The Iron Grip of Civilization: The Axial Age

John Zerzan

2008

Civilization is control and very largely a process of the extension of control. This dynamic exists on multiple levels and has produced a few key transition points of fundamental importance.

The Neolithic Revolution of domestication, which established civilization, involved a reorientation of the human mentality. Jacques Cauvin called this level of the initiation of social control "a sort of revolution of symbolism."[1] But this victory of domination proved to be incomplete, its foundations in need of some further shoring up and restructuring. The first major civilizations and empires, in Egypt, China, and Mesopotamia, remained grounded in the consciousness of tribal cultures. Domestication had certainly prevailed – without it, no civilization exists – but the newly dominant perspectives were still intimately related to natural and cosmological cycles. Their total symbolic expressiveness was not yet fully commensurate with the demands of the Iron Age, in the first millennium B.C.

Karl Jaspers identified a turning point for human resymbolization, the "Axial Age",[2] as having occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. in the three major realms of civilization: the Near East (including Greece), India, and China. Jaspers singled out such sixth century prophets and spiritual figures as Zoroaster in Persia, Deutero-Isaiah among the Hebrews, Heraclitus and Pythagoras in Greece, the Buddha in India, and Confucius in China. These individuals simultaneously, but independently made indelible contributions to post-Neolithic consciousness and to the birth of the world religions.[3] In astonishingly parallel developments, a decisive change was wrought by which civilization established a deeper hold on the human spirit, world-wide.

Internal developments within each of these respective societies broke the relative quiescence of earlier Bronze Age cultures. Wrenching change and new demands on the original patterns were in evidence in many regions. The world's urban population, for example, nearly doubled in the years 600 to 450 B.C.[4] A universal transformation was needed, and effected providing the "spiritual

[1] Jacques Cauvin, *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.2

[2] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), especially the first 25 pages.

[3] Christianity and Islam may be properly considered later spin-offs of this Axial period, their own natures already established some centuries earlier.

[4] Andrew Bosworth, "World Cities and World Economic Cycles," in *Civilizations and World Systems*, ed. Stephan K. Sanderson (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1995), p. 214

foundations of humanity" that are still with us today.[5] The individual was fast becoming dwarfed by civilization's quickening Iron Age pace. The accelerating work of domestication demanded a recalibration of consciousness, as human scale and wholeness were left behind. Whereas in the earlier Mesopotamian civilizations, for example, deities were more closely identified with various forces of nature, now society at large grew more differentiated and the separation deepened between the natural and the supernatural. Natural processes were still present, of course, but increasing social and economic tensions strained their integrity as wellsprings of meaning.

The Neolithic era, and even the Bronze Age, had not seen the complete overturning of a nature-culture equilibrium. Before the Axial Age, objects were described linguistically in terms of their activities. Beginning with the Axial Age, the stress is on the static qualities of objects, omitting references to organic processes. In other words, a reification took place, in which outlooks (e.g. ethics) turned away from situation-related discourse to a more abstract, out-of-context orientation. In Henry Bamford Parkes' phrase, the new faiths affirmed "a human rather than a tribalistic view of life."[6]

The whole heritage of sacred places, tribal polytheism, and reverence for the earth-centered was broken, its rituals and sacrifices suddenly out of date. Synonymous with the rise of "higher" civilizations and world religions, a sense of system appeared, and the need for codification became predominant.[7] In the words of Spengler: "the whole world a dynamic system, exact, mathematically disposed, capable down to its first causes of being experimentally probed and numerically fixed so that man can dominate it...."[8] A common aspect of the new reformulation was the ascendance of the single universal deity, who required moral perfection rather than the earlier ceremonies. Increased control of nature and society was bound to evolve toward increased inner control.

Pre-Axial, "animistic" humanity was sustained not only by a less totalizing repression, but also by a surviving sense of union with natural reality. The new religions tended to sever bonds with the manifold, profane world, placing closure on it over and against the supernatural and unnatural.

This involved (and still involves) what Mircea Eliade called "cosmicizing" the passage from a situational, conditional plane to an "unconditioned mode of being."[9] A Buddhist image represents "breaking through the roof"; that is, transcending the mundane realm and entering a trans-human reality.[10] The new, typically monotheistic religions clearly viewed this transcendance as a unity, beyond any particularity of existence. Superpersonal authority or agency, "the most culturally recurrent, cognitively relevant, and evolutionarily compelling concept in religion",[11] was needed to cope with the growing inability of political and religious authority to adequately contain Iron Age disaffection.

---

[5] Karl Japsers, *Way to Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003 [1951]), pp 98-99

[6] Henry Bamford Barkes, *Gods and Men: The Origins of Western Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p.77

[7] John Plott, *Global History of Philosophy, vol. 1* (Delhi: Motilal Manarsidass, 1963), p. 8

[8] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, vol II* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 309

[9] Mircea Eliade, "Structures and Changes in the History of Religions," in *City Invincible,* eds. Carl H. Kraeling and Robert M. Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 365

[10] *Ibid.* pp 365-366. Karl Barth's leap into "the upper story of faith" has a similar sense: quoted in Seyeed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), p. 48.

[11] Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: the Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 57.

A direct, personal relationship with ultimate spiritual reality was a phenomenon that testified to the breakdown of community. The development of individual religious identity, as distinct from one's place in the tribe and in the natural world, was characteristic of Axial consciousness. The personalizing of a spiritual journey and a distancing from the earth shaped human societies in turn. These innovations denied and suppressed indigenous traditions, while fostering the implicit illusion of escaping civilization. Inner transformation and its "way up" was spirit divorced from body, nirvana separate from samsara. Yogic withdrawal, life-denying asceticism, etc. were deeply dualistic, almost without exception.

All this was taking place in the context of an unprecedented level of rationalization and control of daily life in many places, especially by about 500 B.C. S.N. Eisenstadt referred to a resultant "rebellion against the constraints of division of labor, authority, hierarchy, and... the structuring of the time dimension..."[12] The Axial religions formed during a period of social disintegration, when long-standing sources of satisfaction and security were being undermined, and the earlier relative autonomy of tribes and villages was breaking down. The overall outcomes were a great strengthening of technological systems, and an almost simultaneous rise of mighty empires in China (Tsin Shi hwang-ti), India (Maurya dynasty), and the West (the Hellenistic empires and, slightly later, the *Imperium Romanum*).

Domestication/civilization set this trajectory in motion by its very nature, giving birth to technology as domination of nature, and systems based on division of labor. There was mining before 3000 B.C. in Sinai (early Bronze Age), and a surge in the progress of metallurgical technology during the third millennium. These innovations coincided with the emergence of true states, and with the invention of writing. Naming the stages of cultural development by reference to metals is apt testimony to their central role. Metallurgy has long stimulated all other productive activities. By 800 B.C. at the latest, the Iron Age had fully arrived in the West, with mass production of standardized goods.

Massification of society tended to become the norm, based on specialization. For example, Bronze Age smiths had prospected, mined, and smelted the ores and then worked and alloyed the metals. Gradually, each of these processes became the purview of corresponding specialists, eroding autonomy and self-sufficiency. With respect to pottery, a common domestic skill was taken over by professionals.[13] Bread now came more often from bakeries than from the household. It is no accident that the Iron Age and the Axial Age commence at almost exactly the same time, c. 800 B.C. The turbulence and upheavals in the actual world find new consolations and compensations in the spiritual realm, new symbolic forms for further fractioning societies.[14]

In Homer's Odyssey (8th century B.C.), the technologically backward Cyclops have surprisingly easy lives compared to people in Iron Age Greece of that time, when the beginnings of a factory system were already in place. Development of steel plows and weapons accelerated the destruction of nature (erosion, deforestation, etc.) and ruinous warfare.

In Persia, oil was already being refined, if not drilled. There the seer Zoroaster (aka Zarathustra) emerged, providing such potent concepts as immortality, the Last Judgment, and the Holy

---

[12]S.N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age Breakthroughs," *Daedalus* 104 (1975), p. 13. "May the gods destroy that man who first discovered hours and who first set up a sundial here." – Plautus, 3rd centure B.C. Eisenstadt's is the best essay on the overall topic that I have found.

[13]The fate of domestic hand-loom weavers almost three millennia later comes to mind; the independent weaver household was overwhelmed by the factory system of the Industrial Revolution.

[14]It is a striking irony that Nietzsche named his archetypal "beyond good and evil" figure Zarathustra.

Spirit (which were quickly incorporated into Judaism). The dualism of the divine Ahura Mazda's struggle against evil was paramount theologically, in a religious system intimately tied to the needs of the state. In fact, the Persian legal system of the Achaemenian period (558-350 B.C.) was virtually synonymous with Zoroastrianism, and the latter in fact quickly became the state religion. According to Harle, Zoroastrianism was "born to serve the demand for social order in a rapidly changing and expanding society."[15]

Zoroastrian monotheism was not only a definitive turning away from animism and the old gods, but also a marked elevation of the categories of good and evil as universals and ruling concepts. Both of these characteristics were Axial Age essentials. Spengler regarded Zarathustra as a "traveling companion of the prophets of Israel", who also steered popular belief away from the web of pantheistic, localist, nature oriented rites and outlooks.[16]

The Hebrew-Judaic tradition was undergoing a similar change, especially during the same sixth century heart of the Axial Age. The eastern Mediterranean, and Israel in particular, was experiencing a surge of Iron Age urbanization. The social order was under considerable strain in the context of a national need for identity and coherence, especially in the face of more powerful, empire-building neighbors. The Israelites spent two-thirds of the sixth century as captives of the Babylonians.

Yahweh rose from local fertility god to monotheist status in a manner commensurate with the requirements of a beleaguered and threatened people. His grandeur, and the universality of his field of relevance, paralleled the Hebrews' desire for strength in a hostile world.[17] In the eighth century B.C., Amos had announced this vision as a deritualizing, transcendentalizing spiritual direction. Jewish uniqueness thus unfolded against the backdrop of radical, unitary divinity.

The "new man" of Ezekiel (early sixth century B.C.) was part of a new supernatural dimension that, again, took its bearings from an unstable time. As Jacob Neusner pointed out, by the sixth century B.C., at the very latest, the economy was no longer grounded in subsistence or self-sufficiency.[18] The role of the household had been greatly diminished by division of labor and the massifying market. An omnipotent god demanding absolute submission reflected rulers' aspirations for top-down, stabilizing authority. Yahweh, like Zeus, was originally a nature god, albeit connected to domestication. His rule came to hold sway over the moral and civic order, anchored by the rule of kings. The positive, redemptive role of suffering emerged here, unsurprisingly, along with refined political domination. Deutero-Isaiah (Second Isaiah), greatest of the Hebrew prophets of the Axial Age, created a royal ideology in the sixth century B.C.[19] He announced that the very essence of the Covenant with God was embodied in the king himself, that the king *was* the Covenant.[20] The force of this announcement derived from universal cosmic law, beyond any sense perception or earthly parallel; natural phenomena were only its expressions, wrought in an infinity unknowable by mortals.

In pre-Socratic Greece, especially by the time of Pythagoras and Heraclitus in the sixth century B.C., tribal communities were facing disintegration, while new collectivities and institutional complexes were under construction. The silver mines of Laurium were being worked by

---

[15]Vilho Harle, *Ideas of Social Order in the Ancient World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 18.

[16]Spengler, *op. cit.*, pp 168, 205.

[17]V. Nikiprowetzky, "Ethical Monotheism," *Daedalus* 104 (1975), pp 80-81.

[18]Jacob Neusner, *The Social Studies of Judaism: Essays and Reflections, vol. 1* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 71

[19]Paolo Sacchi, *The History of the Second Temple Period* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press ltd, 2000), p. 87

[20]*Ibid.*, pp 99-100.

thousands of slaves. An "advanced manufacturing technology"[21] in large urban workshops often displayed a high degree of division of labor. "Pottery in Athens was made in factories which might employ, under the master-potter, as many as seventy men."[22] Strikes and slave uprisings were not uncommon,[23] while home industries and small-scale cultivators struggled to compete against the new massification. Social frictions found expression, as always, in competing world views.

Hesiod (8th century B.C.) belonged to a tradition of Golden Age proponents, who celebrated an original, uncorrupted humanity. They saw in the Iron Age a further debasing movement away from those origins. Xenophanes (6th century), to the contrary, unequivocally proclaimed that newer was better, echoing Jewish prophets of the Axial Age who had contributed significantly to progressive thinking. He went so far as to see in the forward movement of civilization the origin of all values, glorying in urbanization and increasingly complex technological systems.[24] Xenophanes was the first to proclaim belief in progress.[25] Although the Cynics held out in favor of an earlier vitality and independence, the new creed gained ground. The Sophists upheld its standards, and after 500 B.C., widespread embrace of higher civilization swamped the earlier longing for a primordial, unalienated world.

The transcendentalizing foundation for this shift can be read in an accelerating distancing of people from the land that had been taking place on multiple levels. A land-based pluralism of small producers, with polytheistic attachments to local custom, was transformed by urban growth and stratification, and the detached perspective that suits them. Plato's *Republic* (c. 400 B.C.) is a chilling, disembodied artifact of the rising tendency toward transformation of thought and society along standardized, isolating lines. This model of society was a contrived imposition of the new authoritarianism, utterly removed from the surviving richness that civilization had thus far continued to coexist with.

Social existence intruded to the furthest reaches of consciousness, and the two schema, Iron Age and Axial Age, also overlapped and interacted in India. The period from 1000 to 600 B.C. marked the early Iron Age transition from a socio-economic-cultural mode that was tribal/pastoral, to that of settled/agrarian. The reign of surplus and sedentism was greatly hastened and extended by full-fledged iron and steel plow-based cultivation. Mines and early factories in India also centered on iron technology, and helped push forward the homogenization of cultures in the Mauryan state of this period. New surges of domestication (e.g. horses), urbanization, large estates, and wage labor took place in the Ganges valley, as "tribal egalitarianism," in Romila Thapar's words, surrendered to the newly evolving system by 500 B.C.[26]

This was also roughly the time of Gautama Buddha. Buddhism's origins and role with respect to the spread of Iron Age society can readily be traced.[27] Canonical scriptures refer to early Buddhist teachers as consultants to the rulers of Indian states, a testimony to Buddhism's direct usefulness

---

[21]Frederick Klemm, *A History of Western Theology* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1959), p. 28

[22]Charles Singer, E.J. Holmyard and A.R. Hall, eds., *A History of Technology, vol. I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 408

[23]C. Osborne Ward, *The Ancient Lowly, vol. I* (Chicago, Charles Kerr, 1888), Chapter V.

[24]Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), pp 15-16

[25]*Ibid.*, p. 3

[26]Romila Thapar, "Ethics, Religion and Social Protest in India," *Daedalus* (104), 1975, p. 122. See also pp 118-121.

[27]For example, Vibha Tripathi, ed., *Archaeometallurgy in India* (Delhi: Sharada Publishing House, 1998), especially Vijay Kumar, "Social Implications of Technology."

to the new urban order in a time of great flux. Various commentators have seen the Buddhist reformulation of the premises of Hinduism as an ideology that originated to serve the needs of a challenged, emerging structure.[28] The early supporters, it is clear, were largely members of the urban and rural elites.[29]

For the Buddha, and for the other Axial prophets in general, the personal took precedence over the social. He was the detached observer, seeking freedom from the world, who mainly accepted a very narrow sphere as locus of attention and responsibility. This amounts to a fatalism that founded Buddhism upon suffering as a prime fact, a condition of life that must be accepted. The message of *dukkha* (suffering) expresses the ultimate incapacity of the human condition to include happiness.

Yet Buddhism promised a way out of social dislocation and malaise[30] , through its focus on individual salvation. The goal is "extinguishedness" or Nirvana, the suppression of interest in the world by those disenchanted with it. Similarly, Buddha's presentation of the "cosmic process" was stripped of all earthly processes, human and non-human. While criticizing the caste system and hereditary priesthoods, he took no active role in opposing them. Buddhism was highly adaptive regarding changing social situations, and so was useful to the ruling classes.

Buddhism became another world religion, with global outreach and distinctive superhuman beings to whom prayers are directed. By around 250 B.C. Buddha had become the familiar seated god-figure and Buddhism the official religion of India, as decreed by Asoka, last of the Mauryan dynasty.

The Iron Age came to China slightly later than to India; industrial production of cast iron was widespread by the 4th century B.C. Earlier, Bronze Age polytheism resembled that found elsewhere, complete with a variety of spirits, nature and fertility festivals, etc., corresponding to less specialized, smallerscale modes of livelihood. The Zhou dynasty had been gradually falling apart since the 8th century; continuous wars and power struggles intensified into the period of the Warring States (482-221 B.C.). Thus the indigenous spiritual traditions, including shamanism and local nature cults, were overtaken by a context of severe technological and political change.

Taoism was a part of this age of upheaval, offering a path of detachment and otherworldliness, while preserving strands of animist spiritual tradition. In fact, early Taoism was an activist religion, with some of its "legendary rebels" engaged in resistance to the new stratifying trends, in favor of re-establishing a classless Golden Age.[31]

The primitivist theme is evident in the *Chuang Tzu* and survives in the *Tao Te Ching*, key text of Taoism's most prominent voice, Lao-tse (6th century B.C.). An emphasis on simplicity and an anti-state outlook put Taoism on a collision course with the demands of higher civilization in China. Once again, the 500s B.C. were a pivotal time frame, and the opposed messages of Lao-tse and Confucius were typical of Axis Age alternatives.

In contrast to Lao-tse, his virtual opposite, Confucius (557-479 B.C.), embraced the state and the New World Order. Instead of a longing for the virtuous time of the "noble savage", before class divisions and division of labor, the Confucian doctrine combined cultural progressivism

---

[28] See Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbet, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp 18-21. Bailey and Mabbet, it should be said, see more of the picture than just this aspect.

[29] Thapar, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[30] Bailey and Mabbet, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[31] Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China, vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp 99-100, 119

with the abandonment of connections with nature. No ban was placed on the gods of mountains and winds, ancestral spirits, and the like; but they were no longer judged to be central, or even important.

Confucianism was an explicit adjustment to the new realities, aligning itself with power in a more hands-on, less transcendent way than some other Axial Age spiritualisms. For Confucius, transcendence was mainly inward; he stressed an ethical stringency in service to authority. In this way, a further civilizational colonization was effected, at the level of the individual personality. Internalization of a rigid ruling edifice, minus theology but disciplined by an elaborate code of behavior, was the Confucian way that reigned in China for two thousand years.

These extremely cursory snapshots of Axial Age societies may serve to at least introduce some context to Jaspers' formulation of a global spiritual "breakthrough". The mounting conflict between culture and nature, the growing tensions in human existence, were resolved in favor of civilization, bringing it to a new level of domination. The yoke of domestication was modernized and fitted anew, more tightly than before. The spiritual realm was decisively circumscribed, with earlier, earth-based creeds rendered obsolete. Civilization's original victory over freedom and health was renewed and expanded, with so much sacrificed in the updating process.

The whole ground of spiritual practice was altered to fit the new requirements of mass civilization. The Axial Age religions offered "salvation" at the price of freedom, self sufficiency, and much of what was left of face-to-face community. Under the old order, the authorities had to use coercion and bribery to control their subjects. Henceforth, they could operate more freely within the conquered terrain of service and worship.

The gods were created, in the first place, out of the deepest longings of people who were being steadily deprived of their own authentic powers and autonomy. But even though the way out of progressive debasement was barred by the Axial Age shift, civilization has never been wholeheartedly accepted; and most people have never wholly identified with the "spiritualized" self. How could these ideas be fully embraced, predicated as they were on a mammoth defeat? For Spengler, the Axial Age people who took up these new religions were "tired megalopolitans".[32] Today's faithful, too, may be tired megalopolitans all too often still spellbound, after all these years, by ideologies of sacrifice, suffering, and redemption.

The renunciations have been legion. Buddhism was founded, for example, by a man who abandoned his wife and newborn child as obstacles to his spiritual progress. Jesus, a few centuries later, exhorted his followers to make similar "sacrifices".

Today's reality of unfolding disaster has a lot to do with the relationship between religion and politics, and more fundamentally, with accepting civilization's trajectory as inevitable. It was the sense of the "unavoidable" that drove people of the sixth century B.C. to the false solutions of Axial Age religiosity; today, our sense of inevitability renders people helpless in the face of ruin, on all fronts. 2500 years is long enough for us to have learned that escape from community, and from the earth, is not a solution, but a root cause of our troubles.

Authentic spirituality is so importantly a function of our connection with the earth. To reclaim the former, we must regain the latter. That so very much stands in our way is the measure of how bereft we have become. Do we have the imagination, strength, and determination to recover the wholeness that was once our human birthright?

---

[32]Spengler, *op. cit.*, p. 356

John Zerzan
The Iron Grip of Civilization: The Axial Age
2008

theanarchistlibrary.org