4, I focus on the differentiation of empire and civilisation in historical processes of communication and transformation of civilisational models. Seen from this angle, the diversification of forms of power is more evident. My three examples of China, the Sanskrit Empire of the first millennium and the Iberian world order of early modernity give a fraction of insight into the diversity of combinations.

Such are the connections of civilisations. Chapters 4 and 5 also pay closer attention to Latin America and begin to touch on Oceania as an islander civilisation. With a focus on inter-civilisational engagement, it becomes easier to see how the societies of the Americas and Oceania are underestimated. The indigenous civilisations subsumed had creative and complex cosmologies and sophisticated orientations towards interaction. They appeared, in European eyes, to lack the institutional complexes, economic forms and material structures of 'civilisation'. Of course, colonisation of the Americas looked very different to the later subjugation of Oceania. Nevertheless, both historical processes had comparable aspects. In the imperial imaginary, the signs of civilisation were instituted originally in the Americas, forming part of western European experiences of power. The image of 'civilisation' construed indigenous civilisations as 'savage'. This barbarisation of Ando-American, North American, Meso-American and Pacific Islander civilisations was an epistemological violence committed by currents of forming societies of colonisers (and, in the Americas, their republican successors). The civilisational relegation of conquered societies was always also contested, however. From Jesuit disputation of the violent upheaval of Meso-America and Ando-America to Indian rebellion against colonial authorities to latter-day social movements, there have always been counter-currents affirming the civilisational value of Amerindian worlds. In Chapter 6, I show two sides of the recuperation of the civilisational value of Oceania. First, the colonisation of islander societies expanded ethnological knowledge in such a way that Western understanding of civilisation was both confirmed and put into question. Anthropology was at the forefront of entanglements of Enlightenment and

Romantic traditions that were capable of critique of evolutionist assumptions as much as defence of them. Second, cultural and political movements in the Pacific since the 1980s have affirmed the civilisational character of Oceania and crucially add that islander societies have a living vitality and are engaged recreations of Oceanian civilisation.

Latin American and Pacific new worlds were invaded and overtaken by historically specific forms of state. Oceanic empires and the oceanic civilisations and imperial imaginaries from which they issued were the wellsprings of conquest. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, they are distinguished from portal civilisations by this very aspect of conquest. Portal civilisations create institutions and practices of power capable of extensive contacts and relationships without conquest of vast territories. To be sure, they build empires and extend spheres of commerce, culture and travel in which explicit power is created. My synopses of the Venetian Mediterranean (during the era of Venice's naval dominance) and the Omani West Indian Ocean (with its flows of slave trading) are indicative of the balance of engagement and explicit power. Nonetheless, they are distinct from oceanic civilisations that bear capacity for global empires. Also distinct are islander societies, though both oceanic empires and portal civilisations embraced islands also. Islands warrant a great deal more attention (Gillis, 2004, 2013) and lack it in civilisational analysis. I have argued in Part II that the resurgence in thalassology in comparative and world history can be pressed into the service of contemporary civilisational analysis. I would go so far as to suggest that specialists may, heuristically at least, pose questions about the civilisational standing of some islander societies. There is an outstanding example of inter-cultural and intra-civilisational engagement in Oceanian civilisation. Europe's visions and institutional logics of power did much to disorder the Pacific's cultural worlds, as did later Cold War rivalries. Yet, engagement and connectedness are still celebrated in cultural memory and reaffirmed in the social, cultural and economic practices of islanders. Their resilience and the vitality of traditions is reminiscent of the Amerindian ontologies renewed in indigenous communities and movements of the Americas, as I observe in Chapter 7.

I have focused on Latin America and the Pacific in order to address regions and whole collective experiences that are largely missing in civilisational analysis. Taken with the example of Japan, I have sought to analyse inter-civilisational engagement through exposés on specific kinds of engagement in three zones. Discussion around Latin American, Japanese and Oceanic perspectives follows components of Randall Collins's approach to cultural and political engagement, if not his specific prognoses. When it comes to Japan, I delimit a specific period in which different paths of modern development were open and potential for broad international relationships was undecided. The Chinese order in East Asia

and the intercession of the West in the mid nineteenth century were contexts of encounters and inter-civilisational engagement in which Japanese perspectives on civilisation were generated. Asia and the Pacific were often debatably represented in Japanese perspectives. Solidarity-based versions of relations with Asia competed with expansionist and militarist ones, and ultimately failed to prevail. In the long post-war period, Asia became a problematic part of Japan's regionalised model of capitalism and remains so, suggesting that Japan's inter-civilisational relations are still tension-laden. In this scenario, the past is articulated with the present. In fact, civilisations in Latin America, Japan and the Pacific are all instituted at context-dependent intersections of influences of present and past. The last task remaining to us is to indicate global problems of the current human condition that provide a compelling reason to pursue a research agenda in civilisational analysis that will operate more closely at the intersection of past and present.

## Intersections of past and present

*Debating Civilisations* began with anthropological axioms posited by Ibn Khaldun, Simon Bolivar and George Pachymeres. Each axiom alludes to perceptions of deep connectivity that pre-date processes of modern globalisation. The three extracts in another way are anecdotes of inter-civilisational engagement pre-dating the global age, which is one of the problems I pose and unpack in the book. The argument I have supported, that analytics of inter-civilisational engagement can form a useful way of looking at global history, might seem like an invitation to an Apollonian panorama of human existence. But a historical perspective has much to offer anyone seeking another way to understand contexts of globality, as critics of globalisation theory have pointed out.

At the same time, there is a chance that, in the rush to exercise historical sensibility, contemporary civilisational analysis might neglect the present. Logically, this might reinforce the presupposition of the globalisation paradigm that civilisations no longer matter and have been flattened out by globalising processes. How much neglect of the present is there? Several points based on my survey of the field in Chapters 1 and 2 can be assembled in support of contemporary civilisational analysis. However, on the whole, they amount to an inconsistent picture. When Robertson, Cox and Katzenstein throw into relief civilisational processes and forces in the present they show how relevant the paradigm is to understanding the international arena. Add in Hall and Jackson's collaborations, and it seems that there is strength in the discipline of international relations. In comparative sociology, Eisenstadt's civilisation of modernity was an attempt to

outline a civilisational framework for study of contemporary trends. It identified important problems for debate. The question of the historical lineages of modern democratic movements is partly framed by the controversy around Axial civilisations. The other side of the theorisation of democracy is oriented to a critique of totalitarianism and fundamentalist modernities. The critique furnishes important insights into the modernity of authoritarian and totalitarian logics and the abiding tensions of democracy. But, more powerfully, the commitment to democratic projects is an orienting position for contemporary civilisational analysis, a place to stand in respect of the global order. Others mentioned in these pages, such as Arjomand, Arnason and Spohn, reveal their currency when they address problematics of modernity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In each of these accounts, contemporary civilisational analysis has shown some relevance to evaluations of the post-Cold War era, but efforts in international relations address the present more decisively than comparative sociology has to date.

Other arguments can be assembled in favour of keeping civilisational patterns on the research agenda for the social sciences. The arguments relate well to my own version of contemporary civilisational analysis but also have a broader relevance. Application of the version I have developed requires two sensibilities, both of which are variably exercised in the field. Contemporary imaginaries, first of all, are frequently manifest as regional patterns. Globalisation analysis, as an alternative, has not done sufficient justice to either regional plurality or the dynamics of regionalisation. Second, analysis of the four dimensions of inter-civilisational engagement presupposes an acute appreciation that social formations are multidimensional and are made up, in other words, of co-determining spheres of social life. While my precise focus is on interactive dimensions of civilisational constellations and patterns, there is a whole other endogenous side to the multidimensional orders instituted by social imaginaries that remains indispensable.

The two sensibilities add up to a commitment to non-reductive social theory and social science. By asserting appreciation of the complexity and multiplicity of large-scale formations, versions of contemporary civilisational analysis that enliven both sensibilities can be alert to the co-determination and multi-determination of social life. They can aim at provisional conclusions and broad understanding and not reductionist explanation. Civilisational analysis has a strong record of investigation of historical civilisations, notwithstanding the shortcomings analysed in this book. Practitioners in the field have more or less applied those sensibilities, and where they haven't their theoretical and empirical findings point to further research into complexity and multiplicity.

Treatment of contemporary problems of modernity is another matter. The record of investigation is inconsistent, as I suggest above. Any perspectives informed by civilisational analysis that aim to combine horizons of past and present

will require a wider optic of social scientific and theoretical inquiry. Inquiry into present and past should be premised on three requisites. The first is an orientation to social change and not unconditionally any projects of change, but ones that confront problems of the contemporary human condition. Those problems include: wars and the plight of refugees, the related attrition of fragile cosmopolitan and democratic ideals, poverty and access to the essential resources of life (water, energy, breathable air), and the precipitous degeneration of the biosphere in which all exists. The critical impulses of contemporary imaginaries call for radically democratic responses to global, regional and local problems, responses that are amenable to different collective modes of living, belonging, relating, organising, negotiating and solving. Beyond shallow multicultural regimes of management of ethnic coexistence, the transformative responses of democratic projects invoke potential for inter-cultural living in which core problems of social and economic life – especially those noted above – are seriously foregrounded, deliberated, negotiated and confronted. No future of problem-solving can be found in the opposite of this potential, which indeed is a great threat in the early twenty-first century: the retreat into nationalism, homelands and border closures, which are closures of the mind as well as closures of territory.

The ‘mission’, if you will, of responding to the problems of the present therefore, as a second requisite, calls for recognition of complexity in collective modes of living and an appreciation for the extent of complexity in so-called traditional societies. Too many instantiations of collective imaginaries throughout world history exhibit multidimensional complexity for any presumption to be rightly made that societies of the global age, and Western societies in particular, are more highly differentiated. An intellectual openness to multiple forms of complexity is an imperative to collective problematising, learning and confronting in the face of contemporary crises.

The third requisite is a deeper understanding of the vitality of traditions in the present – in other words, an awareness of how continuous or discontinuous the past is. That different civilisations and cultures have a variety of historicities is more widely accepted in the social sciences and humanities in the wake of post-colonial critique. Contemporary civilisational analysis is also attuned to the deep appreciation of continuities and discontinuities in historical civilisations. What it has yet to do is systematically apply that appreciation to contexts of the present. An opportunity is there for the field to fully elaborate how this might be undertaken in a manner that takes productive directions out of the analyses of modernity it has already founded.

The contribution of *Debating Civilisations* is a model of civilisational analysis that elucidates lines of engagement, a model that can be applied to the conjuncture of the present as well as to historical civilisations. Horizons of

past and present are equally imperatives in a more generalised scholarship of inter-civilisational connectivity that can help make sense of the present conjuncture. That project must also presuppose a conception of civilisation freed from closures of every kind – territorial, cultural, political, communicative – and capable of problematising the contemporary conjuncture in such a way that potential transformations with lasting improvements to the human condition can be imagined. But profound understanding of plurality, complexity and diverse historicities should also be central to visions of democratic transformation and imagined paths to fresh institutions of inter-connected collective modes of life. In other words, a consequence of deeper understanding of complexity is that it must always be possible to put transformations and institutions productively into question. This book is a very modest contribution to that end, one that emphasises engagement and connection as forms of social creation.