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What is This?

Axial civilizations, multiple modernities, and Islam

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Abstract
Departing from the modernization theory, S.N. Eisenstadt proposed the idea of 'post-traditional societies' in the early 1970s, and proceeded to formulate the concepts of 'axial civilizations' and 'multiple modernities' in the following decades. In the 1980s, Eisenstadt sketched a model of constant tension between an Islamic primordial utopia – the ideal of the Golden Age of pristine Islam– and the historical reality of patrimonial Sultanism, coexisting with an autonomous public sphere protected by Islamic law and dominated by the religious elite, the *ulema*. The main feature of this model was the oscillation between military regimes with limited pluralism and puritanical fundamentalism. Eisenstadt further emphasized the degree of autonomy of the religious elite as the carriers of Islam in relation to the ruler and political power as a determinant of the strength of their civilizational impact. Islam remained confined to the religious sphere in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, where the religious elite lacked autonomy, but had a much broader civilizational impact in the Middle East and North Africa, where the *ulema* developed greater autonomy. The article shows Eisenstadt's subsequent influence by discussion of the application by other sociologists of civilizational analysis to Islam in a comparative perspective, and of multiple modernities to contemporary Islam.

Understanding *diversity* is a far greater challenge for the social sciences than making generalizations. Montesquieu, Weber, and, in our generation, S.N. Eisenstadt have tried to come to terms with it. Eisenstadt's notions of 'axial civilizations' and 'multiple modernities' point to diversity in social dynamics and variety in patterns of social change. When axial civilizations modernize, both the reactive impulse to preserve their axial tradition and the innovative impulse to reform and reconstruct it are at work. To understand

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this process, we need to think not so much of instrumental and formal rationality, but rather of value-rationalization – value-rationalization being a process of harmonization of heterogeneous principles of order that is driven by the judgment of meaningful consistency.[1] In Max Weber's comparative sociology, the impact of the world religions was transmitted through the social strata or classes that constituted their respective social bearers or carriers (*Träger*). The notion of rationalization as a developmental pattern links the institution-building of the formative periods to the religious solutions to the problem of the meaning of human life. These define the ideal interests of the bearers of the world religions that must be brought into some meaningfully consistent reconciliation with material conditions and historical contingencies.

For some three decades, S.N. Eisenstadt led the comparative analysis of civilizations and patterns of modernization, notably in his edited volume, *Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (1986), and the two-volume collected essays, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (2003). His seminal concepts of Axial Age and multiple modernities are integrally connected and have their common roots in his dissatisfaction with the modernization theory he had helped develop in the 1960s. Modernization theory ignored the major issue of the 'continuity and reconstruction of tradition,' and Eisenstadt began with coining the term 'post-traditional societies' (Eisenstadt, 1972) and finally settled for 'multiple modernities'[2] (Eisenstadt, 2000). Tradition and modernity were combined in 'new foci of collective national identity' (Eisenstadt, 1972: 7). This combination could account for the diversity in the patterns of modernity, and Eisenstadt sought to cover their range of variety in the two-volume *Patterns of Modernity* he edited in 1987. Collective identities become central in the political and cultural programs emerging in the struggle for the appropriation of modernity on the global periphery, thus prompting the reconstruction of a diversity of traditions throughout the world – hence multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000). This reappraisal of tradition, furthermore, prompted Eisenstadt's turn to civilizational analysis.

Eisenstadt developed Karl Jaspers' idea of the Axial Age by attributing the breakthrough to dynamism in Axial Age civilizations to the 'chasm between the transcendental and the mundane' in the 1986 work, remaining faithful to Jaspers and to the temporal component of the idea of a breakthrough to transcendence in a specific age. The temporal idea was first shored up by the notion of 'secondary breakthroughs,' which Eisenstadt eventually abandoned, together with that of a specific age in human history, as he further elaborated a contrasting typological approach to 'axial civilizations.' The transition from the temporal to the typological approach was completed with the definition of the axial components of civilizations as 'the axial syndrome' (also 'axial constellation').

Eisenstadt also put increasing emphasis on the intertwinement of culture and power in the symbolism and institutional patterns in axial civilizations. The interpretation of central symbols and values by the orthodoxy could be contested. As Eisenstadt put it, 'potential dissent and heterodoxy constitute inherent and continuous components of every social order' (Arjomand, 2006a: 5). This opens the possibility of radical transformation by heterodoxies, which could thus play a crucial role in civilizational dynamics. This amplifies the sociological dimension of the Weberian paradigm by highlighting the transformative impact of heterodoxies within the world religions (Eisenstadt, 2003, 1: 17–19). Tension among contending interpretations and their respective bearers within

the same world religion and civilization is stressed by distinguishing orthodoxy and its official representatives from heterodoxies of unofficial challengers who offer contesting interpretations of the central values of the tradition and create movements of cultural and political protest. Here, the political impact of Shi`ism on political organization and the political ethic in Iran can be taken as a demonstration of the civilizational impact of heterodoxy (Arjomand, 1984). The same interplay of culture and power generate collective identities that were distinctive of each axial civilization.

Eisenstadt, furthermore, took 'reflexivity' to mean that the symbolic dimension of social activity serves not only orthodoxy as the mainstay of social order but also heterodox groupings by generating alternative interpretations and thus opportunities for dissent. In short, the symbolism of culture and power can be both 'order maintaining' and 'order transforming.' The political sphere is the arena of contestation between orthodoxy and heterodoxies where these countervailing potentials entwine.

Just as had been the case with Max Weber (Turner, 1974), Islam did not become Eisenstadt's specific focus until relatively late in his career (Eisenstadt, 1993, 1999 [1984], 2002). He had not linked his analysis of the continuity and reconstruction of tradition in the early 1970s with Robert Redfield's comparative social anthropology of civilizations at the University of Chicago (Arjomand, 2010a). Later, however, Eisenstadt drew on the ideal-type of Islamicate civilization as offered by one of the participants in Redfield's project, Marshall Hodgson, in *The Venture of Islam.* Hodgson's (1974, 2: 239–268) Islamic 'contractualism,' in contrast to Western 'corporatism,' couples the 'individualism' of Islamic law, regulating socio-economic and hypothetically also the political relations on the basis of contracts among individuals, and its 'moralism.' The latter characteristic impedes the formal rationalization of law which is necessary for modern socio-economic and political organization. According to Hodgson, therefore, Islamic law facilitated great social mobility but not institutional development. The Shari`a ignored public law and state action, and left too little room for initiative to the Caliph in theory. Consequently, social activism tended to take the form of revivalist movements outside the framework of the state and of governmental institutions.

In the Heidelberg Weber conference on Weber and Islam in 1984, Eisenstadt (1999) presented a sketch of the inner dynamics of Islamic civilization, which he was to elaborate further (Eisenstadt, 2002). Drawing on Ibn Khaldun's depiction of the cycle of the rise and fall of puritanical Muslim dynasties, which Ernest Gellner (1981) characterized as the Khaldunian pendulum's swing, and on Hodgson's idea of uninstitutionalized social activism, Eisenstadt offers a relatively simple model of constant tension between an Islamic primordial utopia– the ideal of the Golden Age of pristine Islam– and the historical reality of patrimonial Sultanism, coexisting with an autonomous public sphere protected by Islamic law and dominated by the religious elite, the *ulema*. The main feature of this model was the oscillation between military regimes with limited pluralism and intolerant, 'proto-fundamentalist' and 'Jacobin fundamentalist' ones. This model is appealing for its simplicity and for discarding the Euro-centric view of social evolution and dynamics. It leaves out, however, the heterodoxy whose importance Eisenstadt highlights in his general civilizational analysis—namely, the radical Shi`ite apocalyptic utopia of the millenarian revolutions from the Ismā`ili Fatimids in the tenth to the Bābis in the nineteenth century. In adopting the pendulum swing model into a Khaludnian

ideal-type of revolution, for which I claim applicability beyond the Muslim world, I shifted the focus to the generation of revolutionary movements on the periphery as opposed to the center, and to the effect of religion and ideology on group solidarity (`asabiyya*), Ibn Khaldun's key sociological concept (Arjomand, 2006b: 152; 2009: 10–112, 214).

Max Weber once remarked that 'in order to penetrate to the real causal interrelation-ships, we must construct unreal ones' (1949: 185–186). Weber's discussion of the impor-tance of counterfactuals for adequacy of explanations at the level of causality remains badly neglected in comparative sociology, however, and therefore it is worth considering a counterfactual hypothesis on the possibility for unhinging the pendulum that produces the oscillation in Eisenstadt's model. For Gellner (1981), the pendulum is unhinged in the Ottoman empire with the recruitment of an army of royal slaves, and elsewhere in the Muslim world with the rise of the modern bureaucratic states and their standing armies. Hodgson (1974) entertained a different counterfactual hypothesis. Cognizant of the development of guilds and the urban, mercantile character of medieval Islamicate civili-zation, he considered the long reign of the late `Abbasid Caliph, al-Nāsir [li-Din Allāh] (1180–1225) almost a turning point when the Islamicate civilization was on the verge of a breakthrough to modernity, albeit of its own kind. In the same period, Benjamin Nelson (1980) places the (divergent) inception of modernity in the West when Thomas Aquinas commissioned the translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, the one major work of his that was not translated into Arabic. The Mongol invasion, by implication, prevented the possible epochal transformation.[3]

In the same methodological spirit, I revisited the Islamic city and its pattern of poli-tics on two opposite eastern and western regions of the Islamicate world (Arjomand, 2004b). For the western lands, I drew on the urban politics of the Maghreb, as described by Ibn Khaldun in his history of the Berbers in detail and independently of his general model of dynastic cycles, and compared it with those of Andalusia conquered by Spain. The logic of this comparison rested on the revealing encounter between the politico-legal traditions of the two civilizations that took place with the reconquests of James I of Aragon (1213–1276), which brought *mudéjar* (Spanish Muslim) communities into a relationship of vassalage with him. James, who commissioned Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* for the education of the Dominicans and Franciscans to preach among his Muslim subjects, granted the *mudéjars* municipal self-government on the basis of *fueros* similar to charters of the other cities of his realm. For eastern Islamic lands, I put Hodgson's hypothesis, or, more precisely, the urban and constitutional reforms, through which Caliph al-Nāsir sought to enhance urban solidarity, as a new basis for the reassertion of the enfeebled Caliphal power against the Sultans, in the context of pre- and post-Mongol urban politics. My conclusion was that

> Caliph al-Nāsir's civic reforms did have a lasting effect in the eastern Islamic lands, and the growth of Akhi/Futuwwa confraternities made for a conspicuous presence of plebeian urban groups not known in the Maghreb as surveyed by Ibn Khaldun. Nevertheless, this development did not constitute an irreversible stride on the path to modernity. Self-government remained a matter of default and soon gave way to autocracy and/or the establishment of a new dynasty. In none of the three cases analyzed above do we find a development of a new theory of government

or any normative justification of self-rule and consolidation of the practice of municipal self-government.

(Arjomand, 2004b: 244)

Municipal self-government is a striking feature of the medieval West not found in the Islamicate civilization, while the unavailability of *Politics* in the Muslim world was a further obstacle to the development of a new theory of government.[4] This conclusion was in line with the negative conclusion of my 1999 study that the absence of the concept of corporation in Islamic law hampered the autonomy of the *madrasas* in comparison to the rise of the universities in the West on the basis of the idea of corporation in Roman law (Arjomand, 1999).

Eisenstadt's comparison of the articulation of culture and power in the Islamic and Indian civilizations can also be mentioned as an illustration of his comparative civilizational analysis. It was focused on the constitution and development of political arenas, and highlights the varying salience of the public sphere. The two civilizations vary in terms of the relevance of the political order to salvation and therefore the relative strength of its religious regulation. In Muslim societies, Eisenstadt found that a 'very vibrant and autonomous public sphere' was decoupled from 'access to the political arena,' which remained restricted (Arjomand, 2006a: 7). The religious motive to uphold the moral order was clearly strong in Islam, and the frustrated urge to restructure the mundane world often found expression in movements of protests that sought to restore pristine Islam as a primitive utopia. Meanwhile, the rulers were expected to maintain public order and defend the community while the clerical estate, the *ulema*, acted as the guardians and regulators of its basic norms and thus the 'bearers' of Islam and its transcendental vision. In the Indian civilization, by contrast, we have relatively wide access to the political arena combined with 'rather minimal tendencies to the reconstitution of the political order' (Arjomand, 2006a: 9). The latter feature is explained by the religio-cultural centrality of the caste system. The caste system organized the social order in terms of duties rather than rights 'in highly hierarchical relations and in collective ways' (Arjomand, 2006a: 10), and as a system of social power thus circumscribed the scope of political authority. Within the circumscribed political sphere, the ruler regulated the relations among collective actors who had relatively easy access to him.

A more systematic comparison of the bearers of Islam and Hinduism is certainly called for. The Brahmins were the guardians and regulators of the basic values and norms of the Hindu civilization, as the *ulema* were of the Muslim one, and in both cases independently of the rulers and the state. This similar function was, however, performed very differently, in an ethical and juristic style by the *ulema*, and in a ritual style by the Brahmin. The civilizational consequences of this difference in the orientation of the bearers of the two religions could then be systematically explored.

There is a corresponding similarly in the function of rulership and its religious autonomy in the two cases. In neither civilization were the rulers the guardians of religion and articulators of its transcendental vision. Eisenstadt's treatment of the two cases is not symmetrically consistent, however. He underlines the autonomy of kingship in India and notes the revisionist argument in Indian historiography for its legitimacy

as 'semi-sacral' power and yet not derived from the authority of the Brahmins. The autonomous legitimacy of kingship is thus considered an important feature of the Indian normative order. What I consider a very similar normative autonomy of kingship in the Islamic civilization after the separation of the Caliph and the Sultan is, by contrast, presented by Eisenstadt as merely *de facto*. The ancient symbolism of power in the form of universal monarchy survived Islam (Arjomand, 1984), as sacral kingship survived Buddhism and Brahminism. Surely this much is even implied by Eisenstadt's latest idea of 'multiple axiality' as the result of the interaction between axial and pre-axial civilizations (Eisenstadt, 2005: 531).

Eisenstadt's pioneering comparisons are of great heuristic value, but they share the limitation of global civilizational ideal-types and must be historicized. Further refinement and differentiation of global civilizational ideal-types can only be achieved through historicization. I have accordingly treated the relative strength *vis-à-vis* the patrimonial states of civil society and civic institutions as variables. The charitable and educational institutions that dominate the public sphere of Muslim societies were shown to undergo a few major historical and geographical variations (Arjomand, 1999). In a more recent essay, an attempt has been made to historicize developmental patterns distinctive of the Islamicate civilization (Arjomand, 2010a).

Eisenstadt further emphasized the degree of autonomy of the elites representing orthodoxy in relation to the ruler and political power as a determinant of the strength of their civilizational impact. I have similarly treated the degree of the autonomy of the Shi`ite hierocracy from the patrimonial state in different periods as a key determinant of their impact cultural impact on Iran. (Arjomand, 1984) According to Eisenstadt (1993), whether Islam remains confined to the religious sphere or has a broader impact in a civilization largely depends on the autonomy of the hierocracy from the rulers. This explains the different civilizational impact of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia as compared to the Middle East and North Africa.

For Eisenstadt, the dynamics of axial civilizations continue unimpaired into the global age. Multiple modernities that result from the interaction between Western-inspired modernization and the continued social dynamics of axial civilizations in the global era give rise to a distinct 'civilization of modernity' (Eisenstadt, 2003, 2: 493–571). As in the original Western modernity, the civilization of modernity includes the Jacobin variety, which, for Eisenstadt (2000), comprises contemporary fundamentalist movements, including Islamic fundamentalism.

What Eisenstadt calls the Jacobin version of modernity in fact combines the political radicalism of the eponymous French revolutionaries with the reactive impulse of contemporary fundamentalists to preserve axial traditions. This combination needs unpacking. In *Rethinking Civilizational Analysis* (Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004), a book based on a special issue of *International Sociology* published in September 2001, Edward Tiryakian and I replaced Norbert Elias's Euro-centric notion of *the* civilizing process with two sets of processes. Intra-civilizational processes, to borrow the key terms from Robert Redfield's comparative social anthropology of civilizations, are developmental patterns that rest on the continuous approximation of local Little Traditions to the central Great Tradition of the respective civilization. Inter-civilizational processes represent encounters or dialogue between different world civilizations. The two types of civilizational process

can, and usually do, occur simultaneously and intersect. This is a matter of considerable importance in the global context, where intra-civilizational processes intermingle with inter-civilizational ones as well as with the development of what Eisenstadt calls a distinct, albeit composite 'civilization of modernity.' Most notable among contemporary intra-civilizational processes are Sanskritization and Islamicization. Each of these intra-civilizational processes intersects with Westernization (modernization after the creation of the United Nations), and lately with globalization as an inter-civilizational process. The intermingling of intra- and inter-civilizational processes inevitably produces tension. This tension is either resolved by compromise and assimilation, or it results in violent clashes. The inter- and intra-civilizational processes constitute the appropriate context for considering the clash of civilizational elements within each and every world civilization, and within the composite civilization of modernity.

Modern politics profoundly affects the authority of the guardians of tradition, especially that of the bearers of the world religions. Max Weber noted this effect of modern mass politics in general terms: 'Hierocracy has no choice but to establish a party organization and to use demagogic means, just like all other parties' (1978, 2: 1195). Nowhere was this done as radically and as effectively as by the Shi`ite hierocracy in Iran in the 1970s under Khomeini's revolutionary leadership. In an article Eisenstadt invited me to write as the guest editor of a special issue on revolutions of the *International Political Science Review* in 1989, I found it difficult to escape the conclusion that under Khomeini's charismatic leadership, the Islamic Revolution in Iran resulted in 'both the traditionalization of a modernizing nation-state and the modernization of the Shi`ite tradition, a tradition endowed with the usual transformative potential of the world religions of salvation' (Arjomand, 1989: 117).

In Aziz Al-Azmeh's *Islams and Modernities* (1996), far greater emphasis is put on diversity within the Islamicate civilization than in my comparison of eastern and western Islamicate patterns of urban politics, leading to his focus on variety in alternative Islamic modernities. Asef Bayat (2007) similarly highlights divergent paths of Islamism in Egypt and Iran, and contrasting types of alternative modernities which he sees as variants of 'post-Islamism.' While Bayat simply attributes the rise of post-Islamism to the failure of Islamism in the preceding decade, I consider the movement for Shi`ite reformism in post-Khomeini Iran as a logical development in the continuity and reconstruction of tradition. The dialectic of tradition and modernity in fact became the dominant theme in the public sphere in post-revolution Iran in the 1990s after the subsidence of revolutionary Islamic ideology. Although its political impact during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) was minimal and the return of the reformists to power was prevented by flagrant electoral fraud in June 2009, the long-term significance of the movement should not be minimized. The so-called 'religious intellectuals' in the 1990s elaborated a critical theoretical framework for understanding the dialectic of tradition and modernity. The focus of this critical perspective was not on the transition from tradition to modernity but on the continuous tension between modernity and religion (Arjomand, 2009: Ch. 5). The search for an alternative modernity in post-revolutionary Iran through the dialectic of tradition and modernity has had a considerable impact in many parts of the Muslim world. Even though Islamic terrorism and

global *jihad* may be more spectacular than reformism, they are equally manifestations of multiple modernities, albeit of the Jacobin variety (Arjomand, 2010b).

Notes

1. The last phrase is intended to link Kant's concept of judgment with Weber's *Sinnzusammenhang*. (Arjomand, 2004a).
2. Neither 'post-traditional' nor 'multiple modernities' was a term in common use.
3. Hodgson's hypothesis is unusual for following Weber's idea of singling out a probable counterfactual in an explanation that purports to be causally adequate. The more usual explanations of the lack of breakthrough to modernity are more generic. Taking his point of departure from Maxim Rodinson's analysis of Islamic economic ethics in *Islam et capitalisme* (1966), in contrast to the Khaldunian structural mode, Turner (1974) singled out patrimonialism as the major obstacle to the development of capitalism in the Islamicate civilization.
4. It meant continued unawareness of many key Aristotelian political concepts that became available to Aquinas and others in the thirteenth century and shaped Western political thought, such as the commonwealth (*res publica*) and the rule of law (government by laws and not men), with the citizen being the ruler and the ruled at the same time (Aquinas. 1965: 138–139).

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