

Consciousness and Civilization: the Inside Story

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I am happy to be back with you at York University. This gives me an occasion to reflect upon my time at York and how that fitted into the rest of my life.

I have had two careers in my lifetime. The first began as I left McGill University at the end of World War II as a very young man to become an international civil servant in Geneva, Switzerland. My work there with the ILO took me to Africa, Latin America, the Soviet Union, as it then was, and to Asia and the Middle East. Then, after about twenty-five years, I quit my international status to move into academic life as my second career. First, Columbia University gave me the chance to develop and express my thinking about where the world was going. Then, coming to York in the 1980s, I found my intellectual home in a place where diversity in thought was most welcome.

I am grateful for the variety of experience my life's course in the world has allowed me; and I give thanks to York as the community in which I was able to reflect upon and consolidate my thinking.

In this opportunity you kindly give me to talk to you today I would like to discuss a theme that has been in my mind and which results from that process of reflection. I hope you will excuse the personal character of much of what I have to say.

We are living through a time of great uncertainty about the future. The institutions that were created during the second half of the 20th century to deal with the problems of world order are all in process of transformation or

replacement. The United Nations was set up to embody the principle of the sovereign equality of states modified by the special responsibility for world security of the group of great powers that were victorious in World War II. That now seems a long time ago although it was just the beginning of my adult life.

The United Nations continues to be the world's widest diplomatic forum and it performs a wide range of essential services for refugees, for peacekeeping and peacemaking where it has been allowed, and, through its specialized agencies, services in the realm of health and the strengthening of the structures of government in emerging countries. But the United Nations has for practical reasons been precluded from the major political and economic issues – how to adjust global governance to the changes in global power relationships and how to deal with a global economic and financial crisis.

In these crucial matters, the world is in a condition like what neurologists call 'self-organization'. By that they mean what happens when the nervous system encounters a blockage which it then by-passes as the neurons spontaneously generate a new channel of activity. By analogy, the blockage of the UN Security Council by the Cold War stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union generated NATO, which worked well during the Cold War when European countries felt threatened by the Soviet Union. More recently, when European countries' relations with Russia have improved and NATO has been converted into an American-led instrument to penetrate the Caucasuses and Afghanistan, cohesion among its European members has been strained.

The world economy was for a time managed, not without phases of recession and financial crisis, by the G7 major capitalist powers. Their consensus on neo-liberal principles of management was substantially uncontested. Then, as the G7 was morphing into a broader grouping, the G 20, including not only Russia but also China, India, Brazil and others, the world was confronted in 2008 by the

worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, a crisis emanating from financial collapse in the United States, the centre of the global economy. The so-called “Washington consensus” on global economic policy among the elites of the major international economic institutions gathered in the US capital no longer holds. Global economic management is no longer a matter of consensually accepted economic doctrine like neo-liberalism; it is a matter of political negotiation.

How the two dilemmas of global political organization and global economic management will be resolved anew is by no means clear in the present phase of uncertainty. One thing is, however, clear: the problems of global economic and political governance have been overshadowed by their combined impact on the stability of the earth’s biosphere. The imperative challenge, which is often shoved into the background, is to resolve them in such a way that the fragile biosphere is not left in jeopardy. This constraint in itself should act as an inducement towards a “self-organization” process through a dialogue that makes the life-sustaining capacity of the planet the basic criterion.

Civilization as collective consciousness

We are, in effect, at a crucial moment in the world historical process. The world of the last half century is passing away and the definitive shape of a new emerging world order is far from clear. To think about this we need a long-term perspective; and to find it I would refer to an historian’s way of thinking about the movement of history.

The English historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood pointed out that there was an “inside” as well as an “outside” to history. The “outside” consists of all the existing structures and events and all the measurable, quantifiable resources at play that could be ascertained by an external observer – states, economic

organization and resources, military assets and deployments, elections and changes in political leadership, violent incidents and accidents and all the rest. All these things can be known at least approximately by observation.

The “inside” consists of the thoughts of the participants whose actions make history, the thoughts that explain their understanding of the situations they confront and their motivations and attitudes in shaping their active response or passive acceptance.

Our forms of knowledge are also shaped by this inside/outside duality. During the 18th century European Enlightenment, René Descartes enunciated the foundation of modern scientific method based upon meticulous observation. For Descartes a thing could only be fully known by its maker. Since God, as Descartes believed, had made the world and all that is in it, therefore only God fully knew the world. Human beings, however, could attain an approximate knowledge of the world by observation and by recording regularities in behaviour. In this way scientific knowledge would be built up. Descartes set the pattern for the development of Western science.

A less-known figure, a contemporary of Descartes, criticized the limitations of Descartes’ approach. Giambattista Vico, who lived in Naples, argued that human institutions and human history were made by human beings and therefore should be knowable through the capacity of other perceptive people to reproduce in their minds the thoughts of the makers of these institutions, and of the events that flowed from them.

Vico was, outwardly at least, a pious Catholic. It was prudent for him to be so since Naples, where he lived, was a city where the Spanish Inquisition was active in prosecuting any who strayed from orthodoxy. Some well known

contemporaries of Vico became its victims. Vico, in the oldest tradition of the city in which he lived, was also by temperament a man of the classical age, the age of Cicero, and was thus able to think of the motive force of history as being in the thoughts and actions of people rather than in the will of God.

If people's thoughts were the motive force of history, these were not only the thoughts of individuals. The thoughts of individuals living in different times and places are formed against the background of ideas common to others who have been shaped by the historical experience of the group, a body of inter-subjective ideas often called 'common sense' out of which individuals develop their distinctive thinking. You have to know the 'common sense' of the group in order to interpret the specific thought of individuals living in the same era.

Descartes was the father of positive science; and he did not have much use for history. Vico rescued history as we know it from its marginalization by physical science in the time of the European Enlightenment. Vico didn't call it history. He called it philology because the study of the changing meanings of words and the evolution of language was his method for penetrating the minds of those human beings and groups of humans who had made history, including the institutions and processes built up and broken down by human effort or by neglect.

Coming back to Collingwood's distinction, positivism – positive science – knows the "outside" of the human story; history knows both the "outside" and the "inside". The "outside" is matter; the "inside" is consciousness.

How can we understand this duality of matter and consciousness?

In northern China during the 1930s, two scientists, one a paleontologist, the other an ethnologist, helped us answer that question. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the paleontologist, was a religious exile, a heterodox French Jesuit whose study

of evolution had put him at odds with the guardians of orthodoxy in Rome. They forbade him to teach or to publish, so he devoted his life to field research in China. He introduced the concept of the *noösphere*, named from the Greek word for mind or intellect, to represent the sphere of consciousness, of conscious thought, which came into existence with *homo sapiens* becoming aware of his material conditions of existence and reacting to them. *Homo sapiens* brought consciousness to reshape matter.

S. M. Shirokogoroff, the ethnologist, from Vladivostok was in political exile from Stalin's Russia. He pointed out that *homo sapiens* was never a single uniform species. *Homo sapiens* has evolved in distinct groups, through distinct processes, each of which he characterized as an *ethnos*. Each *ethnos* was a process of collective development of a segment of humanity in that part of the world where it existed, evolving, in the case of each *ethnos*, a distinct way of understanding and dealing with its particular world. How people related to each other and how they confronted outsiders or 'foreigners' was determined by developments in the evolving collective consciousness – in the inter-subjectivity – of each *ethnos*. Language, myth and religion, evolving in time into different forms of rationality consolidated the realms of consciousness that differentiated one *ethnos* from another in the civilizing process of each.

Together Teilhard and Shirokogoroff gave us a picture of the independent clusters of humanity we now call civilizations evolving each its own way of seeing and understanding the world. The one common link among all these historically formed human processes of development was the rare but essential capacity of a human being to reproduce within his or her own mind the complex thought pattern of another different civilizing process – not to make it their own but to understand it as the essence of another.

Oswald Spengler, just before the First World War of 1914-18, published *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, the English title of which was *The Decline of the West*.¹ His verdict about the West now seems premature; but in fact he was not predicting the immanent decline of the West. He was looking upon civilizations as organic phenomena that go through the stages of birth, maturing, decline and death, much as Vico had portrayed the cycle of human agglomerations about 170 years earlier. For Spengler, the West had passed its peak, the uniquely creative impulse of its earlier life now all but exhausted, devoting its efforts henceforth to technology and imperial extension rather than to the creative intensity of ever new ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Now we are aware that, if the West is not irrevocably in decline, the East is on the rise, and the balance of world power is shifting. The dilemma of world order today is to see how that adjustment of world power can be made peacefully.

Spengler saw a world of cultures – he used the word culture from its German form *Kultur* to represent the earlier creative stages of the civilization process, reserving the term civilization, an 18th century word of French extraction, for the later stages. Spengler saw a world of cultures and civilizations coexisting in space and linked over time. Though his focus was on the West, he sought to capture something of the inner essence of other civilizations.

He observed that the culture of China, prefiguring that of the West, was profoundly historical, while the culture of India, like that of Classical Greece, was non-historical, the culture of an eternal present. Spengler was trying to grasp the ways in which people in different cultures and civilizations constructed their views of the world. He certainly did not have the final word on that, but his admonition to move from what he called a Ptolemaic to a Copernican concept

¹ New York: Knopf, one volume edition, 1939.

of history – from the West being the centre around which all else revolves to an understanding of the individuality of coexisting cultures and civilizations revolving in space together and interconnected through time – is particularly relevant to the present. He was stressing the importance of looking *into* another civilization so as to see it from within, not just as an external alien thing.

Cyclical and linear time: the genealogy of the “end of history”

In beginning to think that way, it is a good idea to look introspectively into one’s own tradition of civilization to find the elements that are specific to it – which can allow contrast and comparison with other traditions of civilization – and thereby avoid the illusion of assuming that one’s specific tradition has the quality of universality.

In the origins of peoples, each *ethnos* (to use Shrikogoroff’s word) evolved in a close relationship to nature. Most myths and primitive religions understand life as a circular process analogous to the cycle of the seasons and to the cycle of life – birth, maturity, decline and death. And death has not been seen as an irrevocable end but, as in nature, an opportunity for new creative beginnings, for the start of a new life cycle. Most of the peoples of Asia and Africa and the indigenous people all over the world have retained something of that essential relationship of people to the rest of nature of which they are a part – the relationship of human consciousness to the material biosphere.

The break between humanity and the rest of nature came first in the realm of religion with the emergence of monotheism, an implicitly totalitarian religion in that it subjected everything to one all powerful creator, God with a capital G, separate from and standing above humanity and nature – a God that would not tolerate the many gods of primitive religion which express the manifold spiritual reality of the different aspects of nature. Monotheism created a dualism between

the world of people and a higher spiritual world that was to be humanity's ultimate goal. This higher world was the realm of struggle between absolutes leading to the final victory of good over evil. Monotheism posits that God has a final end in store for humanity, revealed in what theologians call eschatology, the doctrine of final things. In other words, there is an end, a finality, of history, in the kingdom of God on earth. Monotheism originated in the Middle East and spread to Europe and thence via imperial conquest and proselytizing around the world, overlaying the natural religions of other peoples.

Primitive religion was sufficiently resilient to survive within monotheism because it was the conception of life most congenial and understandable to people whose life was close to nature. During the European Middle Ages worship of the saints flourished – a counterpart within a formal monotheism to the many divinities of the primitive religion. St. Francis of Assisi revived within Christianity a particular reverence for the spirituality of nature and showed it was possible to preserve something of the plurality of spiritual life – a popular polytheism within a formal monotheism.

The Industrial Revolution, however, struck a blow at the plurality of the 'natural' religion by changing the manner of living of peoples in the new industrial societies. The old sense of cosmic order uniting humanity with nature was undermined by the demonstration of humanity's ability to dominate and extract from nature what was needed to expand industrial economies and increase national power in the world. The old eschatological habit of mind – the sense that there was an 'end of history' – became secularized without changing its meaning that history was moving towards a preordained end now based on control of the material world.

It has only been in the closing years of the 20th century and the opening years of the 21st that the consequences of this rupture between *homo sapiens* and nature, between consciousness and the biosphere, has been perceived as a looming catastrophe. The American neoconservative vision of the end of history as the whole world converging toward American-style democracy and free market capitalism has been challenged by a more somber vision. The end of history now has a cataclysmic meaning as the end of life on this planet. It meant that existing industrial and economic practices, if continued unchanged into the future, would devastate the biosphere upon which all life depends.

At the same time fundamentalist forms of monotheism have heightened conflict and violence in many parts of the world. These dual prospects of a weakening biosphere and intensifying religious or ideological fanaticism underline the urgency of an inter-civilization dialogue that could lead towards an understanding and tolerance of difference and an ability to deal effectively with common dangers.

In studying the mental orientations towards the world of different peoples (what French historians call *mentalités*), the duality of monotheism and the primitive 'natural' religion leads to the dichotomy of absolutism and relativism – of the idea, on the one hand, that there is only one correct way of ordering life and society and world order; and the idea, on the other hand, of a plural world in which different sets of values find a place where the common continuing task is to work towards toleration and consensus on essentials.

East and West: cyclical and linear time

There have been important differences between West and East in these matters. Monotheism seems to have been alien to the Chinese mentality from the earliest historical times. From my readings and conversations with Chinese thinkers, I

have the sense that in Chinese culture there has been a consistently cyclical view of history and civilization. The cycle of nature was reflected in politics and society. There was a cycle of virtuous government falling into corruption, leading to revolution, followed then by reform within the revolution and a repetition of the cycle. The traditional Chinese mentality was also aware of conflict and struggle between conflicting principles in the process of a people's existence. This was expressed in the dialectic between the masculine and feminine principles of *yin* and *yang*, a dialectic of opposites which were always bound together in the whole, and which alternated in predominance through the course of history, in a process seeking a balance in which both poles would at least momentarily become reconciled.

The Western tradition, by contrast, has understood change as a linear dialectic in which conflict leads all the time to a higher synthesis in a continuing trajectory. The eschatology of monotheism – the doctrine of movement towards a final outcome – was reinforced and secularized under the influence of the economic growth of industrialism. It gave birth to the 19th century idea of Progress – with a capital P -- which was confirmed again for Europeans by imperial expansionism in the 19th century era described by the French historian Charles Morazé as that of *les bourgeois conquérants* – the conquering bourgeoisie – bringing European dominance to Asia and Africa. In the West, the meaning of change became movement towards an ultimate preordained unity of thought and organized life that seemed to be latent in the Western historical trajectory. The “end of history” thesis of Francis Fukuyama – which, by the way, I understand he has since recanted – was the most recent version of this kind of Western secularized eschatological thinking. History, however, goes on producing ever newer forms of life and social organization whether that is seen optimistically as continuing

progress towards something better or more pessimistically – one might say, more realistically – as a cyclical movement recurrently seeking a tolerable equilibrium.

The “end of history” thesis would absorb all other civilizations into the triumphant apotheosis of an Americanized West. The “clash of civilizations” thesis of Samuel Huntingdon, for its part, would seem to freeze the other non-Western civilizations – Islamic and Confucian in Huntingdon’s account – into fixed entities juxtaposed to a dynamic West. His metaphor for the “clash” was geological, the movement of tectonic plates, which emphasizes the solidity and impermeability of the entities in question: the impermeability of civilizations.

Civilizations, however, are historical phenomena, ways of looking at the world, forms of collective consciousness, each evolving initially from within one of those distinctive processes of human development to which Shirokogoroff gave the name *ethnos*. Civilizations evolve through conflict within themselves and through borrowing from and resistance against encounters with other civilizations. They are forms of consciousness malleable to the historical experience of peoples, not geological slabs crushing against one another. They should be understood as processes, changing through conflict among internal forces and from the impact of external encounters and influences. This brings us back to Vico’s and Spengler’s effort to understand them from *within* in their development and in their encounters with other civilizations.

A German scholar, Dieter Senghaas, took it upon himself to contest Huntingdon’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis. He published a book entitled “The Conflict Within Civilizations”.² It did not have the notoriety within the English-speaking world of Huntingdon’s work, but it reminded us of something

² Dieter Senghaas, *The Clash Within Civilizations. Coming to Terms with Cultural Conflicts*, trans. From the original German (London: Routledge, 2002)

Huntingdon's catch phrase obscured: that within civilizations ways of thinking are always changing, whether through modernization and the fermentation of new ideas or through obscurantism and retreat to fundamentalist verities.

To comprehend these changes it is necessary to understand civilizations from *within*. The effort fails if civilizations are pictured as monolithic slabs seen from *without*; and the latent possibilities of inter-civilization dialogue are suppressed.

To understand civilizations from within today it is necessary to gain an historical perspective upon the choices people and their governments face. Does the future lie with an American-led movement towards one all-embracing civilization embodying American values of democracy and free market capitalism? Or is it more likely that the possibility of peace and order will depend upon the ability of several constellations of world power working out a *modus vivendi*, each of these power groupings embodying the values that have evolved within distinctive historical processes and which have led to different ways of organizing life? In other words, is the future to be seen as one unitary global civilization or as a plural world with a continuing diversity of civilizations?

America and China: unitary or plural world?

Two world powers today embody those alternatives: America, on the one hand, China, on the other. America remains the central power in the world. With the present Obama administration its leadership role has become more consultative and consensual – more multilateral in style – renouncing the unilateralism of its predecessor the George W. Bush administration, while it still retains the vision of a future world shaped by American aims and values.

Chinese leaders have not overtly challenged American world leadership but have sought recognition of their weight in the world economy and influence in reshaping the global economic and financial system through the recent years of

economic crisis. The global recession spreading from America across the world has tarnished the image of American free market capitalism. As some corporate bastions have collapsed – Lehman Brothers, AIG (American International Group) – the U.S. government and other western governments have bailed out others including the US auto industry; and, contrary to their earlier commitment to neo-liberal ideology, governments have intervened massively in the economy. In this context, the Chinese model of a state guided capitalism has fared somewhat better.

In thinking about historical change, past or contemporary, absolute principles are challenged by hard experience. What are the limits to unbridled individualism? Where does responsibility to the community leave room for individual creativity? These are now global questions that have been given varying answers in the history of different civilizations. I suggest that there is no uniform answer, that varying answers have been worked out in the experience of different peoples and different situations, and that in looking for answers to global problems – problems that concern everyone on earth – there is merit in recognizing that the answers at any time and in different places will not be uniform for all people. The basis for an inter-civilization dialogue is to understand *why* there are differences.

Long before the European state system was consolidated as a form of world order in the 17th century, a Chinese world order existed on the other side of the planet. The European concept of world order emerging in the Treaty of Westphalia in the middle of the 17th century consisted of the sovereign equality of states – sovereign in the dual sense of being independent from other states and of having a monopoly of power within their own territory. The whole state system was conceived as being regulated by the balance of power among these

autonomous states, equal in their sovereignty. In reality, as George Orwell put it in *Animal Farm*, some were more equal than others.

The traditional Chinese world order was a kind of cultural hegemony based on the superiority of Chinese culture and guided by the principle of ‘virtue’ presumed to be inherent in it. Yet this world order, which was not based on any idea of sovereign equality, recognized also the reality of the relative power of the different political entities composing it. All participants in this Chinese world order would aspire to the unity of ‘all-under-heaven’ while recognizing pragmatically differences of power and identity among countries. Different forms of relationships were possible among the political entities that composed that world. The collective aim was to achieve consensus on what was vital to the whole, while allowing for the reality of diversity in power and values.³

One strand of Western thinking in recent years has become fixated on the idea of transcending the state system established in the 17th century by some form of global governance, an empire that dare not speak its name. A recent version has been the American neoconservative vision which saw the world as inexorably converging towards something like American society writ large – American democracy and free market capitalism – which would only require a push, or ‘surge’, of military and economic pressure to accelerate and complete the process.

This view came naturally to the American mind. The United States has known only a history of rising power, never yet the experience of decline and fall. Americans of all parties have cherished their myth of origin imagined by the

³ Wang Gungwu, “Early Ming relations with Southeast Asia: a background essay” in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order. Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968) pp. 34-62.

puritan father John Winthrop in 1630 – America as a new people freed from the evils of an unjust and decadent Europe, “a shining city on a hill, a light to the world”.

Retreat from globalization?

This vision has been sustained by the process of globalization; and the problems of globalization are beginning to undermine it. Globalization has accelerated mass migrations that are rearranging populations in all parts of the world. It has accentuated the disparity between rich and poor. Globalization has accelerated technological development and spread it to new centres of growth. It has also changed the class structure of developing countries with the emergence of a middle class consuming according to the standards of the most developed.

For some time the so-called “Washington consensus” defined the institutional and policy content of globalization in terms of what became known as neo-liberalism. Economic globalization was a good thing according to this consensus among the elites of the world economic institutions gathered in the U.S. capital. Deregulation, open markets, coupled with sound money policies by central banks and the application of “structural adjustment” policies to weaker national economies defined good economic practice. Politics, according to this consensus, should not interfere with the assumedly beneficent working of the market.

We can trace a slow but steady movement away from this consensus. I would trace it to the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, which was seen by many in the West as the failure of the East Asian model of state-led economic growth, but was seen in Asia as a demonstration of dangers in the way global financial matters were managed out of Washington and Wall Street. In retrospect, that crisis may have been the turning point away from consensus on neo-liberal

policies.⁴ Meanwhile, massive U.S. trade and budget deficits have been financed by other countries, principally by China and Japan. On top of the public and private indebtedness which strained confidence in the dollar, an excess of unregulated speculation in toxic U.S. mortgage debt, spread around the world through ingeniously contrived financial instruments, triggered the collapse of financial markets in 2008 and the possibility of a prolonged world wide recession.

Governments, beginning with the U.S. government, felt obliged to move more forcefully into the economy to repair the damage made by unregulated capitalism. At the same time the dominant economies of the West had to adjust to a new global balance of economic power. The burden of these adjustments to recession or depression and to shifting economic power among nations is borne by working people; and their response calls in question the liberal economic policies that had become the common doctrine of globalization in the developed world.

Politics in all these matters is being reasserted in the sphere of economics, which raises the question whether economic globalization, not so long ago hailed as the inevitable and benign future of mankind, propelled forward by the invisible hand of the market, has not reached and passed its peak. The global problem is not how states can adapt their policies to the push of those market forces but how they can retain sufficient control over market forces so as to preserve and advance social equity in their countries at a time when the balance of economic power among countries is radically shifting – while the West is stalled and the East is rising.

⁴ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2002); and Chalmers Johnston, *Blowback: The Crisis and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Holt, 2000).

Conclusion: a plural or unitary world?

As the balance of economic power shifts from West to East, dominant military power remains with the economically weakening West. If China's economic weight in the world is growing as US economic power weakens in the recession following 2008, American military power remains dominant. The question is: for how long? Are we approaching a critical turning point? It is important to consider how the nature of US military superiority plays into this question.

Looking back at the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, the United States fought that war with an army of drafted civilians. The army was, however, a distorted reflection of American society. White middle class university-educated males could and often did escape the draft. The leaders of the coming generation in American politics – Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and many others – all escaped the draft. Afro-Americans, Hispanic Americans and the less privileged generally formed the bulk of the conscripted armed forces. With the *de facto* defeat and precipitate withdrawal of the US forces from Vietnam, public opinion in the United States turned against the war – anti-war feeling had been building up for some time – and by extension against those who had been fighting in it. That was the sorry end of the conscript citizen army.

America's leaders seeking to reconstruct the armed forces chose another course. The new army would be a professional force composed only of volunteers who would choose to have a career in the military. The idea of a citizen military was abandoned. Thenceforth there would be a clear line between military and civilian life. There would be a clear distinction in society between group discipline and patriotic commitment, on the one hand, individualism and pursuit of the good life, on the other. The military could develop as an independent cohesive body within the American state and society. The military/industrial complex, which former President Eisenhower had warned against in his valedictory address to

the American people in January 17, 1961, had become an independent force in the political system during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The United States is now evolving as a dual power structure of President and Pentagon. The limit of Presidential power was demonstrated following Barak Obama's election in 2008. The anticipation of dramatic change by Obama's youthful supporters as they shouted "Yes we can" was soon disillusioned by the realization that "No we can't". Whatever else could be adjusted at the margin, like a very modest reform in health care, the Pentagon's power was entrenched with its doctrine of "full spectrum dominance". The Pentagon had its own set of proconsuls located in the strategic regions of the world comparable to and independent of the State Department's diplomatic network.⁵ The American empire of the twenty-first century is bicephalous – it has two heads representing two distinct cultures.

This leads to the question whether the United States would be willing and able to adjust to the idea of becoming one major power among several in an emerging new world order, a plural world. Such a course would imply an end to the Pentagon's quasi-independent power in the bicephalous nature of the American polity.

That seems unlikely and could only come about in a period of relative calm in international relations. American power is now, however, engaged in the Middle East and Persian Gulf in a conflict between Israel and Iran. Israel is threatening to attack Iran because it fears Iran may be developing atomic weapons with which to attack it. It is probable that generals in the Pentagon would attempt to

⁵ Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Harvard University Press, 2002), esp. Chaps.5.and 7.

restrain Israel from attacking Iran. No one can foretell what will happen; but a strike of this kind could be the trigger for a much wider conflict.

The Eurasian powers, China, Russia and the Central Asian republics, members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are drawing steadily closer together, integrating their economies and engaging in joint military exercises. They also are increasingly concerned about encirclement by the American “pivot to Asia” building up into a catastrophic confrontation. This is the scenario that seems more likely than a movement towards a plural world with the great powers and many of the lesser in a continuous negotiation over the maintenance of world peace and greater social equity.

Whatever emerges in the ongoing transformation of world order, the moving forces directing these blocs of consolidated power – the American empire versus Eurasia – derive from the divergent mentalities – from the divergent forms of collective consciousness – of the different human groups that confront one another in the process of shaping world order. Civilizations – these forms of collective consciousness – are the inside story in the process of global “self-organization”. It would, however, be a mistake to think of civilizations as monoliths and to ignore the ongoing struggle of conflicting visions within each of them. The very process of change *within* civilizations creates the potential for dialogue *among* civilizations. The ultimate challenge is to understand how perspectives in different civilizations are evolving in order to be able to dialogue effectively.

The purpose of this dialogue of civilizations is not to remake world order in some definitive way, nor is it to create a new structure of world governance. Dialogue would itself become the process of world order, a continuing process of peaceful, even if contentious, adjustment to ever-changing power relations throughout the world. The challenge to each participant in the process is to be

able to enter into the forms of collective consciousness animating the other participants – to understand their concerns while differing with their conclusions. Lacking this ability to comprehend, this empathy, the process will inevitably degenerate into a “clash of civilizations” – a confrontation of entities falsely represented as fixed monolithic structures, whereas they are in reality lively evolving forms of mental perception.

Finally, there is one common threat and common urgency that hangs over the dialogue of civilizations: the necessity for all parties to manage collectively the balance between human activity as a whole and the material survivability of the biosphere upon which all life depends. This is the ultimate challenge to all peoples and their leaders to make a dialogue of civilizations work effectively.