

## **CIVILIZATIONAL ANALYSIS: A PARADIGM IN THE MAKING**

**Johann P. Arnason**

*La Trobe University, Australia*

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### **Summary**

This chapter discusses the development of a theoretical framework for the comparative analysis of civilizations. A brief overview of pioneering contributions by classical sociologists is followed by more detailed comments on the late twentieth-century revival of civilizational theory, especially in the work of S. N. Eisenstadt. The project that emerges from classical and contemporary sources is best understood as a bridge between sociological theory and comparative history, and many aspects are still open to debate - hence the reference to a paradigm in the making. Eisenstadt's approach, which has been central to all subsequent discussions, links a distinctive conceptual scheme - centered on world-views and their translation into institutional patterns - to the interpretation of a particular historical period (the "Axial Age", usually identified with the middle centuries of the last millennium BCE), as well as to a less developed conception of modernity as a new civilization. All these thematic foci call for closer examination. Discussions since the late 1970s have highlighted the originality and diversity of early civilizations, and thus opened up new perspectives on the background and context of transformations during the Axial Age. The traditional civilizations that grew out of these transformations can be analyzed as constellations of cultural, political and economic patterns; so far, the interconnections of the cultural and economic spheres have proved relatively easy to trace, whereas the civilizational aspects and dynamics of the economic sphere are more elusive. This tripartite model can also be used to clarify the civilizational status of modernity, but more detailed comparative studies of paths and patterns are needed to put this question into proper focus. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of objections to the civilizational approach; they are best met by developing a more precise and historically sensitive conceptual framework.

## 1. Introduction

The term “civilizational analysis”, used by Said Amir Arjomand and Edward Tiryakian for a representative collection of papers and now widely accepted by scholars in the field, is designed to stress the combination of theoretical and historical approaches to the comparative study of civilizations. More specifically, the focus is on the constitutive patterns and long-term dynamics of civilizations - understood as macro-cultural, macro-social and macro-historical units – as well as on the question of their more or less active involvement in modern transformations. For these purposes, the notion of civilization must be defined in a way that lends itself to plural use; but when it comes to details, this concept turns out to be as contested as others of similar importance to the human sciences. A first signpost may, however, be suggested with reference to the historical background. All attempts to define, demarcate and classify civilizations in the plural take off from the major socio-cultural complexes of the Eurasian macro-region: the Western European, Byzantine, Islamic, Indian and East Asian worlds are the prime cases in point, even if civilizational analysts disagree on further distinctions and more precise boundaries in time and space. To note the most familiar examples, the chronological and geographical boundaries of Western European - or Western Christian - civilization are still a matter of dispute; it is no less debatable whether we should speak of one Indian civilization or a set of interrelated ones; and the question of civilizational unity or division within the East Asian region has been answered in very different ways, especially with regard to the relationship between China and Japan. In brief, the issues arising in these contexts reflect the history of European encounters with other parts of the Old World.

Civilizational analysis, seen as a twentieth-century turn to systematic reflection on a long record of historical experiences, is by the same token critical of Eurocentric approaches to world history. If civilizations are set apart by distinctive world-views and institutional patterns, their ways of participating in and making sense of world history will also differ, and more comparative study of all these aspects is needed. A multi-civilizational conception of world history would be the most effective antidote to Eurocentrism, but its promise is also a reminder that the problem cannot be solved by quick fixes and prophetic gestures. The project of civilizational analysis, reactivated in the late twentieth century and increasingly recognized as a specific mode of social and historical inquiry, is best understood as a paradigm in the making; and although the main impulse came from sociologists critical of the restrictive assumptions that had blocked the development of their discipline, further progress is impossible without close and extensive cooperation, with historians, area specialists and scholars in other related fields. There is, in other words, an obvious need for a long-term interdisciplinary research program. The more visible cultural pluralism and multi-polar geopolitics of the post-Cold War era have no doubt helped to make out a good case for this project, but this historical constellation has also prompted ideological responses of a simplifying and alarmist kind, most evident in speculations about a “clash of civilizations” and a properly research-oriented model of civilizational analysis must take issue with these caricature versions. Samuel P. Huntington’s widely read book has been criticized for unsound empirical claims and overhasty prognoses, but for the present purposes, it is no less important to note that it does very little to clarify the conceptual foundations of

civilizational theory, and nothing to distinguish or contextualize the different scholarly traditions on which it claims to draw.

## 2. Classical Sources

Among such traditions, the contribution of classical sociology - elaborated in the first two decades of the twentieth century - stands out as particularly significant. If scholarship since the 1970s has - as suggested above - reactivated an older trend, that applies primarily to this classical legacy. It had taken shape in two wholly separate contexts, French and German. On the French side, the Durkheimian school - more specifically Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss - developed an explicit concept of civilizations in the plural, with a correspondingly clear-cut analytical focus. On the German side, Max Weber's comparative analyses of major civilizational formations were less attentive to conceptual issues, but their substantive content is still significant enough to ensure their presence in contemporary debates. The absence of contact between these two innovative developments fits into a more general pattern (the mutual isolation of Durkheim and Weber is still a puzzle to historians of ideas), and it took much longer for the affinities to be noticed than on the level of more familiar sociological themes. Benjamin Nelson seems to have been the first to make the connection and show that the formations studied by Weber were civilizations in the Durkheimian sense.

In a short text first published in 1913, Durkheim and Mauss proposed to distinguish civilizations from societies: the former were large-scale and long-term formations that could encompass multiple societies, both contemporary and successive. This move coincided with Durkheim's systematic turn towards the sociology of religion, and the civilizational perspective reappears at the end of his most representative work on that subject. After a very detailed analysis of primitive religion, based on evidence from a whole group of societies, Durkheim draws theoretical conclusions and refers - among other things - to a civilization as characterized by a system of basic concepts. In this way, a macro-cultural dimension is added to the macro-social one underlined in the earlier texts: patterns of meaning, articulated through or at least translatable into basic concepts, complement the large-scale and long-term social-historical frameworks, but more specific interrelations between the two levels are left unexamined. Mauss returned to the problematic of civilizations in the 1920s and explored it in several directions, but did not tackle it in a systematic fashion. As the influence of the Durkheimian school declined, its interest in civilizations was more thoroughly forgotten than the ideas that had contributed to the formation of sociology as a discipline. But in light of the rediscovery of civilizations, this part of the French sociological tradition (including some attempts to apply the ideas adumbrated by Durkheim and Mauss to comparative studies) appears as a pioneering approach to problems that are still under debate. One of its distinctive features is a very broad definition of the civilizational perspective: it encompasses prehistorical phases and stateless societies as well as the state- and city-centered literate cultures more commonly associated with the concept of civilization. There is no doubt that the latter usage, and the narrower definition more or less explicitly linked to it, has had the upper hand in civilizational studies, but it cannot be said that the issue has been settled.

By contrast, Max Weber's comparative studies focused on major Eurasian civilizations and their religious traditions. He did not use the concept of civilizations in the plural; his favorite term for the units of comparison was *Kulturwelten*, "cultural worlds", but following Benjamin Nelson, this expression can to all intents and purposes be equated with the Durkheimian notion of civilizations. The term *Kulturwelt* recalls Weber's early references to culture as a way of lending meaning and significance to the world (this is by implication a variable pattern), but there was no systematic clarification of that background. The comparative program did not grow directly out of Weber's attempts to define the general orientations of social and cultural inquiry. Rather, the interest in other cultural worlds and their different historical trajectories was kindled by a very specific issue in comparative history. Weber's concern with the historical forces and cultural sources that had enabled the Western breakthrough to modern capitalism led him to explore contrasts and parallels with the non-Western civilizations that had not experienced a similar transformation from within (not that capitalism as such was absent, but its distinctively modern and unprecedentedly dynamic version had not developed). The idea that Weber used for comparative analysis to isolate one decisive factor, present in the West but absent elsewhere (supposedly the radical branch of the Protestant Reformation), has been laid to rest by more adequate interpretations of his work. The comparative turn broadened his perspectives on both sides. It became clear that modern Western capitalism was closely linked to a whole set of other transformative processes, preceding as well as contemporaneous, which Weber subsumed under the concept of rationalization. Interpreters of his work disagree on the contents and connotations of this term, and will probably continue to do so. It refers most obviously to the progress of formal organization and methodical procedures in all fields of social life; in the modern context, it relates most directly to the interconnected apparatuses (Weber uses metaphors like "machine" and "mechanical cosmos") of capitalism, bureaucracy and organized science; but it should also be noted that according to Weber, the most momentous results of rationalization were inseparable from the non-rational - or trans-rational - belief that all things can be mastered through calculation. As for non-Western civilizations, Weber's analyses of China and India covered a broad spectrum of cultural, political and economic trends, and allowed for distinctive rationalizing processes, even if they did not take the same overall direction as in the West. A planned work on Islamic civilization was never written; a detailed study of Ancient Judaism explored one major source of Western traditions, but Weber did not engage with the Greek source in the same way.

The Weberian project, as transmitted to posterity, is unfinished and unequally developed, but neither obsolete in all respects nor imprisoned within an ideological universe of discourse. It reflects the severe early twentieth-century limitations of European knowledge and understanding of non-European civilizations, but it certainly does not - as its less informed critics have claimed - deny the rationality, cultural originality or historicity of the other worlds in question. With regard to the debate on Eurocentrism and the various (sometimes counter-productive) ways of criticizing it, Weber's position is ambiguous, and as such conducive to further debate. There is no denying the presence and influence of a strong Eurocentric strain in his thought, but it is no less true that some of his insights can now be seen as incipient correctives to the Eurocentric bias. In short, Weber's work represents an earlier phase of civilizational

analysis, but remains relevant to the questions and perspectives of the new phase that began in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

### **3. Eisenstadt and the Axial Age**

This new phase is linked to a more general revival of interest in unsettled questions and unexhausted themes of classical sociology. In that connection, special mention has already been made of Benjamin Nelson, who was the first to identify civilizational approaches as a specific part of the classical legacy. Less important, but far from negligible inputs came from the work of speculative historians who had developed the idea of civilizational pluralism along their own lines. Oswald Spengler's widely read *Decline of the West* had done most to establish this offshoot of civilizational analysis, but Arnold Toynbee's *Study of History* gave a new twist to it and brought it into closer contact with comparative history. Last but not least, the new civilizational turn responded to problems of sociological theory as well as to difficulties encountered in new fields of empirical inquiry. The diversity of civilizations, manifested in their world-views and in corresponding ways of ordering social life, could be seen as the most massive evidence of the cultural creativity that found no place in functionalist conceptions of societies as self-reproducing systems. The divergent historical paths of major civilizations, as well as the visions of history encoded in their traditions, cast doubt on the unilinear models of evolutionary theories. Evolutionism could, moreover, be shown to derive some of its assumptions from specific intellectual traditions of European civilization. On a more empirical level, the varying and largely unexpected outcomes of modernizing processes raised questions about civilizational backgrounds: factors of this kind could help to explain the differences, conflicts and composite formations that shaped the course of global modernization. All these aspects of the civilizational turn are particularly visible in the work of S. N. Eisenstadt, and it has been at the center of debates relating to the field. Eisenstadt has, from early on, been involved in research and controversies on modernization; a growing awareness of accumulating problems in this area seems to have prompted him to theorize civilizations in a new key. But the first major move along that road may seem strangely out of step with the initial line of research: it consisted in an attempt to rethink an old but elusive theme from the history of ideas and religions, in a way that would make it more amenable to sociological analysis. This reworking of pre-sociological intellectual traditions was also a return to tradition in the more substantive sense that it led to new understanding of formative beginnings. In fact, the detour through a distant past turns out to be a road to new insights into modernity.

#### **3.1. Axial Transformations**

The past in question was a period of radical change to religious beliefs, modes of thought and human self-images. These cultural mutations were to some extent reflected in social transformations. The changes took place in several separate civilizational centers; ancient Greece, ancient Israel, India and China are the prime cases, but other less straightforward ones have been suggested. In chronological terms, they extend over a few centuries around the middle of the last millennium BCE. The idea that they represent a spiritual revolution of world-historical significance can be traced back to the eighteenth century. But the first systematic interpretation of the period was proposed by

the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in the aftermath of World War II, and he was the first to use the term “Axial Age”, which Eisenstadt adopted. However, in Eisenstadt’s work, the same term covers a different problematic: ideas first formulated in the context of a philosophy of history are translated into the language of historical sociology. The re-interpretation of the Axial Age and the multi-faceted discussion which it has sparked are perhaps the most striking proof that such translations are still possible and productive.

For Eisenstadt, the core aspect and common denominator of axial innovations is a new “cultural ontology”, a novel perspective on the world and on human ways of relating to it: a bifurcation of reality, a distinction between higher and lower orders of being that gives rise to new rules for human conduct and social life. The distinction can be articulated in very different ways, and it need not result in a stark dichotomy of worldly and otherworldly concerns. The higher levels of being may be envisioned in terms of a creator and legislator god, models of an encompassing cosmic order, or more elusive notions of an impersonal ultimate reality. Correspondingly, the ethical and social implications of axial world-views vary across a wide spectrum: the main emphasis may be on a quest for salvation through access to or conformity with higher levels of being, on the maintenance of a hierarchical order set in an ontological framework, or on fundamental principles of justice to be implemented in the social world. But from a more general point of view, and irrespective of such divergences, the axial turn results in a vastly enlarged scope for socio-cultural self-interpretation and self-questioning. With regard to the patterns of social power, the consequences are ambiguous. Axial world-views open up new possibilities for the justification and transfiguration of established power structures as well as for criticism, protest and transformation. In that sense, Eisenstadt refers to the Axial Age as the beginning of ideological politics. New dimensions of social conflicts go hand in hand with the formation of new social actors. Intellectual elites – such as the prophetic movement in ancient Israel, the philosophers and sophists in ancient Greece, the Chinese literati, and the Buddhist monastic community - become the protagonists of traditions based on axial foundations. These groups enter into more or less organized coalitions with political elites and rulers, often with momentous long-term historical effects.

In short, Eisenstadt’s interpretation of the Axial Age stresses the interconnections of cultural and social dynamics and allows for fundamental cross-cultural affinities as well as for the diversity of context-dependent paths and formations. It has sparked more lively debates than earlier writings on the subject; the discussion is far from finished, but a few dominant trends may be distinguished. Questions have been raised about the background to axial transformations: Eisenstadt’s account tends to portray pre-axial world-views as characterized by a basic continuity and homogeneity, excluding radical breaks between transcendent and mundane, cultural and natural, or divine and human orders. This undifferentiated picture does not do justice to the religious and intellectual creativity of early civilizations. They transformed the beliefs and modes of thought of Neolithic societies, and did so in different ways (for example, comparative studies of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations have highlighted major contrasts between their respective cultural universes). At the very least, then, more detailed analyses of the diverse pre-axial trajectories and legacies are needed. Another set of criticisms has focused on the general model of an axial breakthrough. It can be argued that although

the historical cluster of major transformations provides a very convenient framework for comparative studies (contingent historical parallels can serve to focus attention on significant points), closer examination of contrasts and parallels is required before proposing a comprehensive model.

Some participants in the discussion have suggested that a typological perspective would prove more fruitful than the historical one: the focus would then shift from a particular period to a pattern of transformation that may have taken place in an unusually striking fashion during the Axial Age, but should not be defined in chronological terms. On this view, the main innovations in question have to do with higher levels of reflexivity, and more specifically with enhanced awareness of human capacities to understand, order, and transform the world. It matters less whether these new perspectives are articulated through constructions of transcendent powers or principles, and the axial model of cultural change can encompass later transformations which depended much less on ideas of that kind. In particular, a broad definition of axial breakthroughs or mutations may be applicable to the innovations usually taken to mark the advent of modernity. Eisenstadt has to some extent gone along with the typological turn, most notably by including the rise of Islam among the key cases to be compared. But he continues to speak of axial civilizations, not merely of axial transformations; the former concept refers to large-scale and long-term historical formations, centered on cultural orientations that crystallized during the Axial Age as well as in the course of chronologically less circumscribed sequels to it. The most prominent axial civilizational complexes - the Western Christian or Western European, Byzantine, Islamic, Indian and Chinese ones – coincide with regional traditions singled out by global historians in search of a multi-polar framework for their discipline. They also exemplify the macro-cultural and macro-social structures envisaged by Durkheim and Mauss (as noted above). As Eisenstadt sees it, axial civilizations develop their specific institutional forms of integration, conflict and change; together with similarly distinctive patterns of rationalization (in a broadly Weberian sense), and ways of reconstructing traditions, such defining features maintain civilizational identity throughout successive phases.

### **3.2. A New Vision of Modernity**

This conception of axial civilizations is not obviously applicable to the cultural constitution of modern societies. It would seem more appropriate to begin with a comparative analysis of axial and modern innovations, before trying to construct a model that would cover both cases. That project links up with the second main theme mentioned above: the idea of modernity as a new civilization. Eisenstadt's reflections on this topic are less systematic than his work on axial civilizations, and they have been much less extensively discussed, but some significant implications should be noted. The civilizational perspective on modernity belongs in the context of debates that unfolded from the late 1970s onwards, in connection with a critical reconsideration of the problems first posed by modernization theory. The latter is best understood as a broad and diversified current, dominant in Western sociology from around 1950s to the mid-1960s but later subjected to criticism from many sides. Modernization theory was primarily interested in the processes that made societies more modern: industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization and (more controversially) secularization were the most salient trends of this kind. The search for a more general common denominator tended

to emphasize the progress of technically applicable knowledge. What it meant to be modern was a much less debated question; but it came to the fore at a later stage and became central to a broader shift of focus from modernization to modernity. Since the meaning of modernity could not be discussed without reference to the meaningful frameworks imposed and accepted by historical actors, this reorientation led to stronger interest in the cultural sources and premises of modern transformations. Eisenstadt's conception of modernity as a civilization is part and parcel of the cultural turn, and gives a distinctive twist to it. Three main points should be underlined.

First, the central component of the modern civilizational pattern is a new vision of human autonomy, more radical and more complex than any notions of that kind embedded in older cultural traditions. In other words, the cultural focus of the new civilization is on human capacities to accumulate power and wealth as well as to claim self-determination, to master nature and to transform society, and to achieve valid knowledge of the world as well as to attribute meaning to it. Second, the complexity of this network of meanings lays it open to conflicting interpretations. At their most ambitious and polarized, such alternatives develop into what Eisenstadt calls "antinomies of modernity." In the philosophical tradition, the concept of antinomy refers to the clash between incompatible but equally defensible assumptions and principles; Eisenstadt uses it in a looser sense that refers to mutually exclusive interpretations of shared cultural premises. That applies to conflicts between individualistic and collectivistic conceptions of autonomy (and ways of balancing liberty and equality), as well as to rival models of rationality: some of the latter have aspired to global reach and definitive validity, while others allow for a plurality of contextual and evolving patterns. These divergent elaborations of underlying cultural perspectives enter into the making of "alternative modernities", institutional models that compete for supremacy in the global arena; the international conflicts of the twentieth century were the most significant historical episodes of that kind. Finally, the idea of modernity as a new civilization also serves to clarify one of the most vexed questions of modernization theory: the relationship between modernity and tradition. From the very beginning, critics of modernization theory complained about its tendency to rely on a leveling and impoverished concept of tradition, reduced to little more than an inverted mirror-image of the innovative dynamics attributed to modernity. As noted above, the paradigm of civilizational analysis challenges such views on general grounds: civilizations understood as large-scale and long-term historical formations, crystallize around diverse cultural traditions, characterized by specific modes of change, internal debate, reconstruction and adaptation to changing constellations. The civilizational approach to modernity can then highlight the interaction of new orientations with older legacies. Modern civilizational dynamics prevailed most decisively in Western Europe and its overseas offshoots (the debate on comparable but more contained trends in other civilizational contexts is still open); the results affected other parts of the world in varying measure, and in societies belonging to the other major Eurasian civilizational complexes, the modernizing transformations induced or at least accelerated by Western influences were at the same time conditioned by socio-cultural backgrounds that left enduring marks on the resultant patterns of modernity. In other words, the technological, social and cultural dynamic of Western expansion undermined the core structures and collective identities of the non-Western civilizations exposed to it, but did not preclude continuing and mutually formative interaction between fragmented



traditions and changing clusters of transformative forces. To mention only the most obvious cases, the Islamic, Indian, Chinese and Japanese versions of this recurrent constellation differ in important ways. The civilizational approach thus links up with the debate on “multiple modernities” that has been unfolding since the mid-1990s.

The above survey of Eisenstadt’s work would be incomplete without a mention of his work on Japan - probably the most detailed and systematic case study of civilizational dynamics so far available. But its relationship to other parts of Eisenstadt’s project is paradoxical and raises questions about basic conceptual issues. For Eisenstadt, Japan is a singular case: a non-axial civilization not only surviving alongside the axial ones but capable of extensive borrowings from them and of adapting the inputs to its own cultural frameworks. Even more strikingly, this exceptional case became the most distinctive and durable example of non-Western forms of modernity developing in response to the challenge of Western expansion, and through adaptation of western models in ways comparable to earlier encounters with axial traditions. In his more programmatic writings, Eisenstadt has continued to stress the exemplary significance of Axial formations for the “civilizational dimension of sociological inquiry”; he has also emphasized the connection between axial and modern breakthroughs, both in the sense of affinities and contrasts to be explored and with reference to traditions linking the former to corresponding variants of the latter. If Japan falls outside this frame of reference and is nevertheless a privileged case in point, that suggests unresolved problems at the most basic conceptual level. As for the specific features that figure most prominently in Eisenstadt’s analysis of Japan, they have to do with the absence of the very ruptures and divisions supposedly typical of the common axial pattern, and thus – in other words - with the maintenance of basic continuities in the key dimensions of social life: between nature and culture, tradition and innovation, kinship and statehood, but also between the institutional forms of economic, political and religious life, integrated through cultural constructions of an embedding community. The primacy of continuity and integration is still evident in patterns of Japanese modernity, not least in its evolving and flexible combinations of economic and political power.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Johann P. Arnason**, born 1940 in Iceland, studied philosophy, history and sociology in Prague and Frankfurt. Taught sociology in Heidelberg and Bielefeld, 1976-1975, and at La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1975-2003. Professor of sociology, La Trobe University, 1994-2003. Visiting professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1990 and 1997, and at the University of Leipzig, 2004-2005. Research fellow of the Alexander v. Humboldt Foundation, 1970-1972, and of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, 1999-2000. Editor of the journal *Thesis Eleven*, 1987-2002. His research has focused on social theory and historical sociology, more recently with particular emphasis on the comparative analysis of civilizations. Major publications: *Praxis und Interpretation: Sozialphilosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988; *The Future that Failed: Origins and Destinies of the Soviet Model*, London: Routledge, 1993; *Social Theory and Japanese Experience: The Dual Civilization*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1997; *The Peripheral Centre: Essays on Japanese History and Civilization*, Melbourne: TransPacific Press, 2002; *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions*, Leiden: Brill, 2003; *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: Crystallizations, Divergences, Renaissances* (edited, with Björn Wittrock), Leiden: Brill, 2004; *Axial Civilizations and World History* (edited, with S.N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock), Leiden: Brill, 2005.