

# Inventing the axial age: the origins and uses of a historical concept

John D. Boy · John Torpey

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**Abstract** The concept of the axial age, initially proposed by the philosopher Karl Jaspers to refer to a period in the first millennium BCE that saw the rise of major religious and philosophical figures and ideas throughout Eurasia, has gained an established position in a number of fields, including historical sociology, cultural sociology, and the sociology of religion. We explore whether the notion of an “axial age” has historical and intellectual cogency, or whether the authors who use the label of a more free-floating “axiality” to connote varied “breakthroughs” in human experience may have a more compelling case. Throughout, we draw attention to ways in which uses of the axial age concept in contemporary social science vary in these and other respects. In the conclusion, we reflect on the value of the concept and its current uses and their utility in making sense of human experience.

**Keywords** History of social thought · Civilizations · Axial Age · Axiality · Religion · Historical sociology · Cultural sociology

Until recently, it was widely said that we live in a time that has exhausted all “grand narratives.” Yet recently some of the biggest names in contemporary scholarship have taken up studies of the very *longue durée*, and of world history as a whole, in efforts to grasp central aspects of human experience. For example, the sociologist Robert Bellah, the anthropologist David Graeber, the ancient historian Ian Morris, and the psychologist Stephen Pinker have published massive studies going back millennia in time to make sense of our proclivity for religion, the origin of basic categories of economic life, relations of world domination and subordination, and our (putatively declining) propensity toward violence, respectively. In the process, these scholars

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J. D. Boy (✉) · J. Torpey  
Doctoral Program in Sociology, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue,  
New York, NY 10016, USA  
e-mail: jboy@gc.cuny.edu

J. Torpey  
e-mail: jtorpey@gc.cuny.edu

seem to be contradicting both the postmodernist claim about the decline of grand narratives and the Weberian stricture that modern scholarly contributions must be the work of specialists. The recent outpouring of books in the genre of “big history” reinforces the impression that the end of the grand narrative has itself come to an end. This trend may be, among other things, a response to the incessant talk of “globalization,” an attempt to give depth to that rather vague notion even as it highlights its historical shallowness.

One key feature of the current turn toward “big” or “world” or “universal” history has been the discussion of what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers dubbed, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the “axial age.” Indeed, from his European vantage point Bjørn Thomassen claimed very recently (2010, p. 327) that “the axial age thesis has been at the forefront of social theory during the last decade.” This claim seems somewhat overblown, at least with regard to the North American scene, but it is telling that someone could make the assertion at all. The popular religion writer Karen Armstrong (1993, 2006) has brought the concept of the axial age to thousands of readers, equating it more or less with the birth of “compassion.” What is the “axial age” that appears in the subtitle of Bellah’s new magnum opus, the widely discussed *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*? Can this concept give much-needed historical depth to social scientific examinations of the current situation?

The term axial age (*Achsenzeit*; sometimes translated “axial period,” “axis-time,” or “pivotal age”) refers to an epoch in human history that Jaspers and others regard as a decisive period in human cognition. This period, which Jaspers held to have run roughly from 800 to 200 BCE, saw the rise of Confucius and Lao-tse in China, the Buddha and the authors of the Upanishads in India, the Hellenic philosophers, poets, and historians in Greece, the Hebrew prophets in Palestine, and (possibly) Zoroaster in Iran (generally excluded from the axial age thesis, however, because too little is known about him). In the aftermath of the “German catastrophe” (Meinecke), Jaspers felt compelled to reject the Hegelian philosophy of history according to which European experience, and particularly the Prussian state, constituted the apotheosis of human development. Instead, Jaspers argued that the major civilizations of the ancient world experienced in this era a kindred “spiritual tension ... questioning all human activity and conferring upon it a new meaning” (Jaspers 1953, p. 6), to which those civilizations responded in comparable if distinctive ways. Because of this advance in human ratiocination, which is said to involve the emergence variously of “transcendence,” of *theoria*, and of the conception of another world against which the present one might be judged, Jaspers (1953, p. 1) argued that during this age “[m]an, as we know him today, came into being.”

This, needless to say, is an enormous claim, and there have been doubters as well as defenders of the axial age thesis. Some writers accept the notion that this period of several centuries comprised a watershed era in human intellectual–spiritual development that had an intrinsic unity across the diverse civilizations that participated in the transformation. Others reject the notion that there was a specific age that was “axial,” but want to retain the label to refer to crucial developments in human thinking, especially those of a religious kind. Those critics argue that there were “axial” developments in human culture in both earlier (e.g., Egyptian) and later (e.g., Christian and Islamic) contexts. Without the reference to a specific historical period,

however, it is not clear that labeling some form of thought “axial” amounts to saying anything more than that these other developments were significant cultural–historical “breakthroughs” of *some* cognitive sort. In the process, the effort to link these diverse civilizations by way of the notion of an “age” in which they all participated tends to wither, and with it the force of the notion of a special developmental period in a shared human experience.

In what follows, we explore whether the notion of an “axial age” has historical and intellectual cogency, or whether the authors who use the label to connote varied “breakthroughs” in human experience may offer a more convincing perspective on the developments associated with the axial age thesis. Throughout the article, we draw attention to ways in which uses of the axial age concept vary in these and other respects. In the conclusion, we reflect on the value of these different approaches and their usefulness in making sense of human experience.

### Origins and early career of the axial age thesis

The philosopher Karl Jaspers is generally regarded as the originator of the axial age concept, and it is reasonable to credit Max Weber’s younger brother, Alfred Weber (Breuer 1994, p. 1), as a major influence on Jaspers in his thinking about the philosophy of history. Alfred Weber’s 1935 book *Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie* (*Cultural History as Cultural Sociology*) contained the axial age thesis *in nuce*: “The three established cultural spheres—the Near Eastern—Greek, the Indian and the Chinese—arrived at universally-oriented religious and philosophical seeking, questioning and choosing with remarkable synchronicity and apparently independently of one another from the beginning of the second half of the age of the great migrations, that is, from the ninth to the sixth century B.C.” This period, according to Alfred Weber (1935, pp. 7–9), inaugurated a “synchronistic world age” lasting until the sixteenth century, after which, he claimed, nothing fundamentally new was added to religion and philosophy. Despite following up on Alfred Weber’s insight about the intellectual significance of the first half of the first millennium BCE, however, Jaspers dismissed Alfred Weber’s sociological explanation for the “remarkable synchronicity” of events in the axial period. Indeed, Jaspers (1953) is hesitant to attribute the developments that define the axial age to definite material causes. He concedes that Alfred Weber’s account, which holds that the mass migrations of the early first millennium BCE provided the conditions for the axial period, is the most plausible, but does not endorse it. Jaspers mentions “common sociological preconditions” that favor the kind of “spiritual phenomenon” that characterizes the axial age—factors such as a plurality of small states in competition with one another, sustained societal upheaval in the wake of wars and revolutions, an unequal distribution of resources, etc. Ultimately, however, the question of origins remained for him a matter of speculation (Jaspers 1953, p. 18). In fact, by insisting that the world religions arose simultaneously and independently from one another, he suggests an *immaterial* cause—that is, a movement of the human spirit that is not accounted for by sociological factors

such as social actors, organizations, or institutions.<sup>1</sup> Later writers would suggest that there may be a relationship between “breakthroughs” and “breakdowns,” but Robert Bellah (2005) notes that, while this may have contributed to the rise of new ways of thinking, many breakdowns had no such consequence.

Alfred Weber’s influence on Jaspers’s thinking is clearly profound. Yet the notion of an axial age also emerges from the intellectual background of Max Weber’s comparative explorations of the world-historical significance of the so-called world religions.<sup>2</sup> Robert Bellah (2005) argues that, although only Alfred Weber is acknowledged in Jaspers’s formulation of the idea of the axial age in *The Origin and Goal of History*, the older brother also strongly influenced Jaspers’s historical thinking. Jaspers had been personally acquainted with Max Weber since before the First World War, and his impact on Jaspers’s thinking is readily apparent, not least in the various essays that Jaspers wrote about Weber and his ideas (see Jaspers 1989). As a distinguished historian of the ancient world, Max Weber was well aware of the religious and historical importance of the first millennium BCE. Weber planned his investigations of the world religions (gathered together in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*) as a series of comparative studies of several of the civilizations that Jaspers would subsequently define as “axial.” Indeed, Weber completed his studies of *Ancient Judaism*, *The Religion of India (Hinduism and Buddhism)*, *The Religion of China (Confucianism and Taoism)*, and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but never finished those he had planned on early Christianity and on Islam, which may have led to a lessening of the significance of these more recent religious formations in the eyes of his readers. Other than the study of Protestantism, in other words, Weber’s main contributions on particular religious traditions dealt precisely with the “axial age” traditions addressed by Jaspers, with the exception of classical Greece (which Weber treated elsewhere, especially in his *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (1988), though that study is concerned overwhelmingly with economic and social history and says almost nothing about the religion or philosophy of the civilizations under examination).

Max Weber remarks in his magnum opus, *Economy and Society* (1978, p. 447), on the importance of a “prophetic age” during the period singled out by Jaspers, but refers in quotation marks to the “prophets” of ancient Greece in recognition of the fact that these were not religious thinkers in the mold of the Jewish prophets, Zoroaster, the Hindu sages, or the Buddha. Nor does Weber place much stress on the particular period in which these developments occurred; he indicates that the “prophetic age” took place mainly in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, but that some of these prophetic movements “reached into the sixth and even the fifth century” (Weber 1978, p. 442). On the basis of these contributions, Bellah (2005, pp. 75–76) suggests that Max Weber’s comparative sociology of the world religions “implies something like

<sup>1</sup> For this reason, Puiggrós (1966, p. 67) takes Jaspers to task for advancing “a theistic interpretation of the origin of philosophy.” For a general theory of intellectual change that stresses the networks of descent and of opposition as the chief sources of intellectual innovation, see Collins (1998).

<sup>2</sup> For a critical discussion of the origins of this notion, see Masuzawa (2005).

the axial age hypothesis.” Bellah is surely correct about this. Yet one might also argue that Weber was more inclined to emphasize the *variation* in the “directions” of the “world rejection” that emerged in this “prophetic age” than their commonality. In Weber’s view, the crucial dimension of these developments was not so much temporal as geographic and cultural; the East and South Asian forms of prophecy were “exemplary,” whereas those originating in the Near East were “ethical” in character. The differences between these two basic types of prophecy, according to Weber, set these world regions on divergent paths that would subsequently launch them on profoundly different religio-cultural trajectories. In short, Weber seems not to have stressed a prophetic “age” in any more than a loose sense. It might therefore be most accurate to say that Jaspers’s idea of an “axial age” was shaped in more or less equal parts by the brothers Weber and their respective explorations of world history, although neither put a great deal of stress on the notion of an “age” as such.

As we have seen, Jaspers developed the axial age thesis in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi cataclysm, and his thinking about universal history was surely connected to his efforts to reconstruct Europe on a new, more humanistic basis—a project he pursued more directly in his 1947 classic *Die Schuldfrage* (*The Question of German Guilt*; Jaspers 2000). The first time he mentioned the idea of the axial age publicly was at the first annual *Rencontres internationales* of Geneva, a meeting of prominent intellectuals from all parts of Europe.<sup>3</sup> At the September 1946 meeting, which was organized under the heading “The European Spirit,” Jaspers took up the question “What is Europe?” and argued that Europe is not so much a geographical unit as an idea—an idea that has its origin in the centuries between 800 and 200 BCE, which Jaspers called “the axis of universal history” (Benda et al. 1946, p. 294; Jaspers 1947, p. 8). He also referred to the period as the “*Achsenzeit*” (Benda et al. 1946, p. 296; Jaspers 1947, p. 9). Three years later, Jaspers was invited to the 1949 *Rencontres*. This time the meeting’s theme was “For a New Humanism,” and Jaspers’s contribution was called “Conditions and Possibilities of a New Humanism” (Grousset et al. 1949, pp. 181–209). Again Jaspers stressed the importance of the axial age and sought to enlist the support of other intellectuals for his view of this period as a wellspring of humanistic values. The notion of an axial age appealed to others of a liberal, humanistic bent for reasons suggested by the intellectual historian Joachim Ritter: “Compared to merely typological perspectives on world history, the notion of the A[chsenzeit] has the advantage of allowing an understanding of humankind as an historical unity” (Ritter 1971, p. 74). This element of the axial age hypothesis has clearly had great appeal to those who endorse the idea of an axial age understood as the singular achievement of a bounded historical period.

<sup>3</sup> The inaugural meeting of the *Rencontres* today is infamous for the spat between Lukács and Jaspers, often stylized as a debate between existentialism and Marxism. “It was not only an intellectual duel but also a struggle of ideologies for the minds of intellectuals” (Zoltai 1985, p. 72). A few years later, Lukács obliterated Jaspers in *The Destruction of Reason* (Lukács 1981).

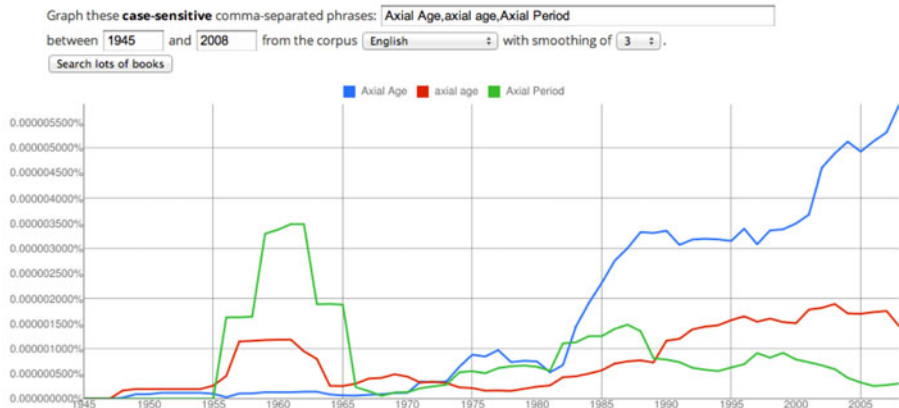
Jaspers published his *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*Origin and Goal of History*), the flagship statement of the axial age thesis, in 1949. The idea of the axial age soon enjoyed extensive exposure to an international readership. Beginning in the early 1950s, the book was translated into numerous languages.<sup>4</sup> By the late 1970s, a number of books and articles appeared that accept “axial” as a term for a historical age, suggesting that the notion had gained wider appeal among historians (Fikentscher 1975; Engster 1983; Peiser 1993; Plott 1977). The axial age thesis had also become relatively well-known in Anglophone scholarly circles by the 1990s, to the point that a German commentator could say in 1994 that it had become “firmly anchored in Anglo-Saxon scholarly discourse” (Breuer 1994, p. 1). The Google Books n-gram reproduced below (Fig. 1) suggests that the idea had gained some traction in English-speaking scholarship in the 1970s, but really took off after the time of Shmuel Eisenstadt’s programmatic 1982 article in the *European Journal of Sociology*, then plateaued for a decade, and really took off again around 1995—roughly when Samuel Huntington published his identity-political analysis of post-Cold War world politics, *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington 1996).

In its early years, the axial age concept was used almost exclusively as a tool with which to think about world history. Notwithstanding the splash made by Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) *Provincializing Europe*, the tendency to de-emphasize Europe in favor of world-historical and comparative approaches had increasingly become part of the historian’s toolbox beginning in the postwar and incipiently post-colonial period. Historical accounts after 1945 tended increasingly to de-emphasize the conventional political history of European nation-states, stressing instead the interconnected development of civilizations (see Schulin 1974, pp. 11–65). The journal *Saeculum: Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte*, founded in 1950, rejuvenated a long tradition of interest in “universal history” in German historiography. Its inaugural volume featured a review essay on Jaspers’s *Origin* by its editor, the Catholic historian Oskar Köhler (1950). The trend was visible in the Anglophone world as well; Arnold Toynbee’s approach to history was the subject of much debate among West German historians, as evidenced by numerous articles on Toynbee in the

<sup>4</sup> The Spanish translation was published in 1950 by a journal founded by José Ortega y Gasset. While it is not clear whether Ortega y Gasset himself initiated the translation and publication of Jaspers’s work in Spain, it is likely that he took a personal interest in the work, as he wrote on Toynbee and universal history in 1948. The Spanish translation was the first to have a wide impact across the Atlantic, where several Argentinian philosophers and historians made use of the concepts *tiempo-axial* or *tiempo-eje* during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1953, the English translation was published simultaneously by Routledge & Paul in Britain and by Yale University Press in the United States (Jaspers 1953). While Yale University Press reissued the book in 1959 and 1965, and Greenwood Press reprinted that edition in 1976, it is notable that the book was out of print until Routledge reprinted it in its “Revivals” series in 2010. Soon after the English edition appeared, the prestigious publisher Plon published a French translation. In 1955–56, the Frankfurt-based publisher Fischer reissued the book in a mass-market paperback edition of 75,000 copies. Translations into Italian and Japanese followed in the 1960s, and more recently, the book has been translated into Chinese, Russian and Polish. Spanish translation: *Origen y meta de la historia* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1950); French translation: *Origine et sens de l’histoire* (tr. H. Naef and W. Achterberg; Paris: Plon, 1954); Italian translation: *Origine e senso della storia* (tr. A. Guadagnin; Milano: Ed. di Comunità, 1965); Japanese translation: *Rekishi no kigen to mokuhyō* (tr. Shigeta Hideyo and Kusanagi Masao; Tōkyō: Kawade Shobō, 1969); Chinese translation: *Li shi de qi yuan yu mu biao* (tr. Wei Chuxiong and Yu Xintian; Beijing: Hua xia chu ban she, 198); Russian translation: *Smysl i naznachenie istorii* (tr. M. I. Levinov and P. P. Gajdenko; Moscow: Izdat. Respublika, 1994); Polish translation: *O źródle i celu historii* (tr. J. Marzecki; Kęty, Poland: Marek Derewiecki, 2006).



# Google books Ngram Viewer



**Fig. 1** Ngram based on Google Books Corpus. [http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Axial+Age%2Caxial+age%2CAxial+Period&year\\_start=1945&year\\_end=2008&corpus=0&smoothing=3](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Axial+Age%2Caxial+age%2CAxial+Period&year_start=1945&year_end=2008&corpus=0&smoothing=3)

early volumes of *Saeculum*. In the United States, the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Historiography rejected large-scale systems of history in favor of hypothesis-driven research (SSRC Committee on Historiography 1946). Nonetheless, some scholars dedicated themselves to the study of grand historical processes, including the historians associated with the so-called "Chicago school of world history," including Louis Gottschalk, L. S. Stavrianos, William H. McNeill, and Marshall G. S. Hodgson (Burke 1993, p. xi); McNeill won the 1964 National Book Award in History for his monumental *The Rise of the West* (1963). Meanwhile, several influential scholars at Harvard University also participated in the effort to explore world-historical themes: the sociologists Talcott Parsons and Pitirim Sorokin and the economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron. Parsons, with his direct personal experience of Jaspers and the Heidelberg milieu in which these ideas first developed, would prove to be a crucial link between Jaspers and sociologists working with the axial age concept more recently. Benjamin Schwartz, Robert Bellah, and Shmuel Eisenstadt, each of whom has contributed in important ways to the discussion of the axial age, were all at Harvard with Parsons in the 1950s and 1960s. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this kind of quasi-philosophical history writing has tended to flourish more among scholars at elite institutions than among those at less prestigious schools, and there appear to be clear network effects underlying the spread of the "axial age" problematic, as Collins (1998) would have expected. In these postwar discussions of world history, including the debates about a possible axial age, we are also observing efforts to develop what might be called (following Habermas) a "post-metaphysical" philosophy of history, an attempt to find an empirical (but non-biological) basis for imputing a common humanity at least to the cultures associated with the world's major religious traditions.

Yet, as we have seen, Jaspers's account of the axial age refers to a process occurring in the middle of the first millennium BCE in different parts of Eurasia, from Greece to China. This specification of the spatial extent of the period implies that "axial" developments did not take place everywhere. In Jaspers's schema, some

civilizations are not parties to the axial age and are thus either consigned, as in Hegel's account, to the realm of mere natural history, or they become part of the universal history of mankind later by way of exposure to the "spiritual radiation" (Jaspers 1953, p. 7) of the axial civilizations. Those consigned to the non-axial include the civilizations of the Americas as well as a broad category unfortunately referred to by Jaspers as "Negroes, etc." ("*Neger usw.*") (Jaspers 1953, p. 27). This residual category is eventually brought into universal history in the age of science and technology, presumably through Western imperialism. What we now call the "global South" is largely excluded from Jaspers's schema, although one must also say that his definition of the axial age *includes* billions of non-Europeans who would never make it into any definition of "the West" and in that sense is non-Eurocentric. Indeed, "provincializing Europe" was to a considerable extent the main point of the idea of an axial age.

Nonetheless, given that the Americas, Africa, and Japan are regarded as non-axial civilizations,<sup>5</sup> Jaspers's scheme appears in certain respects to reproduce earlier Eurocentric models of universal history, though now broadened into a Eurasian-centric paradigm. Moreover, as in earlier models, Jaspers adheres to a *diffusionist* understanding of cultural development—that is, he believes that cultural innovations flow from the center outward. Jaspers calls these centers "islands of light amidst the broad mass of the rest of humanity" (Jaspers 1953, p. 23). This "central perspective" has been criticized by Aleida Assmann (1989), who finds it anathema to an affirmation of pluralism. In short, despite Jaspers's intention to reorient historical thought in the direction of a universal humanity, his conception of the axial age actually leaves out large swaths of the human race.

Can this omission be justified without endorsing an indefensibly Eurocentric perspective? At least with regard to the omission of Africa, it may be worth pondering the historian of Africa Philip Curtin's (1997, p. 65) claim that "the present aridity of the Sahara came into existence at about 2500 B. C., isolating sub-Saharan Africa from the main lines of change in the intercommunicating zones of Egypt and Mesopotamia—and later on from the Hellenic zone and world of classical antiquity." There were no cell phones available at the time to annihilate distance, so it may not be unreasonable to think that Africans south of the Sahara might have been cut off from some of the developments associated with the axial age. Meanwhile, the existence of the Americas was unknown to Europeans for another 2,000 years after the initial axial age developments, and Morris (2010) shows that the likelihood of the Chinese getting to the Americas was much lower than that of Europeans doing so *for purely navigational reasons*. In other words, the Africans and early Americans might not have participated in these developments through no fault of their own, and certainly not as a result of any cultural or intellectual deficiency. Geography, now largely neglected in social-scientific analyses as a result of the emergence of world-wide instantaneous communications, may have played a significant role in determining which religions became "world religions" and which ones participated in the "axial age"—if there was such a thing.

<sup>5</sup> In the work of Eisenstadt and Bellah, Japan is clearly regarded as a nonaxial civilization, i.e., not as part of the Confucian sphere (see, for example, Eisenstadt 2003, p. 484).



Despite these kinds of reservations, numerous historians and scholars in empirical disciplines have engaged with the period highlighted by Jaspers's work in subsequent years. The conservative German–American political theorist Eric Voegelin was influenced by Jaspers in the writing of his multi-volume study *Order and History* (begun in 1956). From the late 1950s, Voegelin began to write about “axis-time,” as he translated the concept. In “World Empire and the Unity of Mankind,” first published in 1962, Voegelin situates the axial period in the context of the “outbreak of imperial expansion” (Voegelin 2000, p. 135), stipulating an affinity between the dominant spiritual and political phenomena of the period—that is, the formation of expansive empires. Despite recognizing the importance of the period in political history, Voegelin is unconvinced of the periodization Jaspers had proposed. Elsewhere, he argues that there is something “willful” about the exclusion of the rise of Christianity from the axis-time, suggesting that it betrays anti-Christian animus on Jaspers's part. Furthermore, he is unconvinced that a non-Western philosophy of history is possible; in view of how things turned out, he thinks a certain degree of Eurocentrism is unavoidable (Voegelin 1957, pp. 19–23). Later still, in the volume called *The Ecumenic Age*, he concludes that

the concept of an epoch or axis-time marked by the great spiritual outbursts alone is no longer tenable. Something “epochal” has occurred indeed; there is no reason why the adjective should be denied to the disintegration of the compact experience of the cosmos and the differentiation of truth and existence. But the “epoch” involves, besides the spiritual outbursts, the ecumenic empires from the Atlantic to the Pacific and engenders the consciousness of history as the new horizon that surrounds with its divine mystery the existence of man in the habitat that has been opened by the concupiscence of power and knowledge (Voegelin 1974, pp. 312–313).

In other words, by situating the axial age in political rather than cultural history, Voegelin is led to the conclusion that Jaspers's spatiotemporal parameters are indefensible.

In the early 1970s, the Harvard historian and sinologist Benjamin I. Schwartz initiated a special issue of *Daedalus* entitled “Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium B.C.” Schwartz assembled a number of scholars, mostly experts on ancient civilizations, to offer contributions on this theme. The *Daedalus* editor, Stephen R. Graubard, discloses in the preface that the special issue originated with a proposal by Schwartz to submit Jaspers's notion to scrutiny: “The idea was appealing in itself; what made it even more compelling, perhaps, was the implicit suggestion that the so-called ‘exotic fields,’ including the Chinese ... might be brought into more meaningful relationships with others that are equally isolated” (Graubard 1975, p. v). The contributors include experts on Greece, Rome, the Middle East, Mesopotamia, India, and China. The unifying theme is a focus on cultural change and intellectual movements, and despite the desire to unify “exotic fields” in a common frame, there is little hint of Jaspers's ethical project to promote the idea of a common humanity. In their accounts of cultural change in the first millennium BCE, the authors anticipate much of the emphasis of later work by Eisenstadt and others, such as the importance of intellectuals in axial breakthroughs.

### “Axial age” versus “axiality”

Against the background laid out above, we now explore different versions of the axial age thesis according to whether or not they insist on the coherence of the historical period or accept a broader periodization and some notion of “axiality” signifying a “breakthrough” that cannot be contained within any narrow time-period. As we noted previously, the deployment of the category of “axiality” without accepting the existence of an “axial age” as such may render the notion more plausible, but deprives it of the power of a concept suggesting a common root for the world’s major (Eurasian) civilizations.

One influential proponent of the axial age thesis was University of Chicago historian of Islam Marshall Hodgson. A Quaker who objected to what he called the “Jim Crow projection” of world maps of his time (for indicating that Europe was larger than Africa), Hodgson’s unfinished manuscripts indicated before his untimely death at the age of 46 that he had planned to make the idea of the axial age a central organizing concept in a planned work on world history (Green 1992). Hodgson first dealt with the concept in an article titled, “The Interrelations of Societies in History,” which appeared in the interdisciplinary journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Hodgson 1963). Like Jaspers, Hodgson was motivated by the ideal of telling the history of a single, common humanity. In his paper he attempts to lay a foundation for a revised humanism that avoids the pitfalls of earlier ethnocentric Western accounts. His alternative account centers around what he calls the Afro-Eurasian lands—basically “Europe, the Middle East, India, and the Far East of China and Japan” (Hodgson 1963, p. 231)—challenging the more familiar division in previous historiography between East and West.

Western scholars, at least since the nineteenth century, have tried to find ways of seeing this Afro-Eurasian zone of civilization as composed of distinct historical worlds, which can be fully understood in themselves, apart from all others. Their motives for this have been complex, but one convenient result of such a division would be to leave Europe, or even Western Europe, an independent division of the whole world, with a history that need not be integrated with that of the rest of mankind save on the terms posed by European history itself (Hodgson 1963, p. 232).

In fact, Hodgson argues, the distinction typically made between the “West” and the “East” is highly misleading, “for the cleavage between Europe and its nearest neighbors was usually slight” and interrelations were abundant:

As Eurasian history is studied, it becomes clear that these interrelations were not purely external, accidental cultural borrowings and influences among independent societies. They reflect sequences of events and cultural patterns shading into each other on all cultural levels. The four nuclear regions [China, India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean lands] are imperfect historical abstractions. All regions formed together a single great historical complex of cultural developments (Hodgson 1963, p. 233).

Hodgson then provides a complex account of the differentiation of distinct cultures from this “single great historical complex” in the second half of the first millennium BCE. He stresses that cultural forms did not develop in one location and later diffuse

throughout the Afro-Eurasian zone; rather, he insists, they have a single origin. Hodgson here states that “Jaspers has with reason called this the ‘Axial Age’”:

It was an age which differentiated cultures, but it also led to a deeper interregional interchange. Whatever may have been the initial role of interconnections in the intellectual atmosphere of the time in fostering these simultaneous wonders, they resulted in the presence everywhere of selective intellectual standards which permitted intercultural influences to proceed on the level of abstract thought—a fact above all important for the course of science (Hodgson 1963, p. 244).

This is perhaps the quintessential statement of the “unity in diversity” notion at the heart of the philosophical appeal of the axial age thesis. Its intellectual significance is enhanced by the fact that it was made by a card-carrying historian, who presumably cared about the empirical details in a way that Jaspers may not have.

Following in this conception of the axial age as a period of advance in human cognitive capacities have been Jürgen Habermas and Robert Bellah, both of whom emphasize the moral–practical dimension of the breakthrough. In his 1976 essay “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,” Habermas sketches out an evolutionist account of human history. Relying on Jaspers, Habermas argues that there occurred “in all evolutionarily successful civilizations” a shift “from a mythological-cosmogonic world view to a rationalized world view in the form of cosmological ethics. This change took place between the eighth and third centuries B.C. in China, India, Palestine and Greece” (Habermas 1979, pp. 151–152). Habermas notes that the question of how this development could be squared with a universal stagewise model dogged historical materialism in its unreconstructed form. Habermas’s solution is to reformulate the concept of modes of production in terms of their underlying principles of social organization, differentiated in terms of stages of interactive competence—derived from Lawrence Kohlberg’s model of moral development—as preconventional, conventional, or postconventional. In these revised terms, the axial age is characterized by a “break with mythological thought [and the] development of rationalized world views (with postconventional legal and moral representations)” (Habermas 1979, p. 157). The defining feature of postconventional thought is that “systems of norms lose their quasi-natural validity; they require justification from universalistic points of view” (Habermas 1979, p. 156; see also Roetz 1993).

Robert Bellah’s understanding of the axial age is also evolutionary in character. As early as his influential article on “Religious Evolution,” Bellah characterized as the first of several “massive facts of human religious history” the “emergence in the first millennium B.C. all across the Old World, at least in centers of high culture, of the phenomenon of religious rejection of the world and the exaltation of another realm of reality as alone true and valuable” (Bellah 1964, p. 359). World rejection was an evolutionary advance over prior, “primitive” stages of religion that regarded the human world and that of the gods as an undifferentiated cosmos. As in Habermas’s understanding, the evolutionary advance in Bellah’s account affects cognitive capacities, not just religious ones. Unlike Habermas, however, Bellah does not suggest a clean “break” with or supersession of mythological thought. Instead, insisting that “nothing is ever lost,” he notes that the theoretic capacity is *added* to the narrative and mythological capacities of pre-axial cultures. Bellah has now explored in greater detail the place of religion in human evolution up to developments of the axial age

breakthrough (Bellah 2011). The main evolutionary advance in the axial age is the development of a theoretic capacity that complicates the previous mythological worldview of tribal societies (as he now calls them) and displaces kings as conduits to the gods. The chief actors in this drama are what he calls “renouncers,” relatively “free-floating” intellectuals who, like Siddhartha Gautama, call into question the social arrangements in which they find themselves and make man the measure of all things. To use the Weberian term, these intellectuals are the “bearers” of the axial age breakthroughs, but they respond differently depending on the particular nature of their appropriation of the cultural materials at hand. The Buddha was responding to the same problems in Brahmanic Hinduism that motivated the Upanishadic teachers, but developed somewhat different answers that led to the emergence of a new world religion that nonetheless reflects certain features of its Hindu roots, such as the desire for “release” (see Wolpert 2000, pp. 44–52).

The importance of intellectuals in the axial age transformation has been strongly emphasized by the Israeli sociologist Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, who somewhat loosens the concern about a specific time period in which the axial age was supposed to have occurred. As a result of his numerous publications on the subject, the axial age thesis came to be closely associated with Eisenstadt, with some even taking him to be its progenitor. In his 1982 publication on the axial age in the *European Journal of Sociology*, Eisenstadt develops the concept of the axial age in a way that he describes as “related to” Jaspers’s concept. His reading of Jaspers is mediated, first and foremost, through concerns then prevalent in American and Israeli sociology since the decline of structural-functionalism from the late 1970s onward (Ram 1995).<sup>6</sup> Eisenstadt proposes a framework for the systematic analysis of the impact of axial revolutions on the social structure that is heavily influenced by Edward Shils’s concept of the normative center (see, for instance, Shils 1965). Axial revolutions, Eisenstadt suggested, can be studied at three points: the emergence, the conceptualization, and the institutionalization of the “basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders” (Eisenstadt 1982, p. 296). Like Shils, Eisenstadt conceives of the origins of social orders as residing in charisma; the main carriers of charisma are “autonomous intellectuals,” a group about which Shils (and before him, Alfred Weber and Karl Mannheim) also had a great deal to say.

In the following years, Eisenstadt coordinated a considerable effort to bring his framework to bear on empirical studies, convening at least two international conferences and a seminar on these themes. Eisenstadt also headed a program on “comparative civilizations” at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, his academic home. The output from these endeavors consists of two English-language volumes with contributions from the first conference and a seminar (Eisenstadt 1986; Seligman 1989), as well as two multivolume publications in German (Eisenstadt 1987, 1992) containing contributions to both conferences.<sup>7</sup> Eisenstadt’s axial age conferences of the 1980s

<sup>6</sup> In a new edition of his *Political Systems of Empires* (originally published in 1963), Eisenstadt wrote that his analysis “went in many ways beyond what had then been the prevalent thrusts of structural-functionalism” (Eisenstadt 1993, p. xvii).

<sup>7</sup> In the foreword to Seligman’s volume, Eisenstadt mentions that a volume called *The Historical Dynamics of Axial Age Civilizations* was forthcoming in 1989 from Oxford University Press, which would have made the output of the second conference available in English as well. For reasons unknown to us, this never happened.

focused on the conditions of possibility (rather than, say, a causal explanation) for the emergence and institutionalization of the basic cultural patterns of axial-age civilizations, the symbolic and institutional outcomes of these processes, and the so-called “secondary breakthroughs” that followed in their wake, such as the rise of Christianity and Islam. A final volume, *Axial Civilizations and World History*, contains the proceedings of another conference held in 2001, mostly with European and Israeli scholars seeking to “reopen the debate” within a sociological framework of civilizational analysis that is able to accommodate the diversity within the axial age (Arnason et al. 2005). Following the publication of Eisenstadt’s volumes on the axial age in the 1980s, the concept was increasingly cited with reference to his notion of “axial civilizations”—not a term used by Jaspers at all. Despite the emphasis on developments in the first millennium BCE, in Eisenstadt’s work we observe a shift from a stress on an “age” to a characterization of types of social order.

The conception of “primary” and “secondary” axial breakthroughs, retrospectively restoring Christianity and Islam to the “the axial,” stretches the original temporal frame of Jaspers’s axial age thesis, but it seems to make more sense of the world-historical significance of those two latecomers (see also Mumford 1956). The ancient historian Ian Morris has adopted a version of this approach in his recent writing. In a breathtakingly ambitious attempt to understand “why the West rules” the modern world, Morris examines Jaspers’s thesis and finds it compelling: “For all the differences among Eastern, Western, and South Asian thought [during the axial age], the *range* of ideas, arguments, and conflicts was remarkably similar in each region” (Morris 2010, p. 261). Morris argues that the thinkers who made the axial age, such as Confucius, the Buddha, and Socrates, promoted a process of “*self-fashioning*, an internal, personal reorientation toward transcendence that did not depend on godlike kings—or even, for that matter, gods” (Morris 2010, p. 256). But he is also inclined to include Jesus among the ranks of these troublemakers, and to see Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism (which extended the possibility of salvation from the narrow religious elite recognized by Theravada Buddhism to all humankind) as “second-wave” axial thought, “offering new kinds of salvation to more people than their first-wave predecessors and making the path toward salvation easier” (Morris 2010, p. 324). According to Morris, Islam was part of this second wave of axial thinking, accepting Muhammad’s conception of himself as redeeming the promise of his predecessors in the “Abrahamic” tradition. The Arab invaders, he writes wryly, “came not to bury the West but to perfect it” (Morris 2010, p. 353). While Morris moves forward the effective end-date of the axial age, he still appears to understand it as a coherent time period that ended with the emergence of Islam. In that sense, Morris’s account represents a sort of halfway house between those who insist that the axial age occurred during (and only during) the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE, and those who hold that there exists something like “axiality” but no mid-first millennium “axial age.”

The full-blown shift to a notion of “axiality” emancipated from the specific epoch delineated by Jaspers comes in two variants: that seeking to move “axiality” to an earlier time period, and that seeing it as an occasional phenomenon in human history with no prescribed temporal coordinates whatsoever. The former perspective is perhaps most strongly associated with the views of Jan Assmann, the leading Egyptologist, as well as Aleida Assmann, a literary scholar. In her 1989 critique of

the axial age thesis, Aleida Assmann argued that the philosophers had inherited the mantle of the theologians, and turned to “universal history” as a way of pursuing theology by other means. When philosophers turn their attention to history, she notes, they are especially inclined to stress the cognitive dimension of human life over all the others (Assmann 1989, p. 189)—a critique also leveled at Bellah’s recent book on the evolution of religion (Johnson 2011). Aleida Assmann also reproaches Jaspers for having repeated, “despite all declared and better intention,” the “exclusive, ethnocentric perspective” he had sought to overcome (Assmann 1989, p. 196). The exclusion of Moses and Jesus from Jaspers’s axial age schema was unacceptable, she argues, and the high cultures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia should be included as well.

Here is where Jan Assmann sets in. He notes (1990, p. 28) that, in labeling the axial age, Jaspers posits a too radical discontinuity between the pre- and post-axial worlds. Whether on account of his ethical project or due to simple ignorance, Jaspers overemphasized the otherness of pre-axial civilizations. In Assmann’s judgment, the philosopher has “a peculiar blindness for historical contingencies and processes” (1990, p. 41; see also Runciman 2009, p. 203). When the Egyptians—like the Assyrians a civilization of the pre-axial world in Jaspers’s schema—are given their due, a more nuanced picture emerges. Assmann finds it important to paint this more nuanced picture not just to get the facts straight—that is, not just because he finds Jaspers’s thesis questionable on *empirical* grounds—but also because he finds it questionable on *ethical* grounds. In his strong emphasis on the otherness of pre-axial civilizations, Jaspers cuts us off from other ways of being human. Assmann sets himself the task of uncovering the historical traces of these suppressed possibilities through an investigation of the Egyptian concept of *ma’at* (meaning truth, order, and justice). He concludes that the “breakthrough” to transcendence that Jaspers claims is unique to the axial age had already occurred among the Egyptians several centuries earlier (Assmann 1990, p. 121).

Assmann has more recently reiterated his view that the stress on “synchronicity” in the axial age thesis is misguided. He nonetheless wishes to maintain the ideas of “axiality” and “axialization” as “a tendency that appears under different conditions in different ‘ages’ of human history” (Assmann 2012, p. 400). If there was an axial age, he suggests, it was not in the centuries when the “great individuals” appeared, but rather “when the texts were canonized which we are still reading,” such as “the Confucian, the Daoist, and the Buddhist canons in the East, and the Avesta, the Hebrew Bible and the canon of Greek ‘classics’ in the West” (Assmann 2012, p. 399). In the end, “[t]he idea of the Axial Age is not so much about ‘man as we know him’ [today] and his/her first appearance in time, but about ‘man as we want him’ and the utopian goal of a universal civilized community” (Assmann 2012, p. 401).

From the Assmanns’ perspective, the whole idea of an “axial age” arises from an unwarranted intrusion of philosophical scribblers into the domain of the historian (see also Scheit 2000). Compelling though this critique may be, it is worth remembering that Ian Morris is no philosopher, but a hard-headed archeologist and historian of Greek antiquity who is attempting to improve upon previous ways of accounting for the dominance of the West and who does not so much as mention Max Weber’s culturalist approach to this problem (the sociologists’ “Protestant ethic thesis” has been largely abandoned by historians in any case). With regard to a possible “axial



breakthrough” in Egypt, Morris (2010, p. 261) argues that the likeliest candidate for having ushered in such a breakthrough in ancient Egypt was Akhenaten, the fourteenth-century BCE Egyptian pharaoh who “swept aside traditional gods” to create a new cult centered on himself, Nefertiti, and the sun disk, Aten. Morris dismisses the idea, however, on the basis of the argument that “Akhenaten’s religious revolution was anything but Axial. It had no room for personal transcendence” (Morris 2010, p. 262). Jan Assmann’s arguments about ancient Egypt rest on broader foundations than Akhenaten alone, but Morris raises doubts about the “axiality” of second millennium BCE Egyptian developments and tends to support the notion of a specific “axial age”—even if one characterized by “first” and “second” waves.

The shift to a temporally promiscuous conception of “axiality” has since come to be especially notable among cultural sociologists who have taken up the term but who are invested in treating culture as an independent variable in their analyses. Thus Bernhard Giesen, for example, uses the axial age concept to refer to *any* historical process through which universals are constructed:

The universalism of the great world religions, the idea of a constantly uniform nature, the Enlightenment conception of natural law and universal reason, and the ideas of history and progress were all such “axial breakthroughs,” each occurring in a different historical period and propelled by a different social group. Each of these axial breakthroughs has its own problem history, and it is surely too much of a simplification to speak of *one* Axial Age in world history, or a single axial age in the development of a particularly society (Giesen 1998, p. 49).

In general, Giesen’s understanding of the term is quite loose, and he provides no explanation of the concept beyond the notion that it is associated with the “construction” of collective principles. By detaching the concept from a specific historical epoch, Giesen reduces the axial age concept to a mere label that operates entirely on the level of discourse. Giesen’s collaborator Jeffrey Alexander makes a similar move, defining the axial age in terms of the “construction of moral universals” (Alexander 2003, p. 32), irrespective of the scale of the process that gives rise to them.

In this construal of the axial age by contemporary cultural sociologists, the criteria for some historical development to qualify as “axial” are significantly reduced. As a result, vastly different conceptions of “the axial” may be deployed by scholars, particularly in terms of the spatiotemporal scale of the process. Thus some historians write about a “European axial age” or refer to Europe’s transition to modernity as an axial age (Scheibelreiter 1999; Schulze 1995). In the process, the putatively universal significance of the axial age, binding together a diverse humanity that nonetheless shares important roots, is abandoned. Instead of a single axial age that coincides with the rise of the so-called world religions in a decisive period of human history, there are a plethora of “axial” transformations, many of which occur within the relatively recent past. While this conception may open the prospect of “axiality” to parts of the world that missed out on the “original” axial age, it de-historicizes the concept and turns it into a cipher (to misappropriate a Jaspersian concept) for the notion of autonomous spirit—a rhetorical trope producing universality on the cheap, so to speak.

## Conclusion

What have we learned from our review of the origins and uses of the axial age concept? The “invention” of the axial age in the work of Jaspers was deeply bound up with an ethical–political–philosophical project, an attempt both to overcome and to continue the Hegelian project of world history. As some historians have pointed out, the axial age concept never solely concerned the bare facts about the past, but was always tied to an attempt to shape the present situation—especially in the aftermath of World War II in Europe, and perhaps again in response to the bewilderment created by the end of the Cold War and encapsulated in the vague notion of “globalization.” In Jaspers’s version, the axial age concept is part of “great individuals” theory of history, in which intellectuals, prophets, virtuosos, et al., are decisive in making history (see Habermas 1985). Jaspers’s axial age also privileged the experiences of the Eurasian *ecumene*, obscuring possible parallels elsewhere. Yet the axial age thesis advanced by Jaspers and developed further by sociologists such as Eisenstadt and Bellah very much reflected a pluralist conception of history that saw unity in diversity. As the concept came to be stripped out of any specific historical context, the notion of an axial age became applicable to “breakthroughs” of all kinds.

Conceived as an event, the idea of an axial age entails specific spatial parameters dividing the world into axial and non-axial civilizations, and history into pre-axial and post-axial phases. Yet upon closer inspection, the spatiotemporal boundaries of the axial event seem to blur, indicating that it may be more fruitful to speak, with Jan Assmann, of “axiality” as denoting specific developments in human cultures, irrespective of when and where they take place. Without definite temporal parameters, however, the ethical project of locating an empirically verifiable source of common humanity is vitiated. In Jaspers’s mind and that of many others who invoke the concept, there is no doubt that the axial age constituted the beginning of a common human history. And, as François Furet (1981, p. 6) has pointed out, attributions of beginnings are always bound up with questions of identity. The identity in question here is that of contemporary humanism itself. As a way of deepening otherwise ahistorical discussions of “globalization,” and used with due circumspection, the notion of an axial age provides a tool for thinking about how we might conceive of a humanly unified world that nonetheless varies across cultural–civilizational lines that are real enough—even if they are not mutually impenetrable or inexorably fated to clash with one another. The debate around “multiple modernities” indicates some of the ways in which the understanding of current global trends can be enriched by using the notion of the axial age as a historical framework (Eisenstadt 1999, 2000).

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**John D. Boy** is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is a contributing editor to The Immanent Frame, the Social Science Research Council's blog on secularism, religion, and the public sphere. His interests include classical and contemporary social theory, the sociology of religion, and historical sociology. He is completing his dissertation, which investigates the so-called church-planting movement and its impact on the religious landscape of the European metropolis.

**John Torpey** is Professor of Sociology and History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His books include *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and its Legacy* (University of Minnesota Press 1995); *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (Cambridge University Press 2000); *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations after the Iraq War* (edited with Daniel Levy and Max Pensky; Verso 2005), and *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Harvard University Press 2006). He is also an editor of and contributor to *The Post-Secular in Question* (New York University Press 2012). His interests lie broadly in the area of comparative historical sociology. He is currently at work on a number of projects. One addresses the question of how we identify periods of major social change, such as those associated with the birth and reform of major world religions, and whether we are in the midst of such a period now. Others concern the sociology of diplomatic services and contemporary changes in the nature of warfare.

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