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(doi: 10.2383/73708)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2013

Ente di afferenza:

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Axial Detachment: Reflections on Bellah's "Conclusion"

by Johann P. Arnason

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I reviewed Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* [2011] in a journal published earlier this year [Arnason 2013]; here I would like to take another look at the last part of the book, "Conclusion" [*ibidem*, 567-606], which can in fact be read as an outline for another book where the "evolutionary metanarrative" would be more consistently sidelined, and where a comparative historical perspective on the axial age would be taken further than in the first one. This move beyond the framework of the main text involves three steps: a reconsideration of basic themes in the historical sociology of religion; an indication of ways to bring the four separate axial trajectories closer together; and a sketch of possible directions for a universal history informed by current scholarship on the axial age.

To begin with, Bellah revisits the topic of play as a background to culture, discovered at a late stage of his work on the book, and spells out a few aspects not properly acknowledged in the preceding chapters. They merit closer examination and reflection on their multiple meanings. Schiller's writings on aesthetic education, cited at the beginning of the conclusion, are not only a classical discussion of play; through their links to German idealism and to its Marxian sequel, they also connect to classical social theory, and that line of thought may help to expand on Bellah's argument. For him, play prefigures "a realm of freedom relative to the pressures of existence," hence at least potentially less subject to hierarchy, and can only occur in what he – following Burghardt – calls "a relaxed field" [*ibidem*, 567]. In hunter-gatherer societies, play is elaborated into ritual, and Bellah speculates – to my mind plausibly – that the

egalitarianism of these societies may have something to do with a generalization of equality beyond ritual. A counter-trend is evident in the early state: the organization of rituals now reflects the imperatives of power and hierarchy, although there is still some room for the play element, especially in rituals of reversal. The axial age brings a certain, though not always easily visible, reactivation of play, from the utopian imagination of alternative forms of life to the Confucian upgrading of ritual. But his general conclusion is that it is best to think of the human condition in terms of overlapping fields.

Since Bellah invokes the “realm of freedom,” it is tempting to bring in the Marxian version of that idea. It is, for Marx, not only a matter of future liberation; since he regards the development of human capacities as a long-term historical process already going on in class societies, and most markedly during the capitalist phase of history, the realm of freedom – defined as the unfolding of capacities according to their own logic and for their own sake – has been in the making for a long time. And in an unpublished text that remained unknown for more than a century, Marx relates this aspect of human history – “the general results of social development” – to class domination: the privileged groups that concentrate social power in their hands do not simply monopolize the surplus product, but also the development of human capacities. For a historical sociology less unilaterally committed to class theory, it seems appropriate to replace the assumption of monopolization with questions about the more or less extensive and variously oriented impact of power structures on fields less directly involved in the struggle for existence. Within the frameworks adapted to elite domination, access to the realm or realms of freedom can be more or less centred; among the civilizations of the axial age, Greece surely stands out as a case of markedly de-centred patterns.

Given the cultural and institutional rules imposed on the activities in question, the term “relaxed” often seems inapplicable, and a generalized concept of detached fields or spaces may be more useful. A comparison of axial age civilizations could, among many other things, focus on their ability to establish detached fields, beginning with those defined in precise spatial terms. Bellah notes the importance of the Olympic Games in Greece; their detached status was underlined by the truce between cities that had to be imposed at the same time; but on the other hand, the agonistic ethos – the struggle for excellence, not to be equated with the struggle for existence, but not to be mistaken for a relaxed style either – was taken to extremes in this detached space. These points invite further reflection on other detached spaces in the Greek world. Delphi is an obvious case; it was a centre of *polis* religion, removed from direct involvement in the affairs of particular states but very much within their shared religious universe. It also became, not least in connection with Greek “colo-

nization,” a kind of information centre and – if we follow Christian Meier’s plausible conjectures on this subject – a meeting place for an emerging group of intellectuals with cross-*polis* channels of communication. At the same time, the agonistic ethos of Greek civilization found expression in the competition of the *poleis* for presence in Delphi. Other examples could be added; Greek culture seems to have been particularly conducive to the creation of detached spaces. Among the axial age civilizations, China was probably the other extreme, due to the markedly statist character of the societies developing on its territory. But the attempts of thinkers like Confucius and Mozi to create intellectual communities should be seen in this light.

However, it is another kind of detachment that is most important for Bellah’s interpretation of the axial age, and for the new perspectives suggested in the last chapter. The breakthroughs exemplified by creative thinkers in the four civilizational centres open up new fields, and Bellah tries to link these innovations to the anthropological dimension of play. This seems doubtful, and since I have already recalled Marx’s ideas on the free development of human capacities, it may be apposite to note his description of artistic creation as “damned hard work.” For Marx, art was the most adequate guide to the realm of freedom. But his point about a logic of work beyond necessity and reproduction has broader implications, and seems relevant to the axial age. The new ground broken by its thinkers and visionaries was a terrain for sustained and unending work.

There is another side to Bellah’s concluding reflections, to my mind more convincing, and open to further elaboration. He proposes to generalize categories that come out of the interpretation of particular axial cultures, and to apply them across the spectrum. As he sees it, the Indian notion of the renouncer is relevant to the pioneers and adherents of axial thought in the other three centres. Renouncement need not involve the Indian-style radical rejection of the world; in more moderate forms, it means opting out of power structures, being “in but not of the city” [*ibidem*, 575], and it has its representatives in all civilizations. Some of the renouncers, notably the Hebrew prophets, are – as Bellah puts it – also denouncers, i.e. social critics, and from social criticism, it is a short step to utopia. The latter term has primarily been associated with Greek thought, but Bellah makes a good case for its applicability to other traditions, including early Buddhism, where the interest in social criticism and alternatives has usually seemed least pronounced. A prophetic stance can be attributed to intellectual and religious figures outside the tradition from which this term is best known. The notion of a master in the strong Chinese sense, applied most emphatically to Confucius, is not mentioned in this context; but the master-teacher who transforms the life of his disciples can be understood as a cross-cultural figure. Bellah also adds a new category, the “moral upstart,” referring to “figures who, at

great peril to themselves, held the existing power structures to a moral standard that they clearly did not meet" [*ibidem*, 573]. There are no obvious reasons to doubt the possibility of such challengers to authority and convention emerging in different cultural settings, but the term certainly would not fit all charismatic innovators of the axial age. Socrates is probably the most obvious candidate, even though he was only indirectly concerned with (and not unequivocally opposed to) the power structures of his city. Confucius, although often compared to Socrates and more interested in improving the ways of rulers, certainly cannot be described as a moral upstart; his deep commitment to traditions of the Zhou dynasty (or at least to an image of them) and his self-understanding as a restorer rather than a transformer speak against that term.

However, the most interesting result of Bellah's cross-axial categorization is a reinterpretation of Plato, backed up by a comparison with the Buddha. The starting-point is a new understanding of the twin mutations central to Plato's thought. They involve the cultural practice of *theoria* – the witnessing of religious festivals – and the notion of philosophy. The result is a "special kind of seeing, seeing with 'the eye of the soul' [...] possible only after a protracted philosophical education that prepares one for it, but it ends with the *theoria* [the seeing] of all time and being (*Republic* 486 d)" [*ibidem*, 580]. Bellah dismisses the readings that turn Plato into a "premature Descartes," and there is no doubt that this criticism applies to Heidegger's view of Plato as a founding father of metaphysics. The vision achieved by the philosopher does not prefigure the subject-object division of later thought; it is interactive and integrative. And if the utopia that centres on the myth of the cave – the city described in the *Republic* – is an integral part of the vision, much of the discussion about Plato's politics has been based on misunderstandings. The good city is not a project to be realized; it is an alternative order corresponding to a new understanding of human being in the world, and an essential guiding light for reformers who accept being "in the city [the existing one] but not of it."

Bellah goes on to argue that parallels can be drawn between Plato and the Buddha, but with the difference that the whole life of the latter corresponds to the myth of the cave, and that the contribution of later generations to a gradually elaborated tradition is much more obvious in the case of the Buddha. Here I will not enter into the details of the interpretation; suffice it to say that I find the comparison convincing, and that also applies to suggestions regarding China, where Bellah thinks that parallels are easier to find in Daoism than in Confucianism. But this attempt to build bridges between axial traditions raises a fundamental question: can the Platonic and Buddhist narratives of vision – as well as the more tentative examples from other traditions – still be meaningfully linked to an evolutionary metanarrative? We are dealing with existential and creative transformations, entailing a comprehensive

reorientation of life and thought; it is not clear how that kind of mutation could be seen as an evolutionary episode. Even the minimalist version that focuses on the emergence of new capacities seems inadequate. The experience and understanding summed up – and encoded – in the myth of the cave is not translatable into the language of acquired and enduring capacities. Rather, it is a matter of new orientations and horizons, and of paradigmatic but not repeatable constellations that bring them together with maximum impact.

The same would, by implication, hold true for comparable breakthroughs in the other axial civilizations. As we have seen, Bellah's comparison of Plato and the Buddha adumbrates a strong thesis about cross-axial affinities. To grasp its meaning, a brief confrontation with other interpretations will be useful. It seems to me that the implicit aim is an alternative to S.N. Eisenstadt's definition of the common denominator of axial transformations. Bellah makes no such claim, but it is in my opinion a logical extension of his argument; more explicit and detailed analyses would of course be needed for a critical assessment of the two approaches to be possible. But some tentative points may be suggested. Eisenstadt refers to a new cultural ontology, a division of reality into transcendental and mundane levels, as a shared and basic cultural premise of the multiple changes that characterize the period in question. Bellah's interpretations of Plato and early Buddhism suggest more holistic and integrative, but also more existential and less conceptualizable visions. The focus also appears to be on exemplary works and figures, rather than on recurrent patterns. These privileged examples may be seen as keys to a broader context, or as decisive for long-term development (in the very long run, Buddhism did not prevail in India, but it arguably set standards which the slowly maturing Brahmanist countercurrent had to satisfy).

On the other hand, Bellah's concluding reflections show that he is – compared to Eisenstadt – less inclined to stress a unified or continuous legacy of the axial age. His view, as summed up on the last pages of the book, seems to emphasize three aspects of the modern and contemporary relationship to it. First, he notes that “the legitimation crisis of the axial age remains unresolved to this day” [*ibidem*, 596]; the crisis that he has in mind is defined with reference to Habermas's theory of socio-cultural evolution: it is caused by inequality, domination, and injustice. In that regard, the axial age failed. The assessment is somewhat reminiscent of Jaspers, but based on other reasons. Second, the axial invention of theory left a double legacy, but the two parts are mutually estranged, and each of them has a highly ambiguous record. On the one hand, there are the recurrent utopian visions of social reconstruction, capable of bringing out the best as well as the worst in human beings; on the other hand, there is the idea of the disengaged knowledge, pursued for its own sake, which has great achievements to its credit, but has also helped to “make the powerful and

exploitative even more so" [*ibidem*, 593]. It is clear from Bellah's comments that he does not think of these two historical forces as exclusively Greco-European in origin, but a comparative analysis of their trajectories in different cultural settings is not part of his agenda. Finally, he argues that a reconsideration of the axial age, and a reintegration of its record into cultural memory, could help to drive home the point that "theory that has come loose from its cultural context can lead to crushing mistakes" [*ibidem*, 606]; the "final lesson" of the book is thus about the need to recontextualize, and to do this in a way that would both further the mutual understanding of cultures and help to rebalance the relationship between humanity and nature.

I find it fairly easy to agree with all these observations; it is more difficult to see how they would fit together in the kind of evolutionary metanarrative that Bellah still wants to propose as an alternative to inherited models of universal history.

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Axial Detachment: Reflections on Bellah's "Conclusion"

Abstract: The concluding chapter of Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* revisits the axial age and outlines arguments that could be developed further. In particular, he notes hitherto unexplored parallels between different axial traditions, with special emphasis on affinities between Platonic and early Buddhist conceptions of radical change to modes of thought and life. These analyses may be read as beginnings of a search for the common denominator of axial transformations, defined in a way that would differ significantly from Eisenstadt's version. Against this background, Bellah discusses the legacy of the axial age and underlines its problematic and inconclusive character. The overall picture is difficult to reconcile with an evolutionary meta-narrative.

Keywords: *Axial age, detachment, Plato, Buddha, theory.*

Johann P. Arnason is emeritus professor of sociology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and visiting Professor at the Faculty of Human Studies, Charles University, Melbourne. Publications include: *Civilizations in Dispute* (Brill, 2003); *Axial Civilizations and World History* (edited with S.N. Eisenstadt and B. Wittrock, Brill, 2005); *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (edited with K. A. Raaflaub, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).