PREFACE

This book was written between 1997 and 2002. The four main chapters deal with central problems of civilizational theory, in different contexts and from various angles; they are perhaps best read as thematically interconnected essays with relatively self-contained arguments. Even if a more systematic treatment were to be envisaged (such projects are not equally compatible with all versions of civilizational theory), extensive preparatory work would still be needed.

The first chapter traces the re-emergence of civilizational themes and perspectives in contemporary social theory. Although the most explicit and controversial claims of that kind have to do with changing patterns of international relations (the 'clash of civilizations'), more instructive connections can be established in other fields—especially in relation to the ongoing transformations of modernization theory, but also on the level of basic concepts and efforts to redefine them. The second chapter surveys the classical sources which remain essential to further theorizing of the civilizational dimension. Within the sociological tradition, two main lines of inquiry and reflection must be distinguished. On the French side, the brief but exceptionally suggestive programmatic statements by Durkheim and Mauss were not accompanied by any corresponding substantive studies; but some aspects of the problematic were explored by later French writers. On the German side, Max Weber's pioneering exercises in the comparative analysis of civilizations tower above all other work of that kind, but their conceptual foundations leave much to be desired. Neither the Durkheimian nor the Weberian approaches were, however, integrated into the mainstream of sociological inquiry. The questions neglected by sociologists—in the course of what Norbert Elias described as their 'retreat into the present'—were taken up, in another context and with very different aims, by metahistorians such as Oswald Spengler and Toynbee. A short and inevitably selective discussion of their work is followed—in a separate chapter—by a critical analysis of later attempts to revive civilizational approaches on a more solid sociological basis. The most systematic arguments in that vein can be found in the writings of S.N. Eisenstadt, but those of Benjamin Nelson and Jaroslav Krejčí also stand out as major contributions to the field.

The fourth chapter should be seen as the most central part of the book: it outlines a conceptual framework for civilizational analysis, based on more general theoretical premises and linked to more concrete historical perspectives. The model presented here draws on a variety of classical and contemporary sources, but synthesizes them in a distinctive way, with particular emphasis on the interrelations of cultural premises—operative on a civilizational scale—and political as well as economic institutions. In addition to these constitutive core structures of civilizations, comparative analyses must deal with the more outwardly visible patterns which have often served to identify the specific objects of civilizational analysis: the multi-societal complexes as well as the traditional and regional configurations that we usually have in mind when we speak of civilizations in the plural.

Finally, the fifth chapter is a postscript to the main argument, intended to situate the proposed version of civilizational theory with regard to some other contemporary trend. If a multi-civilizational frame of reference is by definition opposed to Eurocentric visions of history, it must be confronted with and distinguished from other ways of criticizing Eurocentrism. The most prominent case in point is now the postcolonialist current that has been gaining in strength during the last two decades. As I try to show, postcolonialist projects are—from the civilizational point of view—of very unequal value and significance. Some of them deserve nothing but rapid dismissal, while others seem open to mutually instructive dialogue.

The broader context of contemporary theoretical debates is beyond the scope of this book, but a few remarks may help to clarify the status and the prospects of civilizational analysis. Its revival towards the end of the twentieth century is closely related to a more general 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, but should not be subsumed under that label: although the civilizational approach places a strong emphasis on cultural patterns, it also relates them to specific contexts and does not entail any a priori concessions to cultural determinism. It is obviously part and parcel of the 'rise of historical sociology' often noted as one of the most salient trends of the last quarter-century, but its claims within that field are far from undisputed, and more work will be required to test its ability to integrate other perspectives. Last but not least, it is inseparable from the emerging paradigm of 'multiple modernities'. Those who insist on the variety of modern constellations are not necessarily in agreement on the

tasks of civilizational theory, but civilizational contexts are among the most frequently mentioned differentiating factors.

On the other hand, there is no denying that the civilizational turn runs counter to some more influential ways of thinking. Most importantly, the dominance of globalization discourse—often too diffuse to be called theory—reflects a widespread belief in cultural and/or structural unity across the erstwhile (and perhaps always in part imaginary) civilizational boundaries. On this view, civilizational analysis would at best be applicable to a past phase in the history of human societies, and irrelevant to the task of theorizing modernity. But it can be argued that civilizational perspectives have a more positive bearing on the question of globalization. Some accounts of globalizing processes are adaptable to a civilizational framework; as for the more far-reaching interpretations, they may at least need the civilizational counter-model to make sense of themselves. If the globalizing dynamic is equated with a long-term growth of interdependence and traced back to early beginnings, it is easy to show that both coexisting and successive civilizations relate to it in different ways. Even if a more precisely and literally defined concept of globalization is (as the present writer would prefer) reserved for the period which began with the European conquest of the Americas, the new constellation can still be analyzed in terms of intercivilizational dynamics and encounters.

The most radical globalizers will reject such compromises and insist on the unprecedented character of recent breakthroughs to a world society, world economy or world culture. As recent controversies have shown, such views are open to various objections; and even when taken at face value, they leave more scope for the civilizational line of argument than their supporters may want to admit. Civilizational background and legacies would have to be included among the particularizing factors recognized by most theorists of the global condition. At the same time, the most emphatic ideas of global unity have latent civilizational connotations. If a new global civilization has emerged or is in the making, comparison with the diverse civilizations of the recent as well as the more remote past would be essential to proper understanding of this unprecedented phenomenon. The same applies to visions of a more radical discontinuity and a post-civilizational condition: this version of the 'exodus from civilizations' (a term coined for very different purposes by E. Voegelin)

would have to be backed up by detailed analysis of the contrasts with civilizational forms of social life and historical change.

Further variations on this theme have been suggested. The most extravagantly optimistic speculations about the long-term impact of globalization—seen as a culminating phase of the modernizing process—can be found in the work of Jean Baechler; he expects global modernity to become a new matrix for civilizational pluralism comparable to the innovations which marked the rise of civilization in the singular and paved the way for the flowering of civilizations in the plural. Apart from empirical problems (Baechler admits that it would take a very long time indeed to verify his hypothesis), the analytical implications are obvious. If the prospect of a new round of unification and diversification is to be formulated in clearer conceptual terms, the only available framework is a civilizational theory which tries to do justice to the singular as well as the plural meanings of its core idea. On the other hand, a pessimistic view of global modernity and its consequences can bring civilizations back in for other reasons. The intertwining of ecological and geopolitical problems might provoke a disintegrative backlash, a resurgence of particularisms and a search for broad but not global identities to contain and rationalize them; in this context, civilizational legacies could be reactivated and reinterpreted in a more militant way. G.H. von Wright has drawn attention to such possibilities. Although the scenario might seem reminiscent of Huntington's 'clash of civilizations', it refers to a plausible future rather than an observable aftermath of the cold war, and it is fundamentally at odds with Huntington in that its main emphasis is on likely dysfunctional consequences of the global ascendancy of capitalism.

In the last instance, open questions about globalization link up with more general problems of modernity. This book does not propose to settle the question whether modernity is best understood as a distinct civilization, a civilizational formation of a new kind (perhaps both more and less than a civilization in the traditional sense), or a post-civilizational condition. Some reasons to prefer the second of these three views may be indicated at various junctures of the argument. But the main aim is to develop a conceptual framework that would make it possible to discuss the issue in more adequate ways.