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WESTERN CIVILIZATION IN THE CONTRACTION MODE\*

1. Aspects of the medieval system as a social formation
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1. Aspects of the medieval system as a social formation

What were the Middle Ages all about? Can we talk about a medieval system? The assumption in what follows is that it is meaningful to do so, at least if the perspective is sufficiently macro-historical not to worry too much about details. What we are looking for would be the ideal typical (in the Weberian sense) rather than the variations; the sweeping characterizations of vast regions in space and time rather than the minutiae of a minor space-time region.

To start at a basic point in the system: some words about how surplus was produced, and by whom; and how it was spent, and by whom. The medieval system was an agricultural system; neither crafts nor trade dominated. Over 90% of the population were tied to the soil, most of whom never departed more than one or two miles from the place where they were born.<sup>1</sup> The basic unit of agricultural production was the manor - a largely self-sufficient, often big, farm - some of them had the soil tilled by freedmen, most of them by serfs.<sup>2</sup> The serf was tied to the soil, bound to the land of the master. The coloni background of freedmen and small peasants - the smallest fragments of the fallen West Roman empire - constituted some of the raw material out of which this new social entity was formed; similar formations among the transalpine barbarians constituted another and equally important input.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the aristocracy was a blend of the Roman and the Germanic<sup>4</sup> - and those without or with very little land were brought under the landowner's protection, ideally guaranteeing a minimum security against services. Land and protection one way, labor producing goods and services the other, was the general formula for the manorial system, as later (from the ninth century, in France - in the wake of the breakdown of the Carolingian empire)<sup>5</sup> for the feudal system. The exchange was local. Trade was mostly unnecessary, so was money - the exchange was in kind, a barter of rights and duties to goods and services.<sup>6</sup>

The feudal system, then, is seen as an elaboration of the manorial system. It is the manorial system at a higher level, so to speak. It should not be identified with the Middle Ages: it started later and lasted much longer.<sup>7</sup> It was steeply hierarchical: on the top were those who had land and protection to offer, i.e. the ultimate landowners and the ultimate owners of the means of violence - at the bottom were those who had nothing but their labor, for the production of goods and services, to offer. In the middle were those to whom ownership had been delegated. Feudalism was an exchange system that was based on the simple exchange relation mentioned, but extended it, significantly, in social space, in time and in geographical space.

In social space: from being the simple relation between landowner and serf in a manorial system it became a multi-tier structure king-lord-vassal-serf - with the latter being neither free, nor slave. The serfs could not marry without consent, the land was not theirs (they only had "access" to it), they could not move.<sup>8</sup> But they could not be bought and sold away from the place either; they were not commodities in that sense.<sup>9</sup> Between them and the top any number of tiers, the whole seignourial system, could be interspersed.<sup>10</sup> The basic relation between adjacent tiers was the same, but the relative strength of the relations differed. The history of the Middle Ages is the history of how the pyramid shot upwards from a low bottom level, how higher level links were crystallized and cemented, how it proved impossible to keep all links intact at the same time, and how the system ultimately collapsed, partly by its own weight.

Those who were given titles to land also had the right to issue titles to the level below; those who were offered protection also had the right to offer protection downwards. Where it all ended, with the serf, those terms, "land" and "protection" in exchange for "goods and services" became too euphemistic, by far, to be meaningful. The terms conceal the abject poverty, or rather misery and squalor implied

in tilling the soil for the landowner rather than for themselves (so that the landowner had enough to consume and enough to pass on to higher levels, e.g. a fully equipped "soldier"). To own land implies the right to decide over the agricultural surplus (if any): clearly the serfs did not have this right. They were exploitable down to the level of reproduction and below. And the term "protection" should better be read "extortion". "You accept my protection, or else!" In the idealized form the feudal system was a neatly balanced hierarchical system of rights and duties ensuring human existence at the bottom ("satisfaction of basic needs" we would say today) and not mere appropriation towards the top ("luxury consumption" we would say today) than what is commensurate with the abolition of misery for the serfs. But in practice the system could easily degenerate into a system of duties only at the bottom, and rights only at the top. The Russian/tsarist system (very long-lasting, at least till 1860s) is often quoted as an example of the latter,<sup>11</sup> parts of the French system as close to feudalism in idealized form.

In time: from being a system of exchange for past services it became a system for future services; from being a system set up between concrete persons it became a system equally affecting their descendants. Not only was the off-spring of a serf also a serf, of a vassal a vassal and so on; not only was there "like father, like son", but the relations between the fathers was mirrored in the relation between their sons. Thus, like in the mathematics of natural numbers, an infinite series was constructed through the property of the basic relation and the transfer of that property to the successor - in principle in perpetuity, for eternity.

In space: the system spread, the feudal rules became relatively standardized over vast regions in space, through the extension in time and space of defined statuses and roles in social space.<sup>13</sup> From the simple manorial beginning to the most elaborate it could be found all over Europe in one period or the other, with the

exceptions of the extreme north (which never came further than to its version of the manorial system?),<sup>14</sup> of the southwest under the Muslim Caliphate,<sup>15</sup> of the southeast under Byzantine reign,<sup>16</sup> and in Italy.<sup>17</sup> In doing so the feudal system defined a Europe, a real Europe with highly permeable borders and with a legal system (roman in form, medieval in content) serving to define social space through long periods of time and in vast regions of space. Those who travelled, and they were not numerous, could feel at home: they would not go much wrong if they applied the social rules valid where they came from.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, it makes sense to talk about a medieval system if we take that term to denote both the manorial and feudal and see the former as a rudimentary beginning of the latter. It was based on exploitation of nature and the serfs - by "exploitation" meaning making use of beyond limits, in the first run limits against breakdown set by nature (including human nature), itself;<sup>19</sup> in the second run by man-made norms possibly establishing lower thresholds (in general they tended to establish higher thresholds, however). The system was, as mentioned, local. There was certainly exploitation, as will be delved into later, but there was not what today would be called inter-national exploitation. A similar feudal system could be established in another place, but the local serfs would be exploited by their vassals who in turn would be exploited by their lords, and so on. Exploitation from one place to another was transmitted through imitation even up to isomorphism, but not through interaction between systems. May be one could say that the transportation of surplus was only vertical, upwards in the feudal pyramid, and as the higher links were weak most of the surplus was probably consumed (goods) or consummated (services) within a relatively limited area from where it originated. There was no, or little, horizontal (lateral) transport of surplus as later, between co-operating bourgeois elites.<sup>20</sup> What this means is very simple: the pressure was put on the local nature and the local serfs. It all depended on how much they were able to produce, on how much could be squeezed out of

either resource. There was neither external nature, nor external serfs to rely upon if this should prove insufficient. A knight might be given, or establish, a fief with serfs elsewhere, but then that elsewhere became a system with its problem of balance between resource base and consumption of various kinds. True, systems could be linked together at a higher level as when a king, through conquest or marriage for instance extended his territory. But it was hardly the rule that surplus transported upwards (to the king) trickled downwards.<sup>21</sup>

In other words: not only trade, but also plunder for the purpose of bringing home booty (women, cattle, slaves, precious metals, goods in general) were at very low levels. Trade was mainly inter-town trade; but the towns were marginal in the medieval system. The towns could exchange agricultural products for craftsmanship, luxury items and exotica demanded by the landed aristocracy (and increasingly demanded by them). Thus, a class of burghers (living behind their burg, behind the city walls - expanding with city growth)<sup>22</sup> eked out an existence and grew increasingly wealthy. They were marginal to the system, they did not fit into the feudal hierarchies at all, their origin was dubious. What they did was similar to what was done by social outcasts such as Arabs and Jews. One might add: they were outcasts because what they did was contrary to the dominant ethos, the dominant cosmology at the time, with its emphasis on the local and the inward-looking - and because they were social outcasts they could do what was extra-paradigmatic (and yet demanded, like the brothel in a puritan culture) and hence, possibly, destined to become the basis for a new dominant cosmology lurking in the corridors of history. But their road towards their increasingly elevated status in the "modern period" - finally formalized through the French revolution - was long and tortuous indeed, persecuted by aristocracy and clergy alike, defending themselves through a complex system of guilds, strongly class-divided within and in harsh competition with each other.<sup>23</sup> The centers for the development of the burgher system were two: one in

Northern Italy, one in the Low Countries. The former were condemned to die after a period of brilliance;<sup>24</sup> the latter eventually became a part of the center of the modern, expansionist period.<sup>25</sup>

Back to the countryside: as the medieval system matured from manorialism to ever higher levels of feudalism the higher echelons of the system lived in increasing splendor. Europe was covered by forest, dark and impenetrable,<sup>26</sup> like a sea that forest was infested with brigands, pirates. The manors were like small boats offering some safety from the frenzy of winds and waves; the castles that were to emerge later offering even more safety, but also attracting more attacks. They were the points of crystallization, the centers of organization for spending the surplus, for instance in the form of long-lasting feasts interspersed with hunting parties in surrounding forests and display of gallantry and arts.<sup>27</sup>

But the spending of surplus should be seen not only in economic terms of what was done, but in terms of the spirit with which it was done. Metaphorically speaking it was probably with the heart rather than with the brain, or in contemporary language: with the right rather than the left half of the brain<sup>28</sup> that homo medievalis was living. There was emotionalism rather than rationalism<sup>29</sup> - a dichotomy that seems meaningful in Western history. Another dichotomy, fetched from sociological parlance, expressive versus instrumental may be more appropriate, however.

In society organized around contract and status, frozen into more or less delicate exchange balances with relatively little mobility socially or geographically, the instrumental mode will easily wane into relative insignificance. What matters is to express adequately, to articulate, that which is, not to struggle for something else. What is there to be instrumental about when things are given and well defined, from generation to generation in perpetuity? This can be done in courtesy terms, or in any form of social embroidery, in what to us

would be rather ornate forms of social behavior.<sup>30</sup> But it can also be done with high emotional pitch, accompanying the tragic and joyful events of life; death and defeat on one hand, birth, marriage and victory on the other.<sup>31</sup> In this there is nothing extraordinary. What was extraordinary with the middle ages seen from our standpoint would have been the amount of embroidery and emotionalism, measured not only in complexity and pitch, but also in terms of how many participated and in time budget terms - the amount of time (per day, per week, per year, per life) spent in ritual, mourning and celebration. That this expressive mode was real to them, more real than what we would call the instrumental mode (e.g. bringing cattle manure to the exhausted fields) is obvious. And it matters in the effort to understand why the Middle Ages did not last forever - for one thing because this simply channeled so much surplus and activity in other directions than system maintenance in our sense.

Very significantly, this also applied to the more valiant pursuits: the tournament, the battle, the crusade. All of this was organized around what perhaps was the key value of the medieval system: honor,<sup>32</sup> meaning doing what was right, considering one's station in life. The station was given by birth or as a reward for services rendered and for the way in which they were rendered. To serve the Lord (in heaven) and the lesser lords on earth was to act out fully, even more than fully, one's station - in a way for all to see and admire (and possibly reward). Tournaments, battles and crusades<sup>33</sup> served these purposes, thereby cementing the feudal relationships - signalling to everybody "I know who I am and what is expected of me".

What has been said so far, we assume, was more or less the standard medieval system: rural, with marginalised towns; some of them little more than stockades.<sup>34</sup> But what about the imperial and papal constructions, were they not also part of it?



First, there were the three successors to the Roman Empire in the West: the Byzantine Empire, the Roman Empire in the East or rather Southeast; the Muslim Caliphate in the Southwest (most of Spain); the Carolingian construction and its successor, the Holy German-Roman Empire. All three of them had, in various periods, designs and ambitions far beyond what they actually achieved.<sup>35</sup> The Byzantine Empire was Roman, the Muslim Caliphate was an expression of Islam in the expansionist mode indicating that Islam may be counter-cyclical to the more Christian-dominated part of the West,<sup>36</sup> and the weak Carolingian was a clear successor system, also inspired by the challenge from the Muslims. And then there was the Papacy, also weak throughout most of the period, in search of a clear role for itself.<sup>37</sup>

This point, actually all that has been said so far, can now be summarized and better appreciated by introducing the ethos, code, cosmology - by and large interchangeable terms - into the picture. The assumption is that throughout the period stability, including staying put, was considered normal. Change, including moving from place to place, was considered abnormal, unreal and only justifiable if there were a return to the points of social and geographic origin. Those who moved and changed, burghers and traders, did not conform, and would have to be seen as outcasts - just like outcasts for other reasons (jews, gypsies, Muslims) would be put into these roles. If there were dreams of expansion at the top of church and monarchy, in the papal and imperial constructions, then these were atypical - and were probably marginalized from the medieval system as superstructures, lofty constructions in thin air. Thus, there may be three ways of marginalizing people - by placing them on the side of normal society (as ultimately happened to the burghers), by placing them below as real outcasts (the ethnically alien, the beggars and robbers), and by placing them above (like saints in a secular culture, much admired but not imitated).

So, the cosmology was inner-directed, only occasionally including the outside. Papal and imperial constructions nevertheless

could make sense as ways of solidifying and defending the medieval system over large distances in time and space - which is not the same as expansion. The system was not predicated on expansion like the predecessor and successor systems. The carrier of the faith most compatible with the dominant cosmology would have to be local and even (relatively) self-sufficient: the monastic system. Originally, this grew out of deep discontent with the Roman imperial construction - Benedict of Nursia being of Roman aristocratic background and his system dominated the Middle Ages. Correspondingly, the carrier of secular power most compatible with this cosmology would also have to be local: the landowner, later the vassal. "The delegation of power downwards" is a wrong metaphor for understanding the medieval system, probably inspired by views of the predecessor and successor systems as "normal". Power had to be local, as the local was the most real. Thus, the manorial system was in a sense more medieval than the feudal system - the latter should rather be seen as ways of delegating local power upwards by accepting not only legitimation from higher echelons in the hierarchy, but even dependence on them for resources. Ultimate legitimation, in a system as firm in its transcendental convictions as this one, was from God - to St. Peter and from him by apostolic succession to popes and bishops,<sup>39</sup> and - less clearly - to the countless monarchs who claimed to rule (often meaning presiding over something over which they had little effective control) by the grace of God: rex gratia dei.

Just as papal and imperial constructions, way out in social space could be compatible with a contractive social cosmology, partly by protecting the small units and ensuring their stability, partly by having the real sacred and secular power located much lower down, excursions way into geographical space could also be compatible with a non-expansionist cosmology. Thus, there is no need to see the crusades, for instance the first four or five, including the "people's crusade"<sup>40</sup> as atypical of the Middle Ages. They would have been if they were used

for colonization, for bringing back or establishing a richer resource base, for the medieval system. But, not unlike the Ming dynasty expeditions to Africa,<sup>41</sup> they did not serve such purposes. They should rather be seen as a very costly social ritual that could be converted into honor, not as an economic instrumentality. There were those who hoped they might become exactly that, but they were not the carriers of dominant medieval cosmology. They were, of course, Italian city-states with strong commercial interests they hoped to solidify and expand through this method.<sup>42</sup>

If the perspective in space were limited the perspective in time was unlimited. Medieval cosmology was an effort to freeze a system in a certain state and keep it there - forever. Elsewhere<sup>43</sup> we have argued that premonitions of an impending crisis - a major one - is typical of dominant cosmology in the expansionist phase. They expect crisis - and they get it! In all probability Roman emperors and their helpers, as well as Western imperialists and theirs, had a sneaking suspicion, even when the system seemed to be working well, that something was not as it should be; that it could not last forever. It is hard to believe that those who were at the core of the medieval system harbored similar suspicions - at the private level, yes, for their own salvation, but hardly for the system as a whole. They must somehow have been caught unprepared - possibly one reason why the Middle Ages were much quicker in dying than the Roman Empire.<sup>44</sup>

Medieval epistemology was hardly dialectic, but probably very holistic.<sup>45</sup> Occam came at the end of the Middle Ages,<sup>46</sup> as a precursor of Descartes. Before that gigantic thought systems, highly deductive, designed to fathom everything rather than specialization into the minutiae of one particular (X, Y) - relationship would be the dominant intellectual style.<sup>47</sup>

After these reflections on the medieval system cosmology where space, time and knowledge are concerned, let us turn to man-man, man-nature

and man-God relations. How were these viewed, how were they implemented -- what kind of structure and process, in thought and in reality were typical of the Middle Ages? Again, what was considered natural, normal? In general terms a vast hierarchy with God on top, then entities linking the transcendental and the mundane (such as Jesus Christ the Son, Virgin Mary the Mother, the Holy Spirit -- and all the angels and the demons), then human beings that happen to be alive today ranked in the feudal order, ending with the serfs, and then, at the very bottom, a desecrated nature of animals, plants and minerals, ready to be exploited. Children were probably closer to animals as things that could be beaten, set out to die in infanticide practices, and so on. The position of women was probably ambiguous: it may be argued that with the dethronization of Virgin Mary in Protestant Christianity women lost the anchorage into sainthood provided by Latin Christianity. Left was the exploitable whore, to be fitted into a feudal setting called a family, given reproductive and low level productive functions within a capitalist system only. May be her status was higher in the medieval system?<sup>48</sup>

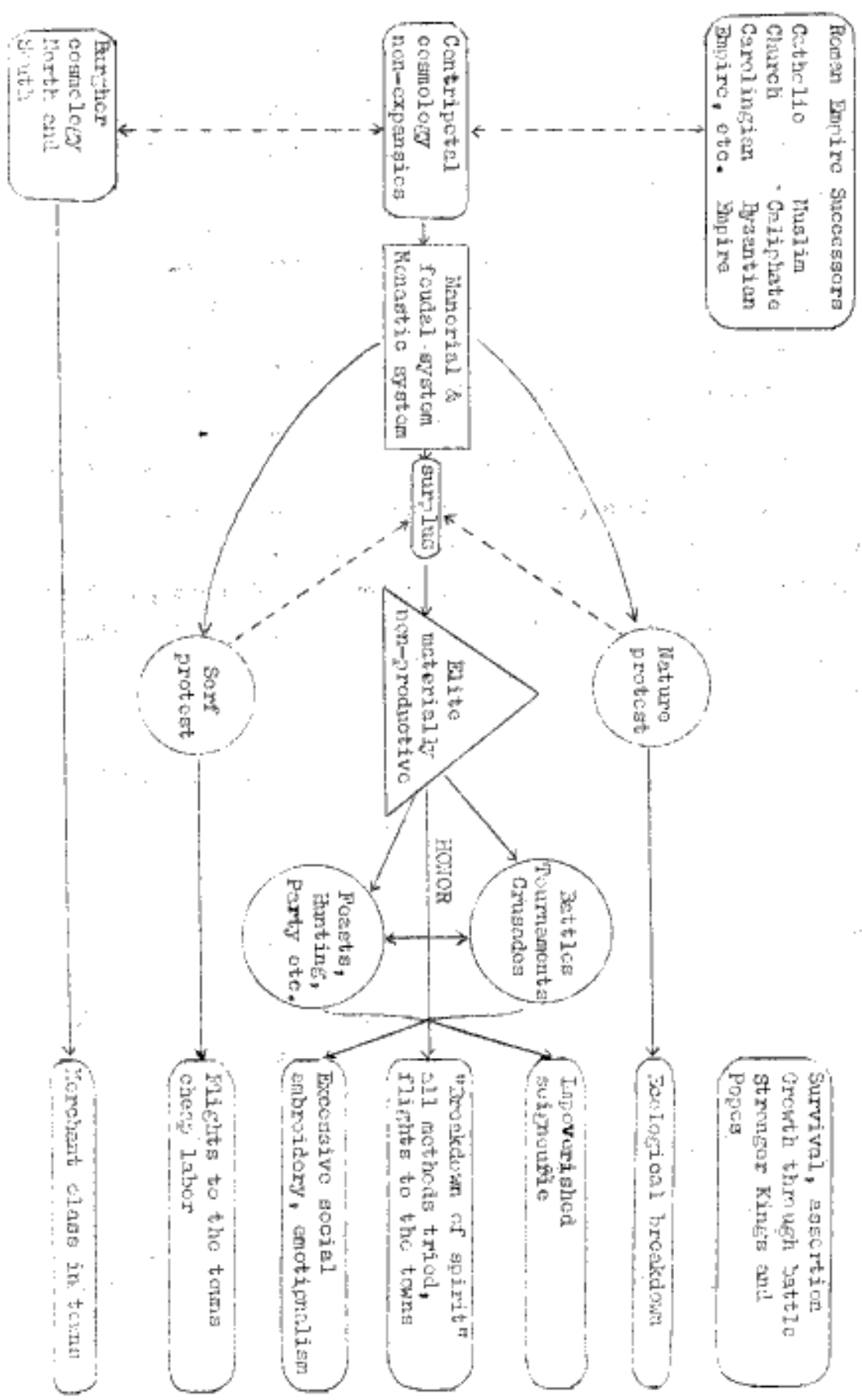
So, on top was God, in-between man, at the bottom Nature. It must have been a very orderly construction, with few contradictions, at least on paper. But verticality was not its only characteristic: there was also a communality, a collectivism, some type of belongingness. In the idealized feudal system this would extend from serf to emperor, from lay to pope, along both secular and sacred ladders. It would exclude nature, it seems, but would reach out to include transcendental elements. For the ultimate and transcendental goal of the whole construction was transcendental: salvation of a soul that was not only individual but also eternal. Hence, there was much at stake: an after-life in a hell or heaven so real that medieval men and women could smell the fumes of the former and the celestial scents of the latter.

## 2. On the decline and fall of the medieval system

Why did such a system, so evidently designed for eternity, nevertheless break down? It did not waste its resources in excessive expansionism; ever increasing decreasingly defensible perimeters. On the contrary, it contracted to a smaller Europe, open to the marauding Vikings to the North,<sup>49</sup> with some kind of balance with the Muslims and the Byzantines. The answer, it seems, is to be found in "excessive contractionism", a system exhausting and elaborating its own resources well beyond the limits of sustainability. To see this one might again focus on the pattern of spending the surplus extracted - as attempted depicted in Figure 1.

The basic point about these ways of spending the surplus from the present point of view, is not so much their precise content, and how they could serve to convert surplus into honor, as how they enter (or did not enter) the economic cycle, which after all is the material basis off which the whole system lives. And the answer is, and that is a major characteristic of the medieval system, that there was no feed-back from them into the cycle. The missing arrows in the chart are the most important ones. Increased honor does not make the soil more fertile, nor does it make the serfs more willing to work - at least not much more or for a longer period of time after any initial sharing of pride may have worn off. Tournaments do not produce fertilizer for a depleted nature; it does produce entertainment, but not food for exhausted serfs. Battles in general and crusades in particular could have extended both kinds of resource base, but they were not used for that purpose. In fact, those who benefitted were probably the outcasts, the townspeople making the armor and also supplying the armies<sup>50</sup> - ~~and~~ making use of the crusades or other long range expeditions to extend their trade network.<sup>51</sup> But then they were only in the system, not of the system.

Figure 1: The Decline and Fall of the Medieval System: an hypothetical flow chart



How long did the medieval system last? Roughly speaking as long as serfs and nature lasted; till ecological<sup>52</sup> and demographic<sup>53</sup> decline really set in, capped with "bad years",<sup>54</sup> with the Black Death<sup>55</sup> possibly decimating the population to the tune of about 40% during two generations as the coup de grace, administered to something already dead. By that time the aristocracy was impoverished,<sup>56</sup> much of it reduced to marauders and gangsters ("robber barons").<sup>54</sup> Their obvious refuge would be in the town and cities if they could stomach the ignominy.<sup>58</sup> And that was also where the serfs, and the free peasant able to get away, would end up - deserting farms and adding to cheap labor in the towns at the same time, swelling their numbers.<sup>59</sup> A new alliance took form: peasants with burghers, for a new exchange relation: protection against services (not land against goods) - a cornerstone in what later became the modern and capitalist system. That the relation was a new form of abject exploitation, a new form of vorticality, must have been forgotten in the fights against the common enemy: the seigniorial classes; in the countless peasant revolts.<sup>60</sup>

What arrived in the towns must have been a sad lot. Not only were they the refugees from a system that had broken down; in addition they had been beaten by forces so much stronger than themselves that they inevitably must have seen them as the expression of the wrath of the Almighty, as divine punishment.<sup>61</sup> Not only were they physically impoverished, not only did the mighty suffer the ignominy of being; but little above the common crowd: they must have felt that the wrongs that had been done were transcendental in character. Later ages might talk in terms of agrarian and social reform; these were not their languages of discourse. Minor wrongs could have been righted within the system, not colossal ones. And this breakdown was in that category - it called for something fundamentally new.

Again, the questions may be asked: what brought the medieval system down? - and, given an answer to that question, under what condition

or conditions could the system have been saved? And again the answer seems to have to be: the cause of the decline and fall of the medieval system was the medieval system, not any particular factor within that system. It is possible to maintain a materially non-productive elite on the basis of exploiting others and nature; that has been done many times in human history and for much longer periods of time than the medieval system.<sup>62</sup> But there has to be some balance between what goes in and what goes out, between income and expenditure. Seen from the point of view of the elite, as almost all medievalists seem to be doing,<sup>63</sup> there seems to have been a clear case of dwindling income and rising costs; a scissor economy.<sup>64</sup> More seriously, however: the very basis for the income, the resource base in terms of human beings and nature to be exploited, was dwindling away through soil depletion and demographic decline and through increasingly non-pliable serfs, less healthy, less exploitable.<sup>65</sup> And at the same time the elite was expanding in numbers and its appetites grew, and/or what was needed for its way of life became more costly.<sup>66</sup>

Obviously this system could only last if either the elites became more limited in numbers and/or cut down on their costs, or the resource base was expanded. This could be done by tilling more soil and keeping it better,<sup>67</sup> possibly by treating the serfs better; or by expanding, getting fresh, external, exploitable resources in terms of nature and/or serfs. The first, internal, approach would have been compatible with the ethos of the medieval system as depicted here. The second approach was not: it belonged to another system, the system to come. What happened at the end of the Middle Ages was to prepare for that system - the preparations being part of the decline of the medieval social formation.

So, what was the cause of the decline? Answer: no single factor; the cause of the decline and fall of the medieval system was the medieval system itself. I would have been unsalvageable even if



the elites had shown more restraint once the resource base itself was destroyed and expansion remained extra-paradigmatic. With dwindling incomes because of destruction of the resource base increasing costs are not needed to bring the system down: constant costs will do. The system could only have been salvaged by improving the resource base or at least keeping it constant, and the system was incapable of doing so as the surplus extracted was "wasted" (by our standards), not ploughed back into the resource base. It was not used to buy cattle to provide for fertilizer, or to buy panem to provide for the serfs. The medieval form of circenses, the tournament, may have meant something to some; but as the Romans know: circenses without panem does not in the longer run keep discontent at bay. Consequently, the problem is actually not why the system declined, but what kept it going for such a long time!

And the answer to that must be found in two factors: that the elite was at least in the beginning very small in proportion to those who were tied to the soil, and there was an internal expansion taking place - clearing the forests (Latin Christianity, perhaps Christianity in general, conceived of forests as barbarian, as resting places of evil forces, as something to be conquered), cultivating the marshes, the swamps. But there was a limit even to this as more and more marginal lands came under cultivation, a form of cultivation that in and by itself impoverished the resource base.<sup>68</sup>

In short, the medieval system was unsalvageable. And at the same time, at its best, it had a much beauty<sup>69</sup> - not less than that of the Roman Empire, and less harsh on the masses - better on the serfs than that system was on the slaves.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, as mentioned above, in this period there was a Europe, with the exception of the Muslim Caliphate, tied together by a shared system and not split apart by the sharp boundaries drawn by the Roman Empire relative to the rest or by the nation-states to follow.<sup>71</sup>

3. The Post-Modern Period: Some Speculations  
On Social Formation, Decline And Fall

It is the basic tenet of this whole exercise that it makes sense to talk of a Western (or occidental) civilization with a centrifugal, expansionist and a centripetal, contracting side to it, oscillating like alternate current in time; showing the expansionist side up during Antiquity and the Modern Period (particularly in the form of the Roman Empire and of Western Imperialism), showing the contracting side during the Middle Ages and what we here, with a term both neutral and trite shall refer to as the Post-Modern period. Thus, we assume a contradictory continuity, only that the balance turns out differently in the different periods. Moreover, we assume that these contradictions are reflected in sharp social polarizations, with the dominant groups and their imitators adopting the dominant side of the cosmology of a given era - by definition - and with the other side being adopted by outgroups, the low-ranking and the marginalized - partly adopting it because they are marginal, partly becoming marginal by adopting it. Moreover, it is our contention that either side of Western civilization is an exaggeration, unreasonable already on the paper (if it were ever written out, but it tends to remain in the collective unconscious); unviable in practice for any really extended period of time. Sooner or later decline will set in with a frenetic search for intra-paradigmatic solutions; sooner or later this will lead to the fall and the ushering in of the new era, spearheaded by the outcasts of the preceding one because they are the carriers of the alternative cosmology, knowingly or unknowingly.

This theory is not pendular; in anything it is spiraling. Just as the Modern Period was no exact repetition of Antiquity, the Post-modern period will be no repetition of the Middle Ages. Similarities, meaning identities at an abstract level there will be, not empirical identities. But these similarities will not only be in the structure: according to this type of theoretical perspective they will also be in the process. It is like la torre pendente in Pisa: there is a spiraling staircase leading upwards; the visitor goes through the same experience (the same view, for instance) again and again, but from a higher level - "higher" here only meaning one thing: that the earlier experience is somehow

incorporated, "we have been through this before". It can be likened to individual consciousness of one's own past: many people seem to relive corresponding seasons in earlier years, and thus have a multiple consciousness. A summer brings to life memories and sentiments from earlier summers, and so on.

So, the thesis is that the West is heading not for the New Middle Ages, but for a Post-modern period, with some important characteristics in common with the Middle Ages. This thesis should be contemplated unemotionally without immediately lapsing into visions of the most negative aspects of the Middle Ages: the squalor, the pestilence and disease in general, the ignorance and superstition, the dirt and the foul smells --. To think in such terms is to commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, to confuse similarities with identities. Moreover, it is also self-defeating: a much more promising attitude within this approach would be to explore the possibilities within the limits set for the Post-modern period.

What, then, will be some of the characteristics of the new social order? Lest any reader believes the authors believe they are reading the future in a crystal ball, or have concrete pre-knowledge, let it be said once and for all that this is all highly conjectural. For one thing: the whole theory is empirically based on only three phases, on two turns and three strokes of a spiraling pendulum. In a sense this is enough if we know we are dealing with a pendulum - but we certainly do not know that, we merely use it as heuristic. So, using that heuristic, what do we "see"?

We see today a system in a deep dilemma. On the one hand it knows that the expansionist phase with Western imperialism has come to an end. An ever expanding materially non-productive, elite with ever expanding appetites seems to be predicated on international assumptions no longer obtainable. External reservoirs of nature, capital, labor and so on will be less, not more available. Contraction; falling back on one's own resources, seems inevitable - as is today already discussed seriously for the case of energy. Some kind of Western localism is called for -

excursions beyond, hauling resources or cheap labor one way or the other (eg by bringing them to the processing in the West, or bringing the processing to the places where nature and labor are cheap and abundant) seems to be out. To the contrary: there may be expansionist forces outside the traditional West trying to reverse the game, exploiting the West as the West once exploited them. After all, the Muslims conquered and kept for a long time a good portion of the Western Roman empire; and eventually (1453) conquered the Eastern empire. Just as it would not be ruled out that one of the last efforts of Western imperialism would be a latter-day crusade to liberate Arab and Iranian oilwells from the Muslims (like Jerusalem in the late medieval crusades) one should not rule out a Muslim counter-attack. After all, they are also occidental and exposed to the same socio-logic and may enter an expansionist phase at the same time as Western civilization in the more narrow sense enters contraction (the counter-cyclical hypothesis).

The deep dilemma referred to above can now be formulated: is it possible for the West to fall back on its own resources, Western localism in other words, yet develop a viable way of life? Obviously only if some other factors also change. If we assume that both size and appetites of a materially non-productive elite remain constant there are, roughly speaking two scenarios.

First, one might try to bring more pressure on the internal proletariat, and on nature. This would be some kind of medieval scenario, since the medieval system seems to have been based on precisely such factors - according to the presentation above. If we rule out the possibility of one part of the West colonizing another (at least for the time being there is a balance in the North America - Western Europe - Eastern Europe triangle that would seem to rule this out on a grand scale) the result would have to be a control of the present proletariat, the workers and what remains of farmers to deliver the goods, and of the clerks of various kinds to deliver the services. Nature would have to be squeezed even further as a resource base probably including extensive use of nuclear power. The system would hinge on its ability to control the protests from nature and from the internal proletariat, partly by not exploiting them

into exhaustion, partly by restoring them through new techniques of regeneration of nature and human alike - eg through new forms of control, like ecosystem and biochemical-genetic engineering.

Second, there is the approach through new levels of productivity so far unheard of, through automation/robotization. This might grow out of dissatisfaction with the scenario sketched: if the elites are to be maintained in both domain and scope, then there has to be super-exploitation of the internal proletariat and nature when external proletariat and nature are no longer available because of increasing self-reliance of the external provinces - to talk in the language of the Roman empire. We shall not repeat here the reasons why this is probably also an option that will very quickly turn out to be non-viable, not because it is hard on nature or others, but simply because it is hard on those who think they will benefit from it. It is a form of exploitation of self by curtailing the role of the human being to some kind of homo ludens existence, a perennial pangloss et circenses life, with automated (aerated) bread and programmed circus.

Hence, these scenarios for the Post-modern period can hardly be more than transitional phases. They are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of historical transformation within Western civilization. When there is a real crisis that shows the non-viability of the entire paradigm, so the theory goes, the changes will not be at the level of one factor only, or a couple -- those will be changes brought in towards the end of the phase in decline and fall with a view to salvaging some essential characteristics. The hypothesis is that the cosmology itself, not only some factors, will be turned upside down. The assumption is that the Western system is today in the type of deep crisis that calls for a total transformation, not only for a change. And since we have spelt out the cosmology of the medieval system above the more precise hypothesis would be that the West will in the coming generations, after all kinds of efforts to save the unsalvageable, try to construct a new system compatible with that kind of cosmology.

In saying so we are not insisting on exact replication of all elements in a medieval system, contracting mode, cosmology. But before opening for such variations let us see where the logic of the theory would lead us - building on what has been said about medieval cosmology.

First and basic: the West would start seeing itself as one point in social space, one among many, not as the center to be imitated or be converted by; by the word, or by the sword, or through unequal exchange. For the West not to see itself as the center is difficult today because the present West is imitated: Western space cosmology is simply a good map to the real world. Sometimes it even happens through self-colonization without the West having to do anything. But precisely as a consequence of this Westernization, non-West becomes powerful enough to compete with West, thus undermining the basis for the West as a center able to dominate others by the sword, through unequal exchange - and ultimately not even able to do so by the word. In the dialectics of history, as non-West transforms itself into West, West will have to transform itself into non-West and watch, probably with deep regrets, how the former non-West continues imitating the former West. In this process the former non-West may take on western characteristics even to the extent of seeing themselves as the new centers, trying to force the former West into periphery status. But to see oneself as periphery is not a negation of seeing oneself as center; it is only the other side of the same coin and the hypothesis here is that West will adopt a space cosmology seeing itself as neither, but simply as itself, as a center of concern, its own concern. This is the meaning of contraction: it is not to be the object of somebody else's expansion - the periphery of a center elsewhere.

Second: a more relaxed time cosmology less fraught with visions of imminent crisis. The ideas of awakening, progress and crisis are intimately related. Progress, for instance, has to be started by something, the awakening, enlightenment and its continuation forever is unsatisfactory to human thought (or so I assume) - it has to end with crisis, catharsis, or both. A flatter time cosmology could have its small ups and downs, not the enormities known from Western history. If there is no distinct idea of progress dramatic conceptions of beginnings and ends are not called for either - as maps to the world, as self-fulfilling hypotheses.

Third: a more holistic and dialectic epistemology. More concern with totalities and with their contradictions and change, less with minor relations that taken out of context and used instrumentally may cause major disturbances.

Fourth: new man-man relations. No doubt rhetoric would be egalitarian, and equally obviously: reality may again be vertical, but possibly in a more collectivistic setting. One way of squaring this apparent circle would be to give special status to he or she who is most egalitarian, most solidary, capable of displaying most spirit of sacrifice, of working hardest for the common weal. Communes, hippies' or people's or others', are the most obvious examples of how what has been said so far can be implemented in a structure with some viability and they also provide us with examples of the reproduction of verticality through the mechanisms mentioned. They tend to be collectivist, uniformist -- and as the members are individualists with strong egalitarian leaning, coming out both of the present social formation and of its internal protest movements, the result is easily authoritarianism, even totalitarianism. Only if the members are imbued with a vertical and collectivist cosmology embedded in some new type of ideological synthesis will this structure and process become natural/normal: no external control will be needed, the control is already there, internally. Thus verticality would be a reflection of the Middle Ages. But it could also be a transition form towards a much more horizontal formation which would then fit into a more complete negation of expansionist cosmology than mustered by the Middle Ages.

Fifth: man-nature relations will probably be much more symbiotic, less parasitic -- although they were not in the mediaval system. Hence, let us try to modify this statement. The West is not going to forget or forego all of its science and technology, just like the mediaval system did not forget Roman law and some of the institutions (of science and technology there was not much). Hence what was hinted at about might be likely: eco-system engineering, new ways of getting much more out of less nature without having to come mentally, spiritually closer to nature. The designer of new eco-cycles that are fed by renewable solar energy and

waste and make ample use of photosynthesis in order to take out a maximum of products for consumption based on a minimum of "agri-inputs" (such as soil, seeds and water) has a relation closer to that of a wasteful agro-technician to nature than the relation entertained by "primitive" man - or at least so it is assumed here. However, once more it is quite possible that this effort to get equally much or more out of less nature will be only a transition phase - as indicated above - and that after that will come a more true negation of expansionist cosmology, softer on nature because one is content with less, and with more harmony.

Sixth: what about Man-God relations? The Middle Ages were God-oriented; to the medieval system transcendental reality was real. The contention would be that the same would apply to the Post-modern period: there will be a revival in religious interest, accompanying the final demise of institutionalized secularized religion. Some of this may in a transition also be accompanied by scientific and technological breakthroughs of a kind similar to the engineering mentioned above: bring about "death" artificially, organizing excursions into the beyond and thereafter, ultimately hauling the person back through a physiological revival. Increased control of unused somatic and mental resources may open for new dimensions of religious experience.

The nature of religious content might vary; it could well be some revised form of Christianity, reflecting the changes in world structure and Western cosmology. Thus, the Western universal God is probably out. That opens for at least two very different images of God in the religious thought of the Western Post-modern period: a non-centralized ecumenical universalism or a more traditional God who contracts and becomes a tribal God for His Western people only. There are models and antecedents in human religious experience: Buddhism for the first case, Judaism for the latter. Maybe it will depend very much on how the West is going to interpret the experience of being driven back - and even so quickly! Only one generation ago, maybe two, the average Western school child could smugly contemplate a map hanging in his school with colors for the various parts of the Western empire - red for the British, indigo for the French, green for the Belgian, brownish for the Dutch, yellow for the Italians, and their: the old white



man with a beard, all presided over by the Western God. In short, will the West see the roll-back as an invitation to join the human race on equal terms, or as some kind of diaspora, of being driven back from what is rightly theirs? Will the religious expression be universalist but symmetric, or highly asymmetric but particularist - for us in the West only -- given that the universalist asymmetric combination is out (and the particularist asymmetric makes no sense)?

Again, one might perhaps hypothesize the tribal God as a transition phase for a sulking expansionist civilization, and ecumenical universalism as the more mature answer as a negation of the Western expansionist God. Obviously, this depends on similar transitions in the man-man and man-nature constellations: they will all three tend to be tuned to each other, either the medieval hierarchy with nature at the bottom, God on the top and man in-between, or a pantheistic, all-encompassing nature-God-man harmony, with none above the others.

Given all of this the shape and contours of future Western society can be drawn - as a prediction. It would be localized and decentralized relative to the present pattern; cities would decrease in size, trade would decrease in volume, barter would be on the increase and money on the decrease, local self-reliance would be on the increase. In other words, the general process accompanying the decline of the Roman empire and the emergence of the medieval system would be repeated. It is very hard to see that it could be otherwise: external exploitation being but the maintenance of the citadels of centralism, the capitals of economic and political power cannot be maintained. More importantly, however; from the point of view of a contracting cosmology the megalopolis and the metropolis would look absurd: as absurd as a mini-capital (Bonn?) or a high level of local self-reliance in lieu of trade look to many today.

Within this setting there would be much less emphasis on any type of external accumulation that can be identified with "progress". Rather, we would assume a transition from what Sorokin terms sensate to ideational/idealistic modes of existence. At least initially there would be a high level of puritanism, even asceticism - no doubt partly brought

about as a deed of necessity because of the depletion and non-availability of natural resources. Some natural catastrophes brought about by human interference in delicate balances, some of them relating to oil, some to nuclear energy, would precipitate this type of approach.

There will be much stronger anti-scientific trends than what is witnessed so far - because the singlamindedness of Modern period Western science will hit the whole population much harder. Other forms of understanding will be imported and invented - a trend that already started at the end of the 1960s. Like all such trends it is not linear, there will continue to be ups and downs, but the overall tendency will be clear: towards a change of basic epistemology.

Now, pressed into smaller units like this, reliving manorial and monastic experiences of 1500 years ago, what will be the structure of the social order? It could well be a repetition of the manorial system growing into a pyramidal feudalism which would then be referred to as "federalism", or "the new federalism". It could also be a more horizontal commune. In fact, it might even be expected that the contradiction between these two forms (the "alpha" and "beta" structures) would be among the things that would give life and dynamism to the Post-modern social formation.

And that contradiction is already expressed in the beginning of this section on cosmology theory applied to the Post-modern society. What we have described as the cosmology of the medieval system is not a complete negation of expansionist cosmology. Expansionism is in need of an element of verticality, "contractionism" is not. The medieval system was a contraction peaking upwards, from nature to God, via the serf and seigneurie. Maybe this was the easy way of doing it, not only because it preserved verticality, but also because it preserved resource by squeezing the bottom level so hard? Would the complete negation with horizontality, even with moderation, with a restraint down to what is today called "minimum level basic needs" but not below, simply be too costly, given a reduced resource base? Does that mean that it could only be practised after a dramatic demographic decline, brought about not necessarily by a major war or catastrophe, man-made or not, but by self-imposed

declining fertility - already to some extent discernible today? We do not know, but sooner or later these problems will be on the agenda.

Let us now turn to another aspect: who will be the carriers of the Post-modern period? The workers of Marx? - the peasants of Mao? - the students of Marcuse? -- to mention the 3 Ms dominating much of radical social thought of the 1960s? According to this perspective only those of them who have sufficiently internalized a centripetal cosmology to want a fundamentally different social order. They are likely to be the marginal rather than the low status people; the latter are more likely to try to climb in the existing social order, either through individual mobility or, if that does not work, through collective uprising, revolt making for more room at the top by decimating the elites, possibly also by widening clogged mobility channels; and creating new elite positions.

Hence, if one assumes that the dominant cosmology in the present system is mainly carried by middle-aged males with university education, living in cities in central parts of their countries, with high income and social status in general, working in what is known by the system as secondary and tertiary sectors; then one hypothesis would be that it is in the partial or complete negation of this status-set that the most likely carriers of a new social formation would be found. It should be added, though: in cooperation with outsiders to the system. The medieval system had as its carriers monks and coloni and other refugees from the Roman system (often from Rome itself), yearning for security in the small rather than insecurity in the big, even grandiose - but they had to amalgamate wit, Germanic and other barbarian elements harboring similar conceptions of the normal social order. The modern system had as its carriers the burghers (in the North) and the left-overs of the Roman construction - but they were no doubt also inspired by imperial constructions in their vicinity, Muslim and Byzantine, and the traders within and between them. In addition, Renaissance people were inspired by looking down la torre pendente of history, seeing themselves in that mirror of history through the clarifying optique of similar phases; the Greek city-state, the Roman empire which then stood out as natural, normal because (by definition) the dominant cosmology was the same. Correspondingly those conscious of

embarking on something very new after the collapse of the Roman empire in the West no doubt sought and got some of their inspiration from a pre-Roman localism, less bent on conquest, more on self-sufficient sustenance - the oikos rather than the polis or empire. That those who started a new system after the collapse of the medieval one did so we know almost too well, the very term "renaissance" gives testimony to that. In both cases there were not only carriers within the declining system feeling that time was ripe; there were also concrete images of earlier periods in the same phase.

So, one very reasonable prediction is that there will be an upsurge in studies of the early middle ages, and of studies of the "the middle ages were not that bad" type. This will be popular not only among those hypothesized above as the carriers: the women, the young and the aged, people with little education, people living in the countryside, in the periphery, with low income and status, working in agriculture. It should be remembered that for them, in Europe and particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe the Middle Ages and the medieval system is not that far away: to see something like that as natural/normal is merely to extrapolate from if not own experience at least that of the parents and the grandparents. It may also be argued that the ~~essence~~ essence of the feudal system - security against services - has survived very well up till today (and beyond) in one very important institution: the family, with the woman as the serf and the man as the provider of security, the "security-owner" (meaning bread-winner). The liberation of women, like the liberation of the serfs exposes her to the contradiction of equality within an expansionist vertical system. The woman who accepts this will not as such be the carrier of something new, nor will the woman who accepts the feudal order. But the woman liberated from either will. The new ethos inspired by such studies will make its dent well into the ranks of the traditional carriers of centrifugal, expansionist cosmology too. In the general theory, based on the interpretation of the other two basic transformations, the carriers were not only the marginal, among them those with the opposite status-set of the power-holders, but also the disenchanted in the elite - those who knew/felt that the game was lost, that it had

all been tried, that there was no way out except by breaking the paradigm. What they are looking for is not more critique of the present system - they do not need that - they are looking for an alternative convincing enough. Almost paradoxically they will look for radically different solutions for they will be quick and experienced enough to sense the smell of decay in revisionism within a system that has lost their allegiance. It is in these groups the most spectacular "conversions" will take place - but, of course, particularly among the women, the young men and the older (retired, or just tired) men. We shall not go into any detail with this process here, suffice it only to say that it seems already to be well on the way.

Finally, to complete the picture: what could bring about the decline and fall of the Post-modern period? If it is to be a return of the cosmology of the medieval system the answer is already given: sooner or later the system will crumble for its lack of external resources and exhaustion of internal resources, natural and human -- because it would be unable to plough sufficient surplus back to maintain these resources through for instance, ecological and welfare state practices. The surplus would be insufficient, and/or it would be "wasted": an ideologically oriented culture would demand that surplus is spent in other directions. Excessive social embroidery and emotionalism would also absorb human and social energies that could be used to spend surplus more "wisely" from the point of view of maintaining the system materially, somatically.

But then, lurking in the crevices of the system, in the corridors of history, will be "bureaucrats, capitalists and scientists", hidden in deserted, ugly looking old cities left to decline, fall and rot. They would be the social outcasts with both expansive and exploitative modes of thinking, talking and acting. They might be spinning, again, webs of unequal exchange relations with the rest of the world; failing that they might reach for the extra-terrestrial, the inter-planetary system and beyond. Obviously, they would be the carriers of the Post-post-modern era -- which would bring us back again to middle-aged males with university education engaged in Western type science - superficial, yet complicated, naive yet highly efficient. And they would look down the spiral of history

and identify with the renaissance, and reread occult books from the dust-covered libraries of Western science in what so modestly styled itself the "Modern Period". And a population fatigued by introspection and other forms of contraction will be grateful to them for their message of other celestial bodies waiting for the mission civilisatrice. And so on. And so forth —

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, some brief remarks about two important objections to this type of analysis - one that it is too deterministic, the other that it opens for wishful thinking. The second objection is relatively easily dispensed with.

Clearly, purely ideological thinking will tend to paint the present all dark and the future all white - as a negation of the present - either for the selected few (Christian eschatology) or for the downtrodden (marxist eschatology), or for the two combined. There is no effort here to paint the future all white. It may be objected that what is said about the present overemphasizes what goes wrong (the exploitation, of various kinds) and underemphasizes what goes well (the very high number of people, at least in absolute numbers, who have a very broad range of needs satisfied).

But the Post-modern period is not seen as a pure utopia. Quite to the contrary: the view is that in the Western cosmology, both for the expansion and the contraction modes, there is something unbalanced, non-integrated, always bringing home occidentalis into trouble. He will either expand too much, or contract too much; he will exaggerate in either case. In the contraction mode we have argued that if the social formation is vertical it will be very hard on those at the bottom and on nature; if it should be more horizontal it might be so hard on nature that demographic contraction is needed. Even so it may be hard on the souls of people, casting them in relations to the transcendental so tortuous, so filled with spiritual pain, that the result is a new form of misery. If that is what is ahead of us they might turn back and agree with the conservative Western leaders of the 1960s: you never had it so good - freed from major material and non-material pain.

The first objection is more important, but it is felt that it can be countered. There is determinism in the system according to

this way of thinking as long as the cosmology remains a cosmology,  
embedded in the collective unconscious. As long as this is the case  
there is not only my unawareness of how I am programmed by my  
civilization and your unawareness; but there is our mutual reinforcement  
of our individual programs by seeing others behaving, acting,  
talking fairly much in the same way so as to constitute what is normal  
and natural. As long as we are collectively unconscious of such  
programs we are doomed to follow them. A handful of protesters, of  
deviants, who have opened the collective black box, seen the program,  
turned it off and even switched on another one for themselves can be  
handled as exactly that: deviants, and be properly marginalized. Just  
as individual psycho-analysis calls for a very complete awareness of  
how particularly early childhood experiences have formed the unconscious  
layers of the personality (the deep program of the person), what is  
called for here is some kind of collective socio-analysis, exploring  
together the nature of the deep code of that civilization. The problem  
is that this will probably only happen once the system is thrown into  
the convulsions of relatively deep crisis, and a characteristic of the  
crisis is that the range of options decreases. In other words, the  
"agonizing reappraisal" will come when it is too late - who would care  
about a hidden program when things are operating smoothly?

But even if this collective socio-analysis should take place  
at a deep level, it is unlikely that the conclusions would be unanimous  
or unambiguous. Exploiters, exploited and marginalized would not view  
the system the same way. The clearest view of the system might be  
from the outside - it might partly coincide with any one of the three  
possibilities just mentioned internally to the system. But when the  
system is in crisis the views of outsiders are likely to be critical  
if they are to be of any explanatory value - and unlikely to be accepted  
in a good stride.

And yet, in spite of all these objections, this is probably none-  
theless a twisting path to be pursued. A person in deep trouble might



be helped through a deeper insight, particularly if it is gained through a high level of conscientization and personal mobilization. A society in deep trouble might do likewise. Both might come to the conclusion that they were on a wrong road, and retrench, reprogram rather than undergo some minor revisions. Thus, consciousness would not help them in modifying an existing program in any minor way; the crisis possibly leading to consciousness-formation would make it too late. But it could mean more awareness in the formation of the next program, more insight into the possible options.

Thus, we do not think, prospectively, that the West any longer has a choice between expansion and contraction: it is so overextended that the latter is written on the wall. But it does have a choice between a self-centered, even autarchic version, and a self-reliant version that would enter into exchange on equal terms with other parts of the world; and it has a choice between a more vertical version, more similar to the feudal system, and a more horizontal version, yet to be spelled out. In short: there are options for the future, within some very broad constraints about which little can be done any longer. It is neither salvageable nor ought it to be salvaged because it was and still is too harmful, too exploitative - both internally in the "developed" countries and externally, in the "developing" countries. It is exploitative in all ways -- of nature, of capital resources, of the entire-world proletariat, and ultimately also of those who are said to be benefitting from the system.

#### NOTES

- \* This paper is a very first draft of chapter 4 of a forthcoming book entitled Macro-history and Western Civilization, prepared by the Chair in conflict and peace research, University of Oslo. Chapter 1 "On the last 2,500 Years in Western History, and Some Remarks on the Coming 500" appears as chapter XII in volume XIII of The New Cambridge Modern History, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 318-361. In its present version it is presented as a background paper to the Sixteenth world conference of the Society for International Development, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 13-15 August 1979, Second Plenary Session; Prospects and Choices for Domestic Policies in Developed Countries. The first section of the paper was given as a lecture to the course on the Rise of Capitalism, School of Comparative Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1 August 1979. I am indebted to the Dean of the School, Dr. Kamal Salih, for giving me that opportunity. The paper as a whole is also an input to the Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development Project of the United Nations University, and an outcome of courses on Macro-history and Western Civilization given 1977/78 and 1978/79 at the Institut Universitaire d'Etudes du Developpement, Geneva.