

The Axial conundrum between transcendental visions and vicissitudes of their institutionalizations: constructive and destructive possibilities**

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I shall examine the tensions and contradictions attendant on the institutionalization of Axial visions. These tensions are first the result of problems inherent in the *institutionalization* of Axial visions — e.g., the implementation of economic and power structures. Second, these tensions are rooted in the *internal structure* of Axial visions — most notably in the tension between their inclusivist universalist claims and their exclusivist tendency, rendering their institutionalization potentially destructive. These prob-

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lems point to the continual tension between constructive and destructive elements of social and cultural expansion and evolution.

The crystallization of Axial civilizations constitutes one of the most fascinating developments in the history of mankind, a revolutionary process that has shaped the course of history dramatically. It is not surprising that it constitutes a great challenge to sociological theory as well. In his article “What is Axial about the Axial Age”, Robert Bellah (2005, pp. 69-89) presented a succinct analysis of the cultural specificity of the Axial breakthrough. The core of this breakthrough, so he argues, has been a change or transformation of basic cultural conceptions — a breakthrough to what he calls the theoretical stage of human thinking or reflexivity. The distinctiveness of this breakthrough and its impact on world history, however, does not lie solely in the emergence of such conceptions, but in the fact that they became the basic, predominant, and indeed hegemonic premises of the cultural programs and institutional formations within a society or civilization. Not all places that witnessed the emergence of such conceptions also saw their transformation into such hegemonic cultural premises; even in places where such a transformation took place, it was usually very slow and intermittent — Islam being the only (partial) exception in this regard. It is therefore only when both processes come together that we can speak of an Axial civilization. This Axial breakthrough occurred in many parts of the world: in ancient Israel, later in Second-Commonwealth Judaism and in Christianity, in ancient Greece, (partially) in Zoroastrian Iran, in early imperial China, in Hinduism and Buddhism, and later in Islam. With the exception of Islam, these civilizations crystallized in the first millennium BCE and the first centuries of the Common Era. It was this relative synchronicity that gave rise to the concept of an “Axial Age” — first formulated by Karl Jaspers and imbued with strong, if only implicit, evolutionary notions.¹ Jaspers saw the Axial Age as a distinct, basically universal and irreversible step in the development — or evolution — of human history. However, while the emergence and institutionalization of Axial civilizations heralded revolutionary breakthroughs that developed in parallel or in similar direction in different societies, the concrete constellations within these civilizations differed greatly.

The distinctive characteristics of each Axial civilization lie in the development of a specific combination of cultural orientations and institutional

¹ On the concept of the Axial Age, see Jaspers (1953), Voegelin (1975), Schwartz (1975, pp. 1-7), Eisenstadt (1982, pp. 294-314, fn 3 and 4).

² This analysis is based on Eisenstadt (1982, fn 2; 1986; 1987; 1992) and Arnason, Einstadt, and Wittrock (2005).

formations that triggered a specific societal dynamic.² The core of the Axial “syndrome”, to paraphrase Johann Arnason, lies in the combination of two 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 being an example) (Eisenstadt, 2000, pp. 1-21; 2005, pp. 531-564; Arnason, 2005, pp. 19-49). The second tendency was the dis-embedding of social activities and organizations from relatively closed ascriptive, above all kinship or territorial units or frameworks; the concomitant development of “free” resources that could be organized or mobilized in different directions and which gave rise to more complex social systems, creating potential challenges to the hitherto institutional formations.³ These two tendencies led to the development of specific patterns of social organization and cultural orientation, and ultimately to the crystallization of Axial civilizations. Until the emergence of modernity, they represent probably the most radical pattern of decoupling of various structural and cosmological dimensions of social and cultural orders.

What was revolutionary about these developments was the fact that the civilizations in question experienced a comprehensive rupture and problematization of order. They responded to this challenge by elaborating new models of order, based on the contrast and the connection between transcendental foundations and mundane life-worlds. The common constitutive features of Axial Age world-views might be summed up in the following terms: They include 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

³ On the concept of free resources, see Eisenstadt (1993 [1963]).

these formations was their transformation into relatively autonomous spheres of society, regulated according to autonomous criteria.

Part of this process was the attempt to reconstruct the mundane world-human personality and the socio-political and economic orders according to the appropriate transcendental vision, to the principles of a higher ontological order formulated in religious, metaphysical, and/or ethical terms — or, in other words, the attempt to implement some aspect of a particular vision in the mundane world. This new attitude toward the development of the mundane world was closely related to concepts of a world beyond the immediate boundaries of a particular society — a world open, as it were, to reconstruction.

An important institutional formation that developed within all Axial civilizations was a new type of societal center or centers constituted as the major embodiment of the transcendental vision of ultimate reality or as the major locus of the charismatic dimension of human existence. In contrast to their non- or pre-Axial counterparts, these new centers attempted to permeate the periphery and restructure it according to the prevailing Axial vision. Axial civilizations also developed a strong tendency to constitute distinct collectivities and institutional arenas as the most appropriate carriers of a particular Axial vision — creating new “civilizational” collectivities, which were often — though not always (as in the case of China) — religious in nature, but in any case distinct from existing “primordial”, “ethnic”, local, political, or religious collectivities. It is one of the most important features of these broader civilizational frameworks that they were not tied to *one* political or ethnic collectivity. They could encompass many different collectivities, could impinge on existing political, territorial, or kinship collectivities and institutions — challenging them or causing contestations among them over the “cultural” or “ideological” primacy within the broader civilizational framework. Ultimately, this led to continual reconstruction and transformation of the premises and contours of the different collectivities involved.

Such transformations were perhaps most clearly visible in the political realm.⁴ The king-god, the embodiment of the cosmic and earthly order, disappeared, and the model of secular ruler appeared, who could still embody sacral attributes, but who was in principle accountable to a higher order or authority, to God and divine law. In other words, there emerged the possibility of calling a ruler to judgment. A dramatic example is seen in

⁴ From the preparatory statement for the conference report on which Arnason *et al.* (2005) is based. Also see Eisenstadt (1981, pp. 155-181).

the priestly and prophetic pronouncements of ancient Israel, which were transmitted to all monotheistic civilizations. Similar concepts emerged in ancient Greece, India, and China — most clearly manifested in the concept of mandate of heaven. A parallel development was the transformation of family and kinship relations, to some extent also of economic relations. They often emerged as distinct autonomous symbolic and institutional arenas, disembedded from broader ascriptive formations and the criteria and modes of justification governing them. Another development was the emergence of a new type of reflexivity rooted in “theory”, and of new criteria of justification and legitimization of the social and political orders. That entailed the possibility of principled critical examination of these orders and their premises, the awareness that alternative institutional arrangements were possible and could challenge existing institutions — including the possibility of a revolutionary transformation of these institutions (Bellah, 2005, fn 1; Elkana, 1986, pp. 40-64).

These new patterns of reflexivity were closely connected with the development of new forms of cultural creativity. On the “intellectual” level, elaborate and highly formalized theological and philosophical discourses flourished, organized in different worlds of knowledge and in manifold disciplines. Within these discourses, the tension between new cultural concepts and the mundane reality was centralized and promulgated — for example between cosmic time and the mundane political realm, between different concepts of *historia sacra* in relation to the flow of mundane time, between sacred and mundane space. New types of collective memory and corresponding narratives developed (Eisenstadt and Silber, 1988). The specific kind of reflexivity, especially second-order thinking, characteristic of Axial visions or programs, produced a number of internal antinomies or tensions. The most important of these tensions concerned, first, the great range of possible transcendental visions and the ways of their implementation; second, the distinction between reason and revelation or faith (or their equivalents in non-monotheistic Axial civilizations); and third, the problematic of whether the full institutionalization of these visions in pristine form is desirable.

One outcome of these modes of reflexivity was the fact that the new societal centers, institutional frameworks, and distinct “civilizational” collectivities were no longer taken for granted; they were no longer perceived as “naturally” given, either by divine prescription or by the power of custom. They could become the object of contestation between different elites and groups. That such relatively autonomous elites and groups existed

was itself a distinctive characteristic of Axial civilizations. They were responsible for the unique dynamics of these civilizations — namely, the possibility of principled, ideological confrontation between hegemonic and challenging groups and elites, of the continual confrontation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (or sectarian activities), and the potential combination of such confrontations with political struggles over power, with movements of protest, with economic and class conflicts — all of them creating challenges to the existing regimes and their legitimization.

The confrontation between heterodoxy and orthodoxy was by no means limited to matters of ritual, religious observance, or patterns of worship. What the various “orthodox” and most of the “heterodox” conceptions had in common was the will to reconstruct the mundane world according to their respective Axial visions. They were bound together in their struggle — a struggle through which most elites were transformed, to follow Weber’s designation of the ancient Israelite prophets, into potential “political demagogues” who often attempted to mobilize wider popular support for the visions they promulgated. The continual confrontation between hegemonic and secondary elites and between orthodoxy and heterodoxy has been of crucial importance in shaping the concrete institutional formations and dynamics of the various Axial civilizations. It generated the possibility of development within these civilizations, even of far-reaching and revolutionary changes and transformations. It is of special importance in this regard that it was sectarian activities that were among the most important carriers of the broader, often universalistic orientations inherent in Axial cosmological visions. The implications of these developments were summarized by Johann Arnason as follows:

The cultural mutations of the Axial Age generated a surplus of meaning, open to conflicting interpretations and capable of creative adaptation to new situations. But the long-term consequences can only be understood in light of the interaction between cultural orientations and the dynamics of social power. The new horizons of meaning could serve to justify or transfigure, but also to question and contest existing institutions. They were, in other words, invoked to articulate legitimacy as well as protest. More specific versions of both of these alternatives emerged in conjunction with the social distribution, accumulation and regulation of power. The dynamic of ideological formations led to the crystallization of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, more pronounced and polarizing in some traditions than others. In that sense, the history of ideological politics can be traced back to the Axial Age. But the development of new cultural orientations should not be seen as evidence of a thoroughgoing cultural determinism; rather, it entails the complex interplay

of patterns and processes and is conducive to more autonomous action by a broader spectrum of social actors and forces [Arnason, 2005, fn 4].

With respect to the constitution of different patterns of collective identity, the very distinction between different collectivities generated the possibility that primordial, civil, and sacred themes could be re-combined on the local, regional, and central level in ever newer ways, and be reconstructed in relation to sacral civilizational themes — including the possibility of continual confrontation between them. No single *locus*, not even the centers of the most centralized empires, could effectively monopolize all these themes. Rather, they were represented on different levels of social organization by different collectivities and institutional local, “ethnic”, political, civic, and religious — each with relatively high levels of self-consciousness and different conceptions of time and space.

The tendency within Axial civilizations to constantly reconstitute institutional formations was reinforced by the fact that a new type of inter-societal and inter-civilizational world history emerged. All Axial civilizations developed a certain propensity to expansion and combined ideological and religious with political and, to some extent, also economic impulses. To be sure, political, cultural, and economic interrelations between different societies — including the development of types of international or “world” systems — existed throughout human history.⁵ Concepts of a universal or world kingdom had emerged in many pre-Axial civilizations, for example in the Mongol empire of Genghis Kahn and his descendants (Biran, 2004, pp. 339-363; 2007).

However, it was only with the crystallization of Axial civilizations that a more distinctive ideological mode of expansion developed in which considerations of power and economic interest became closely related to ideological premises and indeed imbued by them. The zeal for reorganization and transformation of social formations according to particular transcendental visions made the “whole world” at least potentially subject to cultural-political reconstruction. Although often radically divergent in terms of their concrete institutionalization, the political formations within Axial civilizations comprised representations and ideologies of a quasi-global empire. Some civilizations, at specific moments in their history, even managed to build such an empire. This mode of expansion also gave rise to attempts at creating “world histories” encompassing different societies. However, there

⁵ On world systems, see for example, Frank and Gills (1993), Friedman and Rowlands (1977), or Wallerstein (2004).

never existed one homogeneous world history, nor were different types of civilizations similar or convergent in this respect. Rather, a multiplicity of different and mutually impinging world civilizations developed, each attempting to reconstruct the world according to its basic premises, and either to absorb other civilizations or to consciously segregate themselves from the others. In any case, the interrelations, contacts, and confrontations between different Axial civilizations and between Axial and non-Axial ones constituted a fundamental aspect of their dynamics. Such contacts were not only important transmitters of different cultural themes, thus giving rise to different patterns of syncretization of cultural and religious tropes; they could also promote the crystallization of new — both pre-Axial and Axial — civilizations, as was the case with the Ahmenid and Hellenistic empires, with several South-east and East Asian civilizations, and of course with Islam.⁶

It was the potential for change, the attempt, undertaken by different coalitions of elites, political activists, and other social actors, at reconstructing the internal and trans-societal institutional formations, and the close linkage with economic and class conflicts that constitute the core of the revolutionary transformations within Axial civilizations. “Ethnic” group, political, economic, and class conflicts became transformed into ideological ones; conflicts between tribes, political regimes could become missionary crusades for the transformation of civilizations. All of this generated the possibility of change far beyond existing formations, giving rise to different formations of multiple Axial civilizations.

AXIAL VISIONS AND THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF INSTITUTIONAL FORMATIONS

The starting point of an analysis of the institutionalization of Axial visions is naturally the emergence of these visions, the characteristics of their carriers, and the nature of the processes through which these visions were institutionalized. The most important characteristic of the carriers of Axial visions was their relatively autonomous status as *Kulturträger* — for example the ancient Israelite prophets and priests and later on the Jewish sages, the Greek philosophers and sophists, the various precursors of the Chinese literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist “monks” that later became the different Sanghas, and the nuclei of the Ulema among the Islamic tribes and societies. Such groups developed in all Axial civilizations; they constituted a new social element, a distinct socio-cultural mutation, a new type of reli-

gious or cultural activist that differed greatly from the ritual, magical, or sacral specialist in pre-Axial civilizations.

However, the conditions under which such groups could arise have not yet been adequately addressed or systematically analyzed in the social sciences. There are only indications to be found in the literature — for example the observation, put forward by Robert Bellah, that Axial visionaries tend to emerge especially in secondary centers in relatively volatile international settings, or the more general observation that charismatic tendencies are more likely to arise in periods of social turmoil and disintegration (Bellah, 2005, fn 1 and 14).

Only some of the carriers of Axial visions were successful in the sense that their visions were institutionalized and became influential or even hegemonic in a respective society. In many cases, for example in some Greek city states, appropriate resources or organizational frameworks for their implementation were not available or could not be mobilized (Raaflaub, 2005, pp. 253-283; Eisenstadt, (1993 [1967]), fn5). Even where such visions were implemented, the resulting institutions differed considerably, not only between different Axial civilizations, but also within the framework of the same civilization — be it Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian. The variety is clearly visible in different institutional choices prevalent in different civilizations: full fledged empires (such as the Chinese, Byzantine, or Ottoman empire), rather fragile kingdoms or tribal federations (e.g., ancient Israel), combinations of tribal federations and city-states (e.g., ancient Greece), the complex decentralized pattern of the Hindu civilization, or the imperial feudal configurations of Europe. Moreover, all these institutional formations developed their own distinctive dynamics and were continuously changing, albeit at a different tempo and in different directions.

The general tendency in which new types of institutional formations developed was prescribed by the particular Axial vision. But this was only a potentiality; the actualization and the nature of the exact modes of institutionalization depended on specific conditions which were not given with the Axial vision itself. In other words, the concretization of these potentialities, the crystallization of new Axial institutional formations, was not given with the mere development of an Axial vision. This helps to explain the great variety of typically Axial institutions. And it suggests that in order to understand the formation and dynamics of Axial civilizations and the nature of their revolutionary impact on world history, we have to focus on the analysis of the processes of their crystallization.

The institutionalization of Axial visions was contingent, first, on the development and mobilization of the necessary resources for their implementation; second, on the availability of organizational frameworks that could facilitate such mobilization; third, on the formation of a coalition between the original carrier of a particular Axial vision and other actors — especially political, economic, and communal activists, potential elites within a given society. As part of the process of institutionalization, new political, economic, and communal elites emerged. The institutionalization of Axial visions often entailed far-reaching transformations of the major social and political elites; they all tended to become more autonomous, claiming a place in the promulgation of the Axial vision, while at the same time challenging the monopoly of the carriers of these visions in the process of their institutionalization. They tended to become dis-embedded albeit in different degrees in different societies from the major ascriptive frameworks; at the same time, they claimed autonomous access to the new order promulgated by the Axial visions, which resulted in continual contestation about their status in relation to the new order.

These elites were usually recruited and legitimized according to distinct autonomous criteria, promulgated by the elites themselves. They did not think of themselves as only performing specific technical or functional activities — for example as Scribes — but indeed as carrying a distinct cultural and social order manifest in the prevailing transcendental vision of this society. They often acquired a countrywide status and claimed an autonomous place within the institutional formations. But with the successful institutionalization of a particular Axial vision, the carriers of that vision became part of the ruling coalitions, participating in the activities and mechanisms of control and in the regulation of power. At the same time far-reaching transformations took place in the characteristics of the carriers of these visions - some of them became transformed into members of ruling coalitions while others became the carriers of heterodoxies. Meanwhile, the growing — if, by comparison with modern societies, still rather limited — autonomy of the major institutional formations led to the parallel development of relatively autonomous media of exchange — power, money, influence, and solidarity — especially as they became attributed to particular societal sectors — which, in turn, exacerbated the problems of regulation and coordination within these societies (Parsons, 2007).

With respect to both the extent of autonomy of different elites and the new institutional formations and media of exchange, Axial civilizations could differ markedly. In India, for example, a very high degree of autonomy among religious elites stands in contrast to a lower degree among political

elites. While there was a relatively small degree of differentiation of political roles among the broader strata, European societies developed a much greater degree of autonomy and differentiation among all elites. Similarly, far-reaching differences existed between the different imperial agrarian regimes, as the comparison between the Byzantine and Chinese empires clearly indicates, in the structure of their elites, centers, and their developmental dynamics, despite the fact that they shared rather similar degrees (and relatively high ones for historical societies) of structural and organizational differentiation in the economic and social arenas.

In many Axial societies, the different institutional frameworks — political, economic, cultural, and religious — also acquired a certain degree of autonomy. This is most apparent in the case of empires, but it is also visible in other political formations (for example in patrimonial formations) when compared with non-Axial civilizations. Although, in their basic structural characteristics, many Axial formations are seemingly similar to their counterparts in pre-Axial or non-Axial civilizations. For example, the patrimonial societies in south-east Asia developed distinct characteristics that set them apart from pre- or non-Axial societies.

THE DISTINCTIVE DYNAMICS OF AXIAL INSTITUTIONAL FORMATIONS

The variety of institutional patterns (and their potential to change) was significantly greater in Axial civilizations than in most pre-Axial or non-Axial ones. Both variety and changeability were the result of multiple factors: a multiplicity of cultural orientations, different ecological and social settings, their volatility, the continuous encounter, and contestation between different social, economic, religious, and cultural actors and elites within these settings — the relations between which are, in historical situations, open.

The openness of the relationship between “cosmological” visions, ecological settings, and institutional formations is of special importance in the case of what Parsons called “seed-bed societies” — early ancient Greece and ancient Israel being prime illustrations.

The characteristic feature of these societies has been a discrepancy between the potential institutional range of their basic visions and the concrete possibilities of their institutionalization — resulting in the fact that many of the institutional potentialities of their visions were in a sense “stored”, to be transmitted as components of institutional settings and dynamics of other civilizations.

As in other historical cases, any such institutional formation is characterized by specific relationships between social structure and cosmological vision, manifest in the constitution of institutional boundaries and in different affinities between symbolic orientations and geopolitical conditions and structural formations.

Each Axial institutional formation is also characterized by different ways of incorporating non- or pre-Axial symbolic and institutional components. Even in new Axial settings, such non-Axial orientations and their carriers still played an important part in the cultural and institutional dynamics of these societies. They created autonomous spaces that could remain very influential within the new Axial civilization, often persisting (as in the case of Egypt) over a long period of time. They could also (as in the case of Japan) create their own very important niches in an international framework dominated by Axial civilizations.

The distinctive dynamics of each institutional formation were generated by the internal tensions and contradictions that developed in the course of the institutionalization of Axial frameworks, by the tensions and contradictions between these processes and the basic Axial premises of each civilization, and by the ways in which these societies were incorporated into the international frameworks that were the result of the expansion of particular civilizations. These dynamics intensified the consciousness of the tensions, antinomies, and contradictions inherent in the Axial cultural programs and their institutionalization, which in turn gave rise to the continual reinterpretation of the premises of each Axial civilization. The distinct relations between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, their combination with power structures and economic interests could create — or block — new developmental possibilities, different potentially evolutionary paths.

One such development — that of “Western” Christianity — gave rise to the post-revolutionary transformation of the first modernity, which then expanded above all in colonial and imperialistic mode throughout the world, encountering other Axial (and as perhaps above all in the case of Japan) non-Axial civilizations in their respective historical institutional and symbolic settings, and creating a great variety of modern general and institutional formations designed by some scholars as “multiple modernities” (Parsons, 1977, pp. 13, 99-114; Eisenstadt, 1996, 2002).

The fact that the potentialities of the crystallization of Axial symbolic and institutional formations were dependent on broader evolutionary factors at-

human activities, the tendency to a growing complexity of social structures, to the “rationalization” and problematization of symbolic realms and of criteria for the justification of human activities and of social order is, at least potentially, inherent in all human societies. However, historical evidence suggests that such potentialities were not realized in all societies that had seemingly reached the “necessary” evolutionary stage, that the crystallization of concrete institutional patterns is, therefore, not assured or shaped by the mere development or emergence of appropriate symbolic and structural evolutionary tendencies. In other words, the different institutional patterns that crystallized in the Axial civilizations did not develop, as it were, naturally or automatically as manifestations of a distinct stage of evolutionary history. Nor was this process always peaceful. On the contrary, it was usually connected with continual struggles between activists and groups and their respective visions and adaptive strategies. Such contestations constitute an important feature of all Axial civilizations.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS: EVOLUTIONARY TENDENCIES, INSTITUTIONAL FORMATIONS, AGENCY, AND CONTROL

The analysis of the processes of institutionalization within different Axial civilizations has implications for sociological theory and the analysis of world history — indicating some of the most important problems which can only be pointed out to be systematically developed in future work.

The analysis indicates, first, that the crystallization of any institutional pattern is dependent on distinct patterns of social interaction. Second, the crystallization of institutional and symbolic formations is effected by distinct types of actors, the emergence of which constitutes itself in distinct social-cultural mutations which are not predetermined by broad evolutionary tendencies, even if such tendencies provide the basic framework for such crystallizations. Third, such crystallization is dependent on the implementation of effective mechanisms of control and regulation between major social actors. Fourth, historical contingencies play an important role in the process of such crystallization.

The core of the crystallization of any concrete institutional formation is the specification of distinct boundaries of social interactions. Since the human biological program is, to use Ernst Mayr’s expression, an “open” program, such boundaries are not predetermined genetically, but have to be constituted through social interaction (Mayr, 1976; Eisenstadt, 1995, pp. 328-389). Given this openness, the crystallization of any concrete pat-

tern of social interaction generates major problems. The most important of these problems were already identified by the founding fathers of Sociology: the constitution of trust, regulation of power, and provision of meaning and legitimization of social activities and frameworks. These problems are coped with, as it were, by the development of distinct modes of regulation, which may crystallize into relatively independent political, economic, or cultural roles and patterns of social interaction — all of which may tend to pursue systemic tendencies of their own. The degree of their autonomy, of mutual embedment or embedment in broader frameworks, and of their relative predominance, varies in different societies.

The crystallization and continual reconstitution of distinctive patterns of social interaction, the specification of their boundaries, and of the patterns of social behavior and interaction appropriate within them is effected by distinctive mechanisms of control.

Such mechanisms of control entail combinations of symbolic and “material” components. They entail first of all the promulgation of the basic symbolic visions of the ontological and social order by the hegemonic frameworks of the respective collectivities.

Second, they entail the specification of the boundaries of the scope of any social interaction.

Third, they entail the control of access of different social sectors to the major social resources and the modes of conversion between such resources — i.e. between cultural, power, and economic ones.

Such processes of control and regulation entail the transformation of basic symbolic orientations — cosmological visions — into “codes” or schemata. Such codes are akin to what Max Weber called *Wirtschaftsethik*. The term does not connote specific religious injunctions about the proper behavior in any given sphere, nor is it merely a logical deduction from theological or philosophical principles predominant in a given religion. Rather, it denotes a general mode of “religious” or “ethical” orientation that shapes the major criteria of evaluation and justification of human activities and institutional formations — criteria which then serve as starting points in the regulation of the flow and distribution of resources and media of exchange in a society. Such regulation is supported by various institutional means, especially by various types of incentives and sanctions, promulgated in public and semi-public rituals.

Such regulation is effected by the activities of specific social actors; the most important actors in this regard are those who structure the division of labor in a society, those who articulate collective political goals, those who specify the borders of different ascriptive social collectivities, and those who articulate the basic cultural visions and models predominant in a particular society.

The emergence of new institutional entrepreneurs and their visions constitutes a distinct mutation that developed in different historical situations and in different parts of the world in seemingly unpredictable ways, producing very different orientations and worldviews (for example this-worldly and other-worldly orientations) with different institutional implications. The principled openness of any historical situation and of any evolutionary stage of development means that attempts to implement a particular institutional pattern can become subject to continual contestation.

The mechanisms and processes of control within a society are hierarchically composed of many intermediate units that are strongly interconnected horizontally, but less strongly vertically. Furthermore, the strength of vertical linkages differs according to their position within the hierarchical order. Lower-level controls manage short-term and local affairs, while higher-level controls provide system-wide decision-making capabilities.

Such mechanisms develop in all societies, but they differ with respect to the degree of complexity: The more complex that social and political systems and civilizational frameworks become, the more autonomous and potentially more fragile they tend to be. Axial civilizations provide an excellent illustration of the problems concerning the emergence of complex social systems rooted in evolutionary tendencies. Following the analysis of Herbert Simon, one could say that the modes of institutional formation within Axial civilizations gave rise to potentially fragile modes of control, thus enhancing the possibility of challenge and transformation, which in turn led to multiple new and ever changing institutional formations.

The preceding analysis indicates that institutional formations, though rooted in evolutionary tendencies and potentials, cannot be designated as natural manifestations of particular stages in the process of social evolution. Rather, they must be seen as a contingent outcome of a particular historical constellation that allowed for a multitude of possible ways of development. The major dimensions of the social and cultural order within Axial civilizations developed, at least to some extent, independently of one another and often in opposite directions, each pushed, as it were, by its own momentum.

Second, this development is exacerbated by the fact that the crystallization of specific patterns of the social always takes place under contingent historical and geopolitical conditions. Third, and most importantly, any such crystallization is effected by distinct types of agency, by different entrepreneurial activities that mobilize available resources and develop appropriate patterns of regulation for the flow of these resources.

The tendency of humans to continuously expand their sphere of influence potentially undermines whatever temporary equilibrium may have been attained in any institutional formation with regard to the building of trust, regulation of power, and legitimization of social order. It heightens the awareness that any social order is arbitrary, and hence generates destructive potentialities in it. The history of Axial civilizations and particularly that of modernity (with its Axial roots) does indeed attest to the fact that any such extension entails both constructive and destructive potentialities — a fact that has not been given full attention in sociological analyses.

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