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Preface

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PREFACE

MICHAEL PALENCIA-ROTH

For two years, in 1999 and 2000, the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations had as a major theme in its annual conferences “the Janus Perspective.” Not all the papers focused on that theme, of course, but a good number did. This special issue of the *Comparative Civilizations Review* presents an assortment of essays written from the Janus perspective.

Janus is the Roman god or, more strictly, *numen*, of gates and of doorways, usually depicted as a double face looking in two directions, backward and forward. Hence Janus is the god of beginnings, as the etymology for “January” suggests. The essayists in this special CCR issue consider their subjects both in light of the past and of the future, however each of these terms is defined for the purposes of the argument. Thus the question of origins and sources on the one hand, and of legacies and prospects on the other.

The first essay published here is less a scholarly analysis than a meditation, excerpted from *Letters from the Silk Roads*, a remarkable book by Eiji Hattori. Hattori was for more than twenty years a program officer of UNESCO and in that capacity travelled through more than eighty countries. Drawing on a lifetime of experience, Hattori reflects on the importance of the silk roads—both the Central Asian overland route and the sea route through the East and the South China Seas, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea—to the development of civilization itself. In Letter Seven, finding himself at the dawn of a new year, he muses on the topic of a “new world order” grounded in the past but open toward the future, and grounded as well, one would hope, on an adequate understanding of civilizational issues.

Wayne Bledsoe takes up the topic of “globalization” from a comparative civilizational perspective absent from most interpretations of the phenomenon. In doing so, he also uses the discourse of “globalization” itself to demonstrate that, since there is no such thing as a centralized global authority, there cannot be any such entity as a global civilization. The analysis has explanatory power, and it is a strong and well-documented criticism of the notion of “central civilization.” Bledsoe’s analysis of “globalization” can be complemented by Palmer Talbutt’s notion of the “discursive humanities” as an interpretive para-

digm based in part on the work of two prominent 'civilizationists,' Pitirim A. Sorokin and Vytautas Kavolis. Talbutt advocates the analysis of culture and cultural change through a number of coordinates and binary oppositions, among them time, status, wealth, generations, urban/regional, subjects/ruler, self/other, male/female, as a means of understanding achievements in culture. Toward the end of the essay, Talbutt comments on the history of the ISCSC through the prism of the categories he has presented.

Each of the next five essays treats primarily a specific part of the world: Japan, Mexico, India, Iran, and China (Hong Kong). In "The Vistas of the Comparative Study of Civilization," Keisuke Kawakubo bridges both East and West in civilizational study, considering not only the work of the major civilizationists of the West (including some current members of the ISCSC) but also Japanese contributions to comparative civilizational study. He finds commonality among these quite different scholars and, invoking Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, especially its second part, makes a plea for the 'holistic' approach and for what I would call "the axiological," that is, the study of cultural values. In their essay on Mexico, Myron Orleans and José Dávila explore what they identify as the "duality of consciousness" in Mexican migrants in the United States. Life in Mexican villages is contrasted to life in Southern California. The tensions between tradition and modernity give rise to change that is both individual and social, as migrant workers seek to make sense of the world that they have left behind and the new one confronting them. In her essay on Gandhi and Mallik, Madhuri Sondhi analyzes the visions of these two men concerning a future global peace. She places their ideas against the background of past wars and explores the strategies of Gandhi's nonviolence and of Mallik's notion of an ethics of abstention in the pursuit of peace. In her essay on Iran, entitled "Janus Blindsided: The Islamic Revolution," Laina Farhat discusses the revolution in Iran as a "strange event" of contested origins but clearly shaped by the forces of a painful "modernization" that has been the lot of Asian societies in the 20th century. Iran's "slow moving revolution" illustrates the perils of modernization. Farhat's is a cautionary tale, and, as we seek to understand an analogous situation in present-day Afghanistan, we would do well to study the Iranian example.

It is perhaps unusual for any culture or society, much less any city, to realize immediately and without question that it stands in the Janus doorway, looking backwards and forwards at the same time. Hong

Kong, before and after its reunification with China, presents an interesting case of the *conscious assumption* of the Janus perspective. Such a reunification is more than a political event. It is a comparative civilizational one as well, for in becoming a “part” of China, Hong Kong must perforce abandon that which had given it its particular identity in Asia: its Britishness. Such an influence cannot be easily discarded, however, and for the foreseeable future Hong Kong will therefore exist “in between” the civilizations of the West and of China.

This state of in-betweenness has a name in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs of the 16th century. The term in Nahuatl for in-betweenness is *nepantla*. The following incident will bring the term to life. In his monumental 16th-century history, the *Historia de las Indias de la Nueva España e islas de la Tierra Firme*, Diego Durán, Dominican friar, tells of coming across one of his flock, an Indian who, with great difficulty and over a considerable length of time, had gathered a sizable sum of money and then had spent it all in one evening on a party for his entire town. Reproached by the friar for his wastefulness, the Indian replied: “Please don’t be alarmed, father, for we are still *nepantla*.” The friar, though he understood the term and knew that it meant ‘being in the middle’, pressed the Indian to explain *nepantla* more fully to him. The Indian explained that since they were not yet completely rooted in the Catholic faith, they remained neutral, beholden neither to Church law nor to Aztec law. Thus, they believed in God, but at the same time they held on to their ancient customs and to the rites of the devil. They were, in sum, *nepantla*. (Diego Durán, *Historia*, Volume 1, Chapter 3, Paragraph 16).

Nepantla is useful to students of comparative civilizations, both as a term and as a concept. It identifies and makes conceptually more precise that most imprecise of historical processes: the transition from one axiology to another. Other terms point to a similar dynamic: watershed, divide, turning point. There is in all of these terms a sense of before and after, a sense that something significant had taken place and that, for better or worse, the world after is different than the world before.

Such a watershed event took place on September 11th. No one doubts that the attack changed the consciousness of Americans and of many others, and that it changed as well how we act in the present and think about the future. We cannot yet describe our present convincingly to ourselves, and we feel disoriented concerning our future. Hence our uncertainty, our anxiety, about where we are, who we are and what we are doing. In sum, we are living through a 21st-century civilization-

al *nepantla*, suspended—to paraphrase Matthew Arnold—between two worlds, the one dead or dying, the other struggling to be born. Arnold's two worlds were different from our two worlds, before and after September 11th. But they share with ours the same sense of apprehension and doubtless a similar conviction that if we are to make sense of our civilizational moment, we must understand, with as much intelligence and wisdom as we can muster, its past. Only thus can we reasonably hope to shape, at least in part, its future.

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