

Notes on the Contribution of French Social Theory to an Understanding of Western Civilization, Christianity, and Modernity

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In speaking of the “clash of civilizations,” Samuel Huntington¹ brings focus to bear, not upon civilizations as world-historical agents, but upon cultural identities, the increasing centrality of which to the rivalry between states in the post-cold war era he views as assured.² These take the form, among other things, of the resistances that in various localities have been put up to the dominant culture of the West, such as the proliferating rhetoric on Asian values, a resurgent Japanese nationalism, Chinese communism’s realignment with neo-Confucianism, post-Sept. 11, 2001 Islamist ideologies.³ Internal criticism exists as well of this Western dominance, notably I. Wallerstein’s assertions pertaining to the masking, by means of the triumphal rhetoric of the “new world order,” of the installation of Western capitalism as a system of global dominance.⁴ It is Wallerstein’s further contention that this triggers in non-Western cultures defensive invocations of equally ideological cultural identities, hypostasized

¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: The Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

² See G. Melliush, “The Clash of Civilizations: A Model of Historical Development?” *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 62 (2001), no. 1, pp. 109-120.

³ J. Arnason, *Civilizations In Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp.12-13.

⁴ I. Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

civilizational specificities, and imaginary imperial legacies.⁵ It is the nexus, as Wallerstein sees it, between Western civilization and expansionary forms of capitalism or, equivalently, between civilizational claims and global modernization, that I will address in this paper. To be sure, one of the earliest proponents of theories of modernization that equated development with the emulation of the “Western” model was Talcott Parsons, the American evolutionary sociologist, who argued that civilizational evolution peaked in modern Western civilization.⁶ These theories served to buttress American foreign policy throughout the 1960’s,⁷ the linchpin of which was America’s offer to the post-colonial world of liberal democracy, understood as a universal political good superior to anything communism could offer, more especially because it was modeled on American style capitalism and welfare-state liberalism.⁸ Even where it has had to adjust its claims in face of communism’s virtual collapse, America and its apologists appear not to have waned in their messianic zeal. So that even as writers such as Huntington appear to be intent upon disengaging American thought from modernization theory, doubtlessly embarrassed by its claims to universality, they seem just as intent upon salvaging from its ruins one or another form of the notion of American mission and American civilizational superiority.

Since, as Arnason suggests, the ambiguous interplay between singular and pluralistic definitions of civilization is central to the divergent arguments which Huntington and Wallerstein put forth, we shall take those definitions as our first starting point.⁹ The term, civilization, generally refers to any number of distinctive socio-cultural complexes. Within the frame of American evolutionary sociology, however, it refers to something altogether different, namely, a specifically identifiable modernization-inducing world historical process. Proponents of more pluralistic conceptions of civilization, which gained in prominence in the 1990’s, and particularly of the idea

⁵ On this see *Civilizations In Dispute*, pp. 9-10.

⁶ T. Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

⁷ B. Wittrock, “Modernity — One, None or Many?: European Origins and Modernity as Global Condition,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, no. 1, pp.31-61.

⁸ N. Gilman, N. *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory In Cold War America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁹ *Civilizations In Dispute*, p.1.

— one such proponent being Wallerstein — that these conceptions emerged in tandem with contemporary anti-Western reactions, may not be prepared to grant this point, but the fact is, in 18th century France, there already existed a self-critical outlook upon “European civilization.”¹⁰ This, of course, opens up the need to formulate a less monolithic assessment of Western identity than either the affirmative definitions furnished by evolutionary sociology or the negative ones presented by critics of Western civilization such as Wallerstein, are willing to make.

Huntington’s discussion of civilizational pluralism is clearly of limited help to this task as it provides a surprisingly simplistic assessment of the specificity of the civilization that emerged in Western Europe. He equates civilizations with “the ultimate tribes,” implying in the case of each of these “tribes” a civilizational closure with links to a language and a religion which have been productive of a coherent, self-contained civilizational identity.¹¹ On this definition, the “West” is equivalent to an enduring civilizational pattern that crosses over into modernity in non-problematic fashion. “The West was the West even before it was modern,” he writes.¹² To put things that way, however, evades many questions pertaining to modernity in Western Europe. Is the West a mutation of West European civilization, or is it a new civilization altogether? Huntington avoids having to examine the facile equation of Westernization with modernization by producing his postulate of civilizational pluralism, though he cannot do so indefinitely in view of those inter-civilizational encounters that shake to its foundations Western European modernity’s understanding of itself as without precedent. If modernity took off in Europe, it was on account of contingencies in Western Europe and elsewhere going different ways and down different roads.¹³ In short, the appeal to the plurality of civilizations does not negate the flaws attendant upon the easy equation of modernization with secularization.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹¹ *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 207.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.69.

¹³ On the question of cross-civilizational exchanges beyond Europe, see the “Early Modernities” issue of *Daedalus* (Vol. 127 (2001), no. 3, as well as *Civilizations In Dispute*, pp.352-359.

Talcott Parsons, in contrast, treats religion as central to the formation of civilizational identity, and Christianity in particular as a major feature of Western civilization. Although pluralistic, the specific value-orientation characteristic of Western civilization must, on this reading, be seen against the background of a Christianity that in synthesizing its Greek and Jewish legacies, came to be implicated in a universal evolutionary developmental logic.¹⁴ This way of putting it is reminiscent, of course, of the original contribution made by classical French sociology, in particular, by such writers as Durkheim and Mauss, to an understanding of the connection to religion of the unitary and plural meanings civilization. Durkheim and Mauss held that even if religious values *per se* do not define civilizations, their deployments inescapably produce cultural representations of human power.¹⁵ Durkheim's perspective on this matter is influenced, of course, by his work on the cultural dimension of societies. On this view, societies formulate identities and overcome conflict by means of collective representations, called the *conscience collective* or collective consciousness.¹⁶ The conscience collective, or collective representations, must be distinguished from memory, at the very least because it is individuals seeking to establish and sustain their social cohesion, in contrast to some unconscious mental activity operating deep within the individual psyche who produce them. Because these collective representations combine and recombine in ways not necessarily tied to the empirical substratum of their original production, they acquire in the course of time an authority, coercive force, externality, and autonomy that enables them to pursue a life beyond their original institutional contexts, and by means of that pursuit, to underwrite change.

¹⁴ T. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Free Press, 1971).

¹⁵ The Durkheimian analysis of religion's role in the self-constitution of societies and of civilizational frameworks is the subject of Marcel Gauchet's recent book, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. by O. Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Originally considered by Durkheim to be culturally binding only in pre-modern societies, the collective consciousness became in time central to his conception of the specific object of sociological research. Cf. E. Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*. Trans. by D. F. Pocock (London: Cohen and West, 1953), pp. 1-34.

Durkheim's assertions concerning the autonomy and creativity of collective representations not only set the stage for reflection on the cultural dimension of societies, but also raised the question of a meta-social level of meaning, incorporating the different institutionalizations that characterize societies. In other words, it paved the way for the conceptualization of civilization. Although Durkheim's debt to Comte's positivism initially restricted him to the notion of civilization in the singular, that is, as a *universal* process of humanization, in his 1911 article, "Value Judgements and Judgments of Reality," he writes it is possible to imagine the development of civilizational variety in face even of specifically existing political societies.¹⁷ The best proof of this, he argues, are those diverse value systems that produce the "great ideals" of civilizations. In a work that he co-authored with his nephew, Marcel Mauss,¹⁸ he describes how languages exemplify a creativity tied neither to determinate social bodies nor to national life expectancies. Through their evolution, survival, and spread, languages proclaim the existence of a supranational level of social creativity, and concomitantly, of a pluralistic understanding of civilization.

Following the death of his uncle, Mauss explored further the theoretical implications of the specific capacity of cultural civilizational representations to emancipate themselves from the empirical substratum in which they first appear. Mauss' outline of civilization theory in "Civilizations: Elements and Forms" positions itself against the thrust of evolutionary theories that postulate a single path trod by all humans societies. To the idea of common evolution, he opposes, in other words, a conception of historical change in terms of processes of concatenation (*enchaînements de causes*), that play themselves out within a chronological and a geographical dimension.¹⁹ Civilizational phenomena are defined by Mauss as second-order social phenomena with their own specificity. Civilizational phenomena distinguish themselves from other social phenomena in that they transcend the spatial and temporal boundaries that societies deploy to establish

¹⁷ See J. Arnason, "Social Theory and the Concept of Civilization," *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 20 (1988), pp. 87-105.

¹⁸ E. Durkheim and M. Mauss, "Note on the Notion of Civilization," trans. and intro. by B. Nelson, *Social Research*, Vol. 38 (1971), no. 4, pp. 808-813.

¹⁹ M. Mauss, "Les Civilisations: Éléments et formes" in *Œuvres*-I.2 (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), pp. 451-87.

their singular identity and isolate themselves from others. They are characterized by their “touristic” quality (*aptés à voyager*).²⁰ They have both the ability and the tendency to travel across space and time. European institutions themselves are the product of the encounter between Germanic value systems and Roman law.²¹ Civilizational phenomena, asserts Mauss, are essentially social facts shared by different societies. As such, technologies, the arts and crafts, narratives, objects and currencies of exchange, as much as institutions and forms of social organization, instantiate civilizational phenomena. Civilizational theory in Mauss’ sense is crucial to the study of societies because it facilitates the identification of historical and spatial connections between societies that emerge, not from a single parallel evolution replicated by all societies, but from multiple cultural transmissions along with all of their contingencies. Analogously to the manner in which the specificity of every one of those societies that comprise a given civilization world is a function of their reciprocal confrontation, the singularity of civilizations is the product of their heteronomous contacts with one another. This, in Mauss’ view, is the central paradox of civilizations — that they borrow from one another avidly but just as avidly, conceal the fact that they do.²² Even if Mauss does not elaborate upon this feature of civilization it has an obvious connection to Durkheim’s point concerning the centrality of the sacred to the auto-institutionalization of human societies. In the construction of cultural unity, religion is pivotal.²³ By means of their invocation of the sacred, human societies establish their sovereignty, their cultural autonomy, from the natural world. The sacred binds

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.459.

²¹ Although Mauss does not mention it explicitly, religious models of salvation answer as well to this definition of civilizational phenonema (cf. M. Mauss, *Ibid*, p.457). It is this latter line of inquiry that Max Weber pursued in developing a historical approach to the phenomenon of civilizational pluralism (cf. Max Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. by H. H. Gorth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1970), pp.323-359). Whereas Weber does not embark upon a theoretical reflection on the notion of civilization itself, nor upon the role of religion in the constitution of civilizational frameworks, in his discussion of the specificity of European civilization, Gauchet does, drawing from the Durkheim/Maussian legacy.

²² “Les Civilisations,” p. 462.

²³ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995). Gauchet does, drawing from the Durkheim/Maussian legacy.

individuals to collectively configured institutions and social meanings that allow for some amount of differentiation within the symbolic frame of unity.

Mauss suggests that civilizations also partake of this heteronomous cultural logic of human power and that a similar dialectic of unity and differentiation operates at the civilizational level. Civilizations constitute themselves as “hypersocial systems of social systems,” whose cultivated closure paradoxically allows social systems to differentiate themselves from one another.²⁴ Civilizations, in that sense, are ensembles large enough and complex enough to allow for the constitution of social diversity, that is, of “distinct families of societies.”²⁵ Civilizations form common cultural worlds that create the illusion of an original unity even when their elements — the social groupings they bring together — remain ethnically diverse. Conversely, they encourage a sense of diversity, such as linguistic diversity, even in those cases where empirical linguistic variety refers back to one common language.²⁶ Here again one encounters, although in different guise, the binary social logic of identity and diversification, so central to Durkheim’s social theory. Mauss argues, in similar fashion that, in addition to ranging over identifiable territory, a civilization displays “form,” which is comprised of the overarching principles and themes that give it coherence. These principles and themes, however, do not uniformly affect the social and political subgroupings that fall within the purview of a given civilization.²⁷ Social phenomena, in this sense, are *arbitrary*.²⁸ Indeed, within a given civilizational sphere, and between the multiple layers of meaning (*couches*) that underwrite its specificity, these are the centre and the periphery, although in what exactly these might consist is variable.²⁹ But as much as the absence of uniformity among the different forms of social creation makes the reconstruction of the history of civilizations both arduous and perilous, the phenomenon of internal diversification is not without limit. Civilizations operate within self-imposed limits, to protect their internal coherence, and to avoid contamination by other

²⁴ “Les Civilisations,” p. 463.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.464.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.472.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.465.

civilizational spheres. However, as Mauss points out, it is not only their singularity that civilizations strive to attain and to preserve, but their universal resonance, which seals their status as “civilizations” in the singular. Western European civilization, in its quest for singular status, uniquely among civilizations proceeds in two seemingly countervailing directions — that of cosmopolitan universalism, and that of nationalism — but which it brings together by husbanding a romantic belief in the historical mission of nations to create a universal civilization.

Mauss’ notes on civilization end with his attack on this eurocentricity. He accuses European civilization of installing itself as the universal civilizational model, on the strength of the centrality to it of scientific rationality.³⁰ To be sure, science’s potential for universalizing — the invention of West European civilization — is unique. Mauss cites the cinema as just one example of a collection of science-driven instruments of mass communication (e.g. the Internet), which have established a global culture that resists the singularising, closure-generating tendencies of civilizations. But Mauss rejects nevertheless the idea that Western civilization is unambiguously positive. For one thing, in widening areas of the globe, its growth is inescapably tied to the relentless push for “more,” because “more means” more benefits, more power, more abstraction, more rationality.³¹ Yet, as we know from the experience of 18th and 19th century European civilization, “more” means does not necessarily result in better moral outcomes or a broader happiness for all. Mauss, in that sense, anticipates French social theory’s ambivalence towards a European modernity faced with the dilemma of choosing between autonomy and the rational mastery of the world. For even where there exists something of a civilizational fund (which one might call civilization in the singular) that humanity can draw from, it is unaccompanied by safeguards against its absorption by nationalist agendas of cultural exclusivity and supremacy.

Marcel Gauchet, who figures modernity as an experience of “disenchantment,” shares something of Mauss’ feelings of ambivalence towards it. In his work, Gauchet was deeply influenced by Durkheim’s analysis of the heteronomous logic by which human power in pre-modern societies attaches to full political sovereignty, and human

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.481-485.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.483.

societies establish the principle of their self-institution.³² Civilizations, on that view, are constellations of meaning — they are interpretations of the world, or cultural orientations, that over the course of time engender larger, more durable social formations. Being closely related to political structures and traditions, these constellations of meaning open up a way to the conduct of a cultural interpretation of human power. To highlight the specificity of modern forms of power, Gauchet contrasts to stateless simple societies, more complex, “civilized” ones, where the latter are distinguished, not by their deployment of science and technology, but by their proximity to universal inclusion, brought about by their acceptance of division and conflict. In this respect, Gauchet’s theory of modernity is also a theory of the birth of democracy as a new constellation of meaning that does not enforce closure and exclusion.³³

Modern power, according to Gauchet, involves turning the vision of otherness so central to religion, inwards, in order to inspire a project of transformation of the social and natural world that is without precedent. The birth of modern culture involved a radical departure from that anthropological continuity by which conflict in human societies was regulated by the discourse of religion, and the sacred identity that religion engenders, containing and limiting the expression of difference. Gauchet links this to the new dynamics introduced by the state.³⁴ He draws on the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres which revived Mauss’ idea of the existence of macro-social choices to suggest that state-less primitive societies represent a civilizational choice in fact — the choice to be stateless, that is, to be organized and motivated in a complex way that in fact blocks the process of state-formation and the social differentiation

³² Durkheim’s writings on the question of the democratic state are from his lecture notes at the Sorbonne. The hitherto unpublished lectures were discovered and edited in 1950 by a Turkish academic and published as *Leçons de sociologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France). Recognition of the political significance of Durkheim’s work on religion was further delayed by Durkheim’s failure to produce a synthesis of the two lines of exploration — religious authority and political authority — which marked his work on the phenomenon of *conscience collective*. See Bernard Lacroix on the centrality of the political dimension to human societies (*Durkheim et le Politique*, Montréal: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Nationales, 1981).

³³ N. Doyle, “Democracy As Socio-cultural Project of Individual and Collective Sovereignty,” *Thesis Eleven*, 75 (2003), pp. 69-95.

³⁴ *The Disenchantment of the World*, pp. 33-46.

it induces.³⁵ Concerning this civilizational choice, which paradoxically consists in the refusal to tread on the path toward civilization, Gauchet does not suggest that primitive societies function without any exercise of power or without any symbolic projection of power. State-less societies, it is clear, are also political, also have wars and leaders, but they prevent the exercise of power from leading to the emergence, either of a center of power, or of an autonomous sphere of political activity. Political power, military power, is countered by another power, the prestige and symbolic authority of chiefs who also have the right to speak on behalf of the community even if they do not possess the right to control or coerce it. In a manner reminiscent of Durkheim's sociology of religion, Gauchet demonstrates how this counter-political authority is fundamentally grounded in religious authority. This authority is the one conferred by primitive religion, which establishes the ultimate authority of the past, understood to be the past of mythical ancestors who have bequeathed to succeeding generations the foundations of a social order beyond questioning or alteration. Gauchet, following Durkheim, interprets primitive religion as the purest form of religion in that it involves the self-projection of society. He adds to this, however, the idea that it is a self-projection into a mythical past, giving it a fundamental ambiguity: primitive religion is an essentially paradoxical expression of humanity's socio-cultural creativity as it makes the creation by humanity of its own meaning synonymous with the denial of its power to create: "the essence of religion is ... to gain self-possession by consenting to dispossession."³⁶ Humanity creates its own world and social destiny though the very denial of its creativity, which it attributes to an Other, the Other of a fundamental sacred order with roots in an unattainable and unchangeable past. Primitive religion, in other words, is the strongest manifestation of heteronomy.³⁷ The exercise of humanity's creative

³⁵ M. Gauchet, "Politique et société: la leçon des sauvages": Parts I and II, *Texture*, Vols. 10-11, 1975, pp.57-105. See also *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 26. To be sure, a number of questions are raised by Clastres's political anthropology (P. Clastres, *Society against the State*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). For one thing, it presupposes a conscious rejection, on the part of primitive societies, of something they are not supposed to have any notion of, namely, state power. As Arnason suggests, however, this does not invalidate its overall hypothesis (*Civilizations in Dispute*, pp. 83-86).

³⁶ *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31.

power it allows is severely constrained and limited by the primacy of the group's unity, the intangibility of the law to which the group subjects itself and the fact that the ultimate ground and foundation of the group is posited to be external to itself. Religious heteronomy, then, contains conflict by denying it any object to contest, and by diffusing it through ritualized forms of symbolic rivalry. By extension, it prevents any recognition of the historical dimension of human societies. The development of new technologies in agricultural practice, for example, is represented in the context of a debt owed to the mythical ancestors. The new practices are then understood to be part of a foundational past with which the present is in perfect continuity. Factored into this is the centrality of kinship, which guarantees the transmission of the meaning owed to the past through the subordination of succeeding generations and their members to the "whole" of the social order — spoken of by Louis Dumont as a kind of "holism."³⁸

Following Durkheim and Mauss, Gauchet opens the way for anthropology and pre-history to contribute to the conceptualization of a process of civilization in the singular. His political history of religion thus also seeks to offer an interpretation of the specific factors that propelled modernity in Western Europe — a modernity which breaks from an anthropological continuity in the way that it leads human societies to become fully historical and assume full responsibility for the manner in which they structure themselves. He follows Weber in his analysis of the historical relationship between the rise of monotheism, specifically Christianity, and the emergence of the modern rationalizing state. The specifics of this analysis of Christianity need not concern here as its emphasis on the uniqueness of Western Christianity, specifically of its dogma of Incarnation, dismisses the role played by other world religions in the self-transformation of societies.³⁹ It is important to note, nonetheless, that Gauchet's interpretation of the complex dialectics of state development in Western Europe that, in interaction with Christian values, inspired a totally new form of political sovereignty, opens a productive way of understanding the modern conception of human power.

³⁸ "Politique et société : la leçon des sauvages," Part II.

³⁹ *The Disenchantment of the World*, pp. 101-106.

In the work he undertook to conceptualize political sovereignty in Western European civilization, Gauchet was inspired by Louis Dumont, the social anthropologist whose exploration of Indian society underscored the importance of territorial notions of political sovereignty to accounts of the birth of modern, political societies.⁴⁰ Taking individualism to be the central feature of modernity, and to be the cause of a radical transformation of the collective consciousness resulting in the reformulation of the role of the state, Dumont himself failed to pursue the implications of his exploration into Indian society.⁴¹ Gauchet picked up where Dumont had left off in pursuing the hypothesis that the birth of political modernity in Western Europe involved the replacement, in France and England, of an imperial notion of sovereignty, by a new territorial one.⁴² The following excursus on Dumont's theory of modern individualism will allow me to outline the conceptual categories which Gauchet retained from Dumont's work but which he used to invert its logic to reveal how modern individualism was a consequence of the birth of the modern state, rather than its cause.

Dumont's theory of modern individualism developed from a comparative approach that focused on the difference between the social ideology of traditional societies and that of modern societies. Dumont designated as ideology the institutionalized pattern of ideas and values that are involved in the structuring of all social practices but that at the same time are irreducible to them.⁴³ Inspired by the work of Mauss, his teacher, Dumont argued that the use of a comparative approach is central to the exploration of social ideologies. This led him to approach Indian society in terms of what in it cannot be grasped by modern thought. As Dumont suggested, the caste system appears to the modern observer to be an extreme form of inequality when it

⁴⁰ L. Dumont, L. "Nationalism and Communalism," Appendix D in *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980d), pp. 314-334.

⁴¹ L. Dumont, L. "Genesis II: The Political Category and the State from the Thirteenth Century Onward," in *Essays on Individualism* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1986), pp. 60-103.

⁴² L. Dumont, L. *German Ideology—From France to Germany and Back* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), p. 218.

⁴³ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), p. 343.

is, in fact, the equivalent of what modern thought grasps by means of the term "society." It is not a system of exclusion, but one, rather, that creates social integration through the principle of hierarchy, which stresses the relationship of the parts to a whole ordered by an overall logic derived from religion.⁴⁴ It is in this sense that the caste structure of Indian society is motivated by an overall opposition between the two opposing principles of religion, the pure and the impure, which set the two poles within which the graduation of caste identity is defined and thus engender a complex division of labor. In other words, in Indian society, social differentiation remains secondary to the dominant level upon which collective identity and cohesion are affirmed. Holism, the social ideology of caste society, thus reveals to modern thought the need to distinguish between the two levels upon which society operates: the ideological level, upon which an integrative identity is established, and the empirical level of social practices. This distinction is lost to the categories of modern thought. The principle of hierarchy reveals the relationship that in societies exists between that which encompasses and that which is encompassed.⁴⁵ The question of this logical relationship is central to Dumont's study of Indian society. It relates social practices back to the ideological level of the social cohesion that encompasses them, but in relation to which they also enjoy a degree of autonomy.

This task remains opaque to modern thinking, with its substantive categories of individual and society, to the extent that it operates in terms of a cultural logic according to which the elements that constitute the collective whole acquire their meaning or identity only differentially, that is, in contradistinction to other elements, and to the extent as well that the collective is understood to be a mere product of the overall network of relations connecting the elements. Indeed, the principle of equality which is central to the modern ideology of individualism only allows the recognition of sameness,

⁴⁴ L. Dumont, "Caste, Racism and 'Stratification': Reflections of a Social Anthropologist," in *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), pp. 247-266.

⁴⁵ L. Dumont "Towards a Theory of Hierarchy," in *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), pp. 239-245; L. Dumont, "The Anthropological Community and Ideology," in *Essays on Individualism*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 202-233.

not of the hierarchical relationships of value that permit inclusive differentiation.⁴⁶ Hierarchy as a social ideology allows contradiction at a subordinate level to the one where the identity of the collective whole is asserted, contradicting what Dumont pointed out about the Indian institution of religious renouncement, whereby individuals can choose a path of individualization that involves the rejection of the system of caste identities.

Pursuing his structural approach to the exploration of the specificity of the Indian social ideology, Dumont looked into the way the pair caste/renouncer not only is equivalent to the pair society/individual of modern ideology, but also involves a fundamental difference — a phenomenon that, he argues, yields insights into the specificity of modern societies. If both the *Sannyasi* and the modern individual derive their identity from their opposition to the collective, the *Sannyasi* must actually leave society, whereas the autonomous individual is seen as the foundation of modern society. A distinction must therefore be made between the *Sannyasi* being an “other-worldly” individual and the modern individual being “inner-worldly.”⁴⁷ This distinction led Dumont to posit that the specificity of the modern ideology resides in its individualism, in the fact that it derives the social whole from the principle of the autonomous individual rather than defines the individual through his place in the social whole.

Dumont went on to posit that the birth of modernity in Western Europe involved the transformation of the otherworldly individual into an inner-worldly individual. From his study of Indian society, Dumont had indeed reached the conclusion that political authority had partially emancipated itself from religious authority, although remaining subservient to it at the higher level of social ideology where the social whole is defined.⁴⁸ This led him to formulate a universal hypothesis about modernity being the complete emancipation of the political from

⁴⁶ A strong dimension of Dumonts’ work which I will not go into here is its critique of the conceptual limitations of European universalism, whose incapacity to acknowledge difference he analyses precisely because he wants to retain its positive dimension, the project of an “anthropological community”.

⁴⁷ L. Dumont, “World Renunciation in Indian Religions,” in *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), pp. 267-286.

⁴⁸ L. Dumont, “The Concept of Kingship in Ancient India,” in *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), pp. 287-313.

the religious, an emancipation that he argues was made possible by the secularization of Christian values.⁴⁹ The validity of the overall hypothesis regarding the partial emancipation effected in India need not concern us here,⁵⁰ as this article is only concerned with the assessment of European modernity that it led to. This assessment is clearly limited by the fact that the birth of the modern state is seen as purely the consequence of the transformation of the figure of the otherworldly individual, as apparent in early Christianity as in Indian religion, into the inner-worldly autonomous socio-political individual.⁵¹ In this respect, Dumont does not offer any satisfactory way out of the Parsonian definitions of modernity as a secularization of Christianity. His critique of the artificial universalism of modern thought, promoted by its rationalist definition of the individual, is silent about the fact that modern individualism is a degraded social ideology, blind to the social dimension of human identity, although in his exploration of the genesis of modern economic thought, this is something he asserts strongly.⁵²

The critique that Gauchet formulated of Dumont's theory of modern individualism thus retained the central insight of Dumont's comparative approach: the social ideology of traditional societies involves a principle of hierarchy grounded in a religious logic. Gauchet, however, in his theory of primitive tribal religion, modified the definition of this holism. He argued that its specificity as a social ideology does not so much incorporate an awareness of the ontological anteriority of society

⁴⁹ L. Dumont, L., "Genesis, II: The Political Category and the State from the Thirteenth Century Onwards," in *Essays on Individualism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 60-103.

⁵⁰ As Arnason suggests, Eisenstadt's work on India reviews the objections raised to Dumont's thesis but nevertheless maintains the core of its argument that Indian civilization is characterized by the restrictions it placed on state formation and state absolutism (Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute*, pp. 22-23).

⁵¹ L. Dumont, "Genesis I: The Christian Beginnings: From the Outworldly Individual to the Individual-in-the-world," in *Essays on Individualism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 23-59.

⁵² L. Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx. The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977). Dumont's tendency to regard individualism as a degraded social ideology can be traced back to his rather "Parsonian" understanding of Durkheim's notion of collective representations stressing their integrative function. His emphasis on the fact that the social must be conscious prevents him from grasping the sociological insight that economic thought first gave form to.

over the individual as imposes a conception of social identity that stresses the subordination of the parts to the whole, a subordination linked to the religious logic by means of which traditional societies institute themselves. The primacy of the social whole enshrined by holism depends on the visibility of the laws defining the total social order, a visibility provided by the religious discourse of society's integration into a greater cosmic order.⁵³ This new understanding of the religious framework of holism revealed the need to re-examine the nature of the de-hierarchization performed by individualism as amounting to more than simply the secularization of Christian values. This led Gauchet to elaborate a theory of modern "disenchantment," which, while it maintains Dumont's hypothesis of the emancipation of the political from the religious, deepens it through a reflection on the social role performed by religion on a symbolic level.

Gauchet's "political history of religion" suggests that the birth of the state introduced a fundamental rupture into the institution of societies.⁵⁴ The state brings into the sphere of human social organization the divide that first separates the social order from a supra-human sacred realm outside itself, of which it was taken to be the echo. It does so through the institution of sacred kingship, which Gauchet suggests, constitutes a transition between the fully religious institution of primitive tribal societies and the theologico-political mode of traditional societies. It introduces the sacred understood as the embodiment in the figure of the semi-divine ruler of the supernatural origin of the community. The change this introduces in the way societies define and interpret their meaning is fundamental. The community is suspended and a chasm opens up between the mundane and the divine that creates a margin for the interpretation and contestation of religious orthodoxy.⁵⁵ In other words, the "sacral transformation" performed by the birth of the state creates the possibility of new visions of otherness to be elaborated that can enter in contradiction with the structure of society and thereby encourage its political self-transformation. Sacred kingship thus ultimately alters the ambitions and scope of political power, opening up the era of hierarchy, domination and conquest.⁵⁶

⁵³ M. Gauchet, "De l'avènement de l'individu à la découverte de la société," *Annales ESC*, Vol. 34 (1979) no. 3, pp. 451-463.

⁵⁴ *The Disenchantment of the World*, pp. 33-37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-46.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-43.

According to Gauchet, the breakthrough to modernity involves the re-direction of a religious vision of otherness towards the transformation of the world, the birth of a new conception of political sovereignty that re-directs imperial aspirations inwards, away from territorial expansion and towards the intensification of the state's administrative control. It comes with the appearance of a new form of sacredness claimed by the monarchies of France and England in their rivalry with the theocratic aspirations of the Catholic Church, themselves fed by the failure of imperial re-construction in Western Europe following the demise of the Roman Empire. This sacredness is dual: it is that of the State and Nation. In competition with religious authority, feudal monarchs directly claimed to be the representative of the sacred law ordering the human world. This claim was further strengthened by reference to another sacredness represented by the monarch, this time fully immanent, which is that of the Nation as a collective body eternally reproduced through the succession of generations and transcending human mortality.⁵⁷ This dual sacredness rationalised political sovereignty by de-personalizing it: like the nation it represented, monarchical sovereignty transcended the physical existence of the king, which gave the state its own autonomous legitimacy, that of *raison d'état*. Absolutism, by paradoxically making the social whole dependent on the monarch's will, while at the same time establishing the principle of society's *self-creation*, facilitated the emergence of the egalitarian dynamics that destroyed the hierarchical cohesion of European societies on a symbolical level. The Reformation was not the sole manifestation of this de-hierarchization of the social ideology, because it appeared as well in the contract theories that emerged at the same time that monarchical power was defining itself as absolute. These contract theories grounded the monarch's authority to govern in the consent of individuals to being governed. The people, as an aggregate of individuals, is now understood to pre-exist society. Through the abstraction of the state they had indeed acquired a formal ontological equality that would later inspire a radically new project of

⁵⁷ M. Gauchet, "Des deux corps du roi au pouvoir sans corps. Christianisme et politique," Part I, *Le Débat*, vol. 14, 1981, pp. 133-257 and "Des deux corps du roi au pouvoir sans corps. Christianisme et politique", part II, *Le Débat*, vol. 15, 1981, pp. 148-168. Also, M. Gauchet, *Un Monde désenchanté?* (Paris: Éditions de l'atelier, 2004), pp. 107-119.

democratic sovereignty and ultimately destroy hierarchy at the level of social practices.

Gauchet's analysis of the evolution of West European civilization defines modernity as a process of disenchantment, as a departure from a heteronomous vision of the world in which rules, laws are understood both to originate in a non-human realm, and yet assume a fundamentally political role in social organization. This disenchantment is much more than the secularization defined by the Enlightenment. If heteronomy has historically been closely associated with religion understood as institutionalized sphere of activity, it is not fully synonymous with it, and as Gauchet's teacher, Claude Lefort, first pointed out, it can also operate in the guise of materialism, as it did in communist totalitarianism, which constituted a paradoxical attempt to re-enchant only partially dis-enchanted societies by enforcing conformity through an ultra-modernistic discourse of progress and of its historical laws.⁵⁸ Conversely, disenchantment must be recognized to have facilitated a new understanding of religion as individualized faith, as an expression of personal choice with no pretensions to determine the organization of the public realm, as part of the wide transformation of subjectivity that fed the development of modern individualism.⁵⁹ According to Gauchet, disenchantment is where the modern world stands regardless of what appears today to be the return of the religious in the form of renewed public displays of faith.⁶⁰ In relation to Europe, this return is in fact a paradoxical consequence of the progress of disenchantment. As democracy has established the principled neutrality of the public sphere with respect to the ultimate questions of human life, political power now relies on religious organizations to articulate within civil society the debates that these questions call for but which it cannot be seen to orchestrate.⁶¹

In conclusion, Gauchet's theory of modernity renders the link between Christianity and modernity much more problematic in that it relativizes what some have called the "European exception" characterized

⁵⁸ C. Lefort, "The Logic of Totalitarianism" in *The Political Forms of Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1981). Also M. Gauchet, "L'expérience totalitaire et la pensée de la politique" *Esprit* (juillet-août), 1976, pp. 10-32 and *The Disenchantment*, p. 181.

⁵⁹ M. Gauchet, *The Disenchantment*, pp. 162-165.

⁶⁰ M. Gauchet, *The Disenchantment*, pp. 200-207.

⁶¹ M. Gauchet, *Un Monde désenchanté?*, p. 16.

by the spectacular decline of the authority of the churches.⁶² The West European experience, however, is only one path to modernity, the American, another one. The strong religiosity of the citizens of the United States by no means marks them as non-modern — they operate in fact in more fully secular, materialist fashion than their counterparts elsewhere. The specific historical circumstances that gave birth to the United States produced an original synthesis of private faith and social atheism, which became the basis for a unique civil religion.⁶³ Even if this civil religion was forcefully reactivated in the wake of the traumatic terrorist attacks of 2001, the secular foundations of American society are not put into question.

Beyond this contrast between Europe and the United States, Gauchet also questions the assimilation of modernization to westernization. In particular, he facilitates a better understanding of the many forms of fundamentalism as attempts to reinstate the universe of religious tradition in face of modernity's increasing encroachments upon it, attempts that in fact actively contribute to the destruction of the very tradition they claim to defend. Central to this is the individualization of belief which these fundamentalisms encourage. This individuality enters in conflict with the traditional framework of religious piety. In this respect, it calls to mind the modernizing effect which the Reformation had in the European context, despite its desire to return to an origin. Fundamentalisms may very well end up creating the basis for the birth of individualism in societies that are still hierarchically structured. This re-assessment of the objective meaning of religious fundamentalism clearly points to the possibility of new modernities being born outside of the Western Christian framework. In this regard, it is particularly pertinent to today's heated debates on Islamist terrorism and the place of Islam in modernity.⁶⁴ ↪

⁶² G. Davie, *Europe, The exceptional case. Parameters of faith in the modern world* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002)

⁶³ M. Gauchet, *Un Monde désenchanté*, p.12.

⁶⁴ The work of Olivier Roy is the one to have most explicitly drawn inspiration from Gauchet's work for a reflexion on the place of Islam in modernity: O. Roy, *L'Islam mondialisé*. (Paris: Seuil, 2002) and *La Laïcité face à l'Islam* (Paris : Stock, 2005).