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World history, civilizational analysis and historical sociology: Interpretations of non-Western civilizations in the work of Johann Arnason

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to assess Arnason's civilizational theory and methodology and their application to non-Western civilizations from a historical-comparative sociological perspective. Although civilizational analysis and historical sociology as historical-comparative orientations in sociology are closely connected, civilizational analysis concentrates particularly on the macro-history of civilizations, whereas historical-comparative sociology (particularly in its American variety) is orientated rather to a meso- and micro-analytical foundation of societal developments and therefore is more time- and context-sensitive. From such a perspective, the article reconstructs, first, Arnason's theoretical and methodological approach to civilizational analysis and discusses his contribution to the civilizational origins and dynamics of the West as a measuring rod for non-European societies. Second, it then assesses Arnason's two major exemplary civilizational studies: the Soviet model in Russia, Eastern Europe and the non-European world as well as the Japanese civilization in the broader East Asian civilizational context. The article concludes with a critical summary of Arnason's highly innovative approach from the vantage point of a recently developing global orientation in historical and comparative sociology.

Keywords

alternative modernities, Arnason, civilizational analysis, Eisenstadt, historical sociology

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Parallel to the rise of historical sociology (Adams et al., 2005; Delanty and Isin, 2003; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003; Smith, 1991), there has also developed a growing interest in historical-comparative civilizational analysis. For a long time civilizational analysis had been a rather marginal and contested field within sociology and history. It played a certain role in classical sociology, namely in the contributions of Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Max Weber; it was developed in universal history through the studies of Oswald Spengler, Alfred Weber or Arnold Toynbee; it remained a domain in other disciplines like social and cultural anthropology; and was pursued in sociology only by some outsiders like Pitirim Sorokin. However, since the 1960s (Cahnman, 1964), a new interest in civilizational analysis has arisen, particularly with the works of Norbert Elias ([1977] 1994), Benjamin Nelson (1981) and Shmuel Eisenstadt (1986, 2003) and has developed – in the context of the growing geopolitical shift from Western to non-Western civilizations and the related debate on multiple modernities – into an increasingly salient field in international and global sociology (Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004).

In this context, Johann Arnason's work on civilizational analysis, and his exemplary civilizational studies on the Soviet model and the case of Japan, stand out as one of the most systematic efforts to develop, on the basis of the complex sociological tradition, a civilizational theory and methodology. However, due to the primarily theoretical, critical and discursive character of Arnason's studies, his innovative contributions to civilizational analysis can be more easily grasped in theoretical and methodological terms rather than in their research potential within the context of the broader field of historical sociology. From this perspective, this article will, in the following, first outline Arnason's theory of civilization and methodology of civilizational analysis; then the article discusses his contributions to the civilizational origins and dynamics of the West as a measuring rod for non-European modernities; it assesses his analysis of the Soviet model in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Third World, as well as his analysis of the Japanese civilizational trajectory within the broader East Asian cultural area. The conclusion will consider the innovative contribution of Arnason's theoretical and methodological approach and the related research direction in civilizational analysis to the broader field of a globally oriented historical sociology.

Civilizational theory and methodology of civilizational analysis

There is no doubt that Johann Arnason's recent work represents one of the most elaborate contributions to the contemporary revival of civilizational theory, methodology and analysis. His book *Civilizations in Dispute* (Arnason, 2003a) gives an excellent, all-encompassing and critical overview of the classical foundations as well as the contemporary debates, synthesizing them in a highly original theory of civilization and methodology of civilizational analysis, which also form the bases of his many contributions to the historical-comparative sociology of civilizations (cf. Wittrock, 2006). They include the study of the Soviet model and related communist modernization trajectories (Arnason, 1993); Japanese civilization and its East Asian regional context (1997, 2002); as well as his many pieces on European civilization: its early crystallization and relation to the Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic civilizations (Arnason et al., 2007); the early modern and modern transformations of European civilization and, in this context,

the East-Central European region (Arnason, 2005); as well as the rise of the West to global hegemony and its impact on non-Western civilizations and their modernizing transformations (Arnason, 2003a: Chapter 5).

The core aim of Arnason's critical reflections on the historical legacies of and current debates on civilizational research is to develop the contours of a theory and methodology of civilizational analysis. In this direction, a civilizational theory requires the definition of the core concept of civilization and the main sociological categories for its analysis. The methodology of civilizational analysis refers to the application of the basic sociological categories to the comparative analysis of civilizations in world history. The empirical reference points of both represent the manifold historical and sociological studies on civilizations in world history, namely the civilizations in Western and Eastern Europe, Islamic world regions, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, East Asia, Oceania as well as North and South America. With this global orientation, Arnason takes three main avenues for the development of a theory of civilization and methodology of civilizational analysis: (1) the problematic of civilization in the singular and plural; (2) the relationships between the structural and cultural dimensions in the constitution and dynamics of civilizations; and (3) the connection of the civilizational dynamics within modernity or the problem of one or many modernities in a globalizing world (Arnason, 2003a: Chapter 1).

To begin with, civilization in the singular, on the one hand, refers to the totality of the humanizing process, including the technological scientific, socio-economic, political, cultural and moral dimensions in the evolution of social life (Arnason, 2003a: Chapters 1 and 2). Civilizations in the plural, on the other hand, relate to the varying forms and developmental trajectories in the evolution of social life, its basic differences and continuing divergences in the multiple cultural geographical areas in world history. In his own position, Arnason combines both perspectives in the form of an interrelated and entangled plurality of civilizational processes in world history (Arnason, 2003a: Chapter 5).

A second vantage point for defining the core category of civilization concentrates on the relationships between the structural and cultural dimensions in civilizational complexes and the related modes of civilizational analysis. As Arnason observes, in classical sociology, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in their definition of civilization as a multi-societal grouping, started from the social or societal level as constitutive for a civilization, whereas Max Weber, in his comparative sociology of world religions, emphasized the cultural cores of civilizations as bases of their continuing differences (Arnason, 2003a: Chapter 2). In contemporary (historical) sociology, Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein concentrate their definition of civilization on geographical economic areas, whereas Shmuel Eisenstadt (2003), Benjamin Nelson (1981) and Jaroslav Krejci (1993) emphasize the cultural and institutional cores (Arnason, 2003a: Chapter 3). On this background, Arnason proposes a multi-dimensional conceptualization of civilization(s) but at the same time, following Cornelius Castoriadis, insists on the imaginary significations embodied in institutions, cultures and practices.

The two vantage points for assessing the traditions and current debates on civilizational analysis combine in a third problematic: the relation between the socio-cultural dynamics of the various civilizations and the civilization of modernity, or the question of the persistence of heterogeneous civilization-based multiple modernities versus the

evolution of a homogenizing post-civilizational global modernity. Structural theoretical approaches to civilizational analysis here tend to emphasize the converging trends towards global modernity, whereas cultural theories rather stress the continuing differentiating impact of civilizational cultures and institutions on global modernity (Martinelli, 2005; Schmidt, 2006). Following Eisenstadt (2003), Arnason, with his emphasis on the imaginary significations of societal institutions, clearly sympathizes with the multiple modernities perspective but at the same time acknowledges the converging trends towards a unifying post-civilizational global modernity as a future possibility and hence sees the clarification of the relation between civilizational multiple modernities and a post-civilizational global modernity as a pivotal research desideratum (Arnason, 2003a: 35–50).

Against the background of his critical reflections on the historical legacies and current debates on civilizational theory and analysis, Arnason develops his own complex theoretical framework of civilizational analysis (Arnason, 2003a: Chapter 4). In a nutshell, he distinguishes six thematic foci of civilizational analysis as well as three domains of civilizational formations. The six thematic foci comprise: (1) the cultural premises of civilizational formations; (2) the institutional structures and dynamics as channels for the unfolding of cultural meanings; (3) the multi-civilizational field or inter-civilizational environment of civilizational formations; (4) the crystallization of these three – cultural, institutional and inter-civilizational – as a composition of a family of societies; (5) the reproduction of this multi-societal grouping over time; and (6) the formation of this multi-societal grouping as a spatial-regional configuration. These six thematic foci represent the basic levels of the formation of civilizations: the constitutive internal as well as the external combination of cultural, institutional and social levels over time and across space. The three domains comprise the economic sphere of wealth; the political sphere of power; and the cultural sphere of meaning. These domains of civilizations constitute different dimensions in the formation of civilizations and Arnason, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Cornelius Castoriadis, refers to them as distinct and yet interrelated, practical and imaginary forms of world-making.

There is no doubt that Arnason's definition of civilization and the related approach to civilizational analysis is – in the context of the historical legacies and current debates – the most complex and fruitful theoretical and methodological conceptualization of civilizational analysis. At the same time, to my mind, there remain some open questions which relate to the ways in which this definition is operationalized in his civilizational studies. First, there is a strong tendency to prioritize the cultural and imaginary core of civilizations. The definition of civilization starts from its cultural core and imaginary potential (thus implicitly criticizing Eisenstadt for limiting the potential of meanings to cultural and political programmes). Accordingly, the three domains are conceived as combinations of practices, institutions and meanings, again emphasizing, with Castoriadis, the imaginary aspects. Second, as a consequence, there is a certain tension in bringing the practical, institutional and cultural dimensions together. A civilizational formation is primarily seen through the prism of culture, meaning and imaginary horizon, concentrating on the explanation of this cultural domain. But how does this emphasis relate to institutional frameworks and multi-societal groupings, how are they shaped by the cultural core of civilizations and how do they shape the cultural core? Third,

considering Arnason's primarily theoretical mode of reflection on civilizational analysis, it remains unclear how his form of historical sociology of civilizations proceeds in contrast to other approaches. For example, he seems to be largely in agreement with Eisenstadt, who emphasizes the institutional and socio-economic setting of civilizations, rather than the cultural-imaginary aspects (Eisenstadt, 2005). At the same time, he disagrees with Michael Mann's multi-dimensional IEMP model which takes ideology, economics, the military and politics as the main sources of social power (Mann, [1986] 1993; Hall and Schroeder, 2006; Spohn, 2006a) for being structurally reductionist (Arnason, 2003a: 259). In other words, it remains to be seen how Arnason's complex civilizational approach is operationalized in his several case studies and it is to this I now turn.

World history, civilizational dynamics and global modernity

In what ways does Arnason use his civilizational theory and methodology for a historical sociological analysis of the genesis, formation, transformation and demise of civilizational complexes in world history? What are the main foci of his historical sociological research strategy? How do his civilizational studies differ from those of others? Or what is his place in the context of the developing field of civilizational analyses? I will begin by concentrating on his several contributions to the European civilizational trajectory from its axial foundations and crystallization in Western Europe, to its transformation in the high Middle Ages, the Reformation, and modern revolutions as well as the rise of the West, its impact on and incorporation into other civilizations as the core of contemporary global modernity. Although his contributions to the European civilizational trajectory are rather theoretical reflexive and less analytical, they nevertheless serve as a crucial model of modernity against which other non-Western civilizations develop, adapt to and compare with or import from and/or incorporate, resist and reject.

A pivotal starting point is Arnason's discussion of the Axial Age – the period in world history between 800 and 200 BCE (Arnason, 2003a: 131). For Karl Jaspers, following Alfred and Max Weber, this period constituted the original phase of the emergence of religious and philosophical reflexivity (Jaspers, 1953). For Shmuel Eisenstadt (1986), it laid the foundations for the distinction between Axial age and non-Axial age civilizations and their long-term consequences for generating differing types of modernity. In applying his complex civilizational theory and methodology, Arnason attempts to outline a historical sociological approach to the axial breakthrough, emphasizing a historical contextual framework against a typological evolutionary perspective. In this respect, he gives credit to Jasper's fundamental insight into a world historical rather than a simply European breakthrough. Yet, he criticizes the tendency to assume a homogeneous pre-axial background; to neglect the different critical processes leading to the axial transformations; to overlook the quite different cultural forms of reflexivity; and to abstract from the sociological foundations, in particular, early state formation, empire-building and the increasingly salient inter-civilizational encounters in post-axial world history. The reference point for Arnason's critique of Jaspers is the historical sociological interpretation of the Axial Age by Shmuel Eisenstadt. In particular, Eisenstadt highlights the manifold forms and degrees of separation between the transcendental and mundane world and connects them to the comparative sociology of empire formation – with the aim of providing

a sociological basis for different historical forms of axiality, to interpret the emerging world religions as different kinds of order maintenance and order creation and uncover the long-term consequences of the different typological forms of the axial or non-axial formations for the multiple civilizational modernities in the present. At the same time, from the perspective of a historical-contextual interpretation of the Axial Age, Arnason overlooks important issues in Eisenstadt's analysis: the inclusion of the diverse pre-axial cultural backgrounds; the more precise connection between the cultural forms of axiality and early empire formation and his consideration of the inter-civilizational contexts.

As Arnason realizes, one of the core difficulties of the Axial Age discussion is a potentially cultural teleological bias that sees the historical evolution of developing world civilizations as preformed in the Axial Age. However, the crystallization of world civilizations is basically a post-axial process in the context of empire-building and their differing fates in world history. Thus, the Roman Empire, with its cultural core of Greek and Latin civil religion and its rivalry with the Eastern empires, found its encompassing gestalt only after the Axial Age proper. And only on the basis of its devolution and reconstruction did there emerge the three successor civilizations: Latin Christian Europe, Greek Christian Byzantium and the 'Islamicate civilization' (in the terminology of Marshall Hodgson, 1994). In addition, all three successor civilizations in the course of world history expanded beyond the original Roman boundaries in mutual rivalry as well as continuing interaction with their peripheral worlds. Latin Europe found an initial renewal of imperial order in the Carolingian Empire expanding to East Central Europe and in competition with Northern Europe. Greek Byzantium continuously lost against the expanding 'Islamicate' civilization and was finally replaced by the evolving Ottoman Empire, but re-emerged in the Christian Orthodox Russian Tsarist Empire and its expansion to Central and Northern Asia. The 'Islamicate' civilization, originating at the fringes of the Roman Empire conquered not only the Eastern, Southern and Western parts of the Roman spheres, but also expanded to the Middle East, South Asia and parts of Oceania. In all three cases of post-Roman civilizations, crucial long-term transformations and expansions were taking place, contrasting with the more stable imperial frameworks in India and China. Hence, the long-term civilizational trajectories cannot be derived from the constitutive framework of the Axial Age; rather, varying axial components have been continually reconstructed in the long-term civilizational trajectories and have influenced their course.

By way of a historical sociology of civilizations, Arnason has made contributions to and comments on all of these civilizational trajectories in world history. Regarding the Greek and Roman civilizations (Arnason, 2002), he attempted to delineate the cultural-specific core of Greek and Latin philosophy. Regarding Christianity (Arnason et al., 2005), he assembled various scholars to understand the specific combinations of the Greek Roman tradition with Latin Christianity as a basis for the rise of European civilization and Greek Christianity as the foundation of the Byzantine civilization. As well, Arnason (Arnason et al., 2007) made attempts to understand, following Marshall Hodgson in particular, the contours of the 'Islamicate' civilization and the position of Ibn Khaldun within it. Further, Arnason (2003a) took up the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt and a variety of Indian specialists on Indian civilization. And, finally, Arnason specialized in early Japan and China (1997, 2002) to contrast the European experience with the Japanese civilizational trajectory within the East Asian inter-civilizational constellation.

In each of these contributions and comments, the core of Arnason's argumentation is founded on his civilizational theory and methodology. He always attempts to specify the cultural core and its transformations in each civilizational trajectory; to outline the institutional frameworks as embedded in empire and state formation; to hint at the economic, political and cultural domains and environments; and to include the inter-civilizational encounters in each case. However, as Arnason's contributions are primarily theoretical and methodological, it is not fully clear (except in his own studies on Japan and the Soviet model) how he would proceed differently from the established scholarly tradition of civilizational studies. Thus, the essence of his analysis concentrates on the cultural core of civilizations, which, contrary to his intentions, gives the impression of a kind of culturalism. The call for including the analysis of state formation and its institutions parallels Eisenstadt, but it remains unclear how the link should be carried through and how it would differ from analyses such as those of Michael Mann ([1986] 1993) or John A. Hall (1998). This is true also for his demand to include the analysis of the respective inter-civilizational encounters that are increasingly the subject matter of the currently developing discourse of world history. Finally, it remains unclear how many major turning points in the evolution of each civilization are pivotal. However, these critical points can only be raised from the perspective of a historical sociology of civilizations that Arnason himself is committed to, i.e., one that traces the transformations in each civilizational trajectory, their dynamics and turning points within the frame of conditions of changing inter-civilizational constellations.

In this context, Arnason's comments on the problematic of the rise of the West and the resulting impact on other non-Western civilizations as well as the emergence of a potentially post-civilizational world order deserve special attention (Arnason, 2003a: Chapter 5). In this classic issue, two opposite positions currently compete with each other. The still widespread modernist view sees the rise of the West as a result of the internal and globalizing dynamics of Western European civilization, whereas the recently developing global history perspective emphasizes the long-term lead of the Eastern civilizations *vis-à-vis* the West and the rise of the West as an externally induced result of Eastern globalization (Hobson, 2004). Following McNeill (1999), Arnason prefers an inter-relational perspective that considers internal as well as external forces within an ecumenical world system. From such a perspective, the rise of the West is attributed to multi-dimensional economic, political, social and cultural processes that have emerged since the sixteenth century, leading in the long term through to the industrial and political revolutions and intensifying imperialism and colonialism, first to European, and then US world hegemony. At the same time, the diffusion of Western modernization models to non-Western civilizations is leading at present and in the future, to growing power shifts in the inter-civilizational global constellation. From such a perspective, global modernity is not seen as a Westernization of the world but as a global formation based on shifting inter-civilizational foundations and emerging trans-civilizational frameworks. It also allows the consideration of multiple and alternative forms of modernization and a modernity that combines regional civilizational dynamics with external Western modernity and its impact on power structures, as well as selective incorporation, rejection and reconstruction.

Alternating modernities: the Soviet model in Russia and the communist world

Against the background of the predominant modernization approaches in the political and social sciences toward communist studies, Arnason (1993) develops a highly innovative comparative interpretation of the failed Soviet model – first and foremost, in its original form in Soviet Russia but also in its variants in Eastern Europe, China and the Third World. Modernization approaches usually view the development of communist regimes in Russia and other parts of the world as a transition from traditional to modern societies, thereby emphasizing in the course of modernization a long-term convergence towards Western democratic capitalist society by either a gradual transformation or a sudden break of its totalitarian structures (Grancelli, 1995). By contrast, Arnason develops a historical-comparative approach that conceptualizes modernization as a multi-dimensional and open process that is determined by structural differentiation and fragile integration as well as co-determined by civilizational traditions and inter-civilizational contexts (Arnason, 1993: 181). From this perspective, Arnason interprets the Soviet model as a form of imperial modernization that first was able to resolve the impasses of the Tsarist Empire but in the end failed due to inherent contradictions and changing external conditions. Although written shortly after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and before the full elaboration of his civilizational theory, Arnason's interpretation of the Soviet model represents a highly original civilizational approach to the communist regimes in Russia and other parts of the world that deserves further theoretical development and comparative research.

Arnason situates the origins of the Soviet model in the specific modernization trajectory of the Tsarist Empire. He begins with the revolutionary reconstruction of the Tsarist state along the model of Western European absolutism in the early eighteenth century, which carries through a variety of reform policies for agriculture, industry and state administration during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and combines them with an enormous imperial expansion to Eastern Europe as well as Central and Eastern Asia. According to Arnason, two key components are pivotal for the Tsarist modernization path: the autocratic form of imperial state formation, and the connected revolutionary tradition. They represent specific responses to the continuing superiority of Western Europe as well as an accommodation, against the background of Russian backwardness, to the Western model. As a result, this modernization path was characterized by a specific fragility of social integration and prepared the collapse and revolutionary transformation during World War I. Measured against the later more systematically formulated civilizational theory, I find Arnason's interpretation of the Tsarist imperial modernization path in need of further elaboration. First, more should be included on the pre-modern, pre-Petrian foundations of the Tsarist state, combining autocracy closely with Orthodox Christianity and colonial imperialism; and this configuration should not be seen simply as a reaction to the rise of the West. Second, the pro-Western modernization strategy since Peter the Great was accompanied by anti-Western, Christian Orthodox and Slavophile counter-currents; hence, the Russian civilization was characterized not simply by an imperial revolutionary modernizing ideology but rather a continuing strong rift between conservative clerical and revolutionary anti-clerical forces that tore the

modernizing autocratic state apart. Third, Russian Marxism does not represent simply a radicalization of the Petrian modernization ideology, but rather a combination of Western-critical and anti-Western autocratic collectivist currents. In other words, as important as Arnason's focus on the contradictions of the imperial modernization model is, he underrates the Christian Orthodox and collectivist autocratic dimensions in both conservative and revolutionary forces (cf. McDaniel, 1989).

Moving to the institutionalized Soviet model, Arnason once again sees at the core of its social formation, particularly with the consolidation of Stalin's regime, a combination of an imperial modernization strategy with a specific form of re-traditionalization. The transition to a state-induced and state-administered industrialization model radicalized the Tsarist industrialization strategy; the integration of Russian nationalism and Christian Orthodoxy during World War II remobilized Russian traditions; and the expansion of the Soviet Union after WWII followed a Tsarist strategy. In this sense, as Arnason emphasizes, the Soviet model is essentially a continuation of the Tsarist pattern of imperial modernization. At the same time, like its Tsarist predecessor, the Soviet model suffers from inherent contradictions. These include the tendency to imperial overstretch in the face of limited resources and superior Western powers; the erosion of legitimacy in the face of advancing capitalist countries; as well as the lack of democratic institutions and legitimacy. As before, however, some elements essential for the collapse of the Soviet Union are not fully spelled out. For instance, the ideology of Marxism-Leninism contributed considerably to the idea of exporting the Soviet model and overtaking the West. The ossified party dictatorship increased social inequality in spite of the revolutionary promise. The mobilizing peripheral nationalisms sharpened Russian national identity, bringing them into increasing conflict with each other. Both central and peripheral nationalisms combined with religious reactions against atheist state control and suppression. And Gorbachev's Perestroika was motivated by a utopian communist orientation that triggered Yeltsin's Russian nationalist dismantling of the Soviet empire (Hanson, 1997; McDaniel, 1996; Spohn, 1998).

Arnason does not limit the Soviet model to the Soviet Union but compares it to three main variants: Eastern Europe, China and the Third World. In each region, Arnason considers the pre-communist tradition, the mode of Sovietization, the inter-civilizational relations as well as the intra- and inter-civilizational conflicts that led to the breakdown or transformation of the Soviet model. In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe the communist regimes could draw on indigenous socialist and communist traditions (see also Arnason, 2005), but the actual establishment of the Soviet model was only possible through the military expansion of the Soviet Union during and after World War II. As a consequence, these regimes represented peripheries of Soviet imperialist modernization with a certain degree of legitimacy but as the most advanced region in terms of nationalism, economic development, democracy and geopolitical orientation to Western Europe also opposed Soviet peripheralization. In the case of China, the Soviet model corresponded most clearly with the parameters of imperial modernization and served to reconstruct the threatened imperial order and the development of the imperial economy. This explains the early close, though conflict-ridden, relationship between the Soviet and Chinese Communist Parties, as well as the later emerging imperial competition between the Soviet Union and Communist China (Arnason, 2002). Also in many cases in

South-East Asia, the Near and Middle East, Africa and Latin America, the Soviet model was attractive, because it allowed the institutionalization of the anti-colonial independence movements in the form of party dictatorships promoting a homogenous nation, a state-regulated economy and a geo-political shield against continuing Western imperialist influence. However, it also contributed to the fragility of these authoritarian and totalitarian Third World regimes, once the protective shield of the Soviet Union collapsed.

As Arnason published his analysis of the Soviet model in the early 1990s and returned to it only occasionally (Arnason, 2002), he did not cover the developing transition and transformation in the literature (Bönker et al., 2002). Nevertheless, a variety of civilizational principles can be fruitfully applied to the post-communist transformation problematic. Transformation research predominantly applies an evolutionary modernization theory to the post-communist world, concentrating on the varying patterns of transformation to market capitalism and parliamentary democracy, but running into difficulties in those cases where reversals in economic and political liberalization developed. Against these modernist approaches in transformation research, Arnason's civilizational perspective could add important explanatory dimensions such as cultural orientations, institutional frameworks, geopolitical and inter-civilizational constellations. Regarding East Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, such a civilizational perspective would concentrate on the degree to which these regions were historically part of the European civilization and the degree to which they presently identify with and support the European Union and its contemporary eastern enlargement. Regarding the two imperial centres of the communist world: post-Soviet Russia and post-communist China, such a civilizational perspective would focus on the degree of congruence between empire and nation-state, the forms of liberalization of autocratic regimes and the extent of state regulation of the developing capitalist economy. Finally, regarding the post-communist cases in the Third World, such a civilizational perspective would clarify the ways in which the differing civilizational parameters in the Near and Middle East, Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia, are influencing the stabilization of autocratic and authoritarian regimes or their liberalization and democratization, in terms of civilizational cultures and institutions.

From a Western-centric perspective, the communist form of modernization seems to be a transitory phase, a failed form of modernization, with some, though vanishing, legacies for post-communist transformations and, as such, does not provide a structural alternative to Western modernization. From a civilizational perspective, as developed by Arnason, the Soviet model represents a time- and context-specific civilizational response to Western hegemony. It entails both learning and adaptation processes from and to Western modernity as well as particular civilizational forms that shaped not only communist societies and regimes in the past but also their post-communist transformations in the present. As such, they are not simply failed forms of Western modernity but time- and context-specific alternating forms of multiple modernities. Although the Soviet model collapsed in its original and formative gestalt, it crystallized in a specific phase of global modernization in particular civilizational contexts and will continue in a transformed gestalt with specific civilizational features, though in a globalizing world in changing inter-civilizational constellations. Arnason has presented, in applying his civilizational theory, a highly innovative historical comparative sociological perspective on the Second World. But it also

needs further empirical, inter-disciplinary, inter-civilizational and intra-civilizational research in order to substantiate his reflexive theoretical and historical sociological claims.

Alternative modernities: Japan and East Asia

For sociology, as for other social and cultural sciences, the rise of modern Japan has been a crucial case since it represents the first non-Western country that has successfully caught up with and even partially overtaken the West. For mainstream modernization theory, Japan has served as a proof of the general tendency towards global modernization but, at the same time, it remained puzzling due to its characteristic features deviating from Western patterns. In order to solve this puzzle, Japan has become also the major case of a critical reassessment of modernization theory. In this context, Shmuel Eisenstadt's analysis of Japanese civilization has broken new ground for a multiple modernities perspective (Eisenstadt, 1996). In close parallel, Johann Arnason has theoretically elaborated the Japanese civilizational trajectory (Arnason, 1997, 2002), trying to improve on several key issues of Eisenstadt's interpretation. His crucial premise is to analyze the Japanese civilizational trajectory in the long-term East Asian inter-civilizational constellation or what he calls the peripheral centre. From that perspective, Arnason sees the emergence and development of the Japanese civilization in close relation to the Chinese Empire; he questions Eisenstadt's premise of Japan as a case of non-axiality; and interprets the modernization of Meiji Japan not only as a response to the superior West but also in the context of the East Asian inter-civilizational constellation.

To substantiate this core premise, Arnason discusses in depth, to begin with, the early crystallization of the Japanese civilization in the Nara period (seventh to the tenth centuries) in its inter-civilizational interaction with the superior and threatening Chinese Empire (Arnason, 1997: Part I; 2002: Chapter 4). In this period and with long-term consequences, Japan adopted several important political and cultural features of Chinese civilization, and in this sense Japanese civilization is derivative. At the same time, Japan combines the Chinese civilizational components in new ways, and in this sense is also independent. Following the trajectory from these starting points to the present, Japanese civilization cannot be defined as a dependent periphery in relation to China, but rather as an independent peripheral centre. From this perspective, the first important dimension of the Japanese peripheral centre relates to religion. On the one hand, Japan takes over and is influenced by Chinese Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, but incorporates these religious currents into its own religious tradition of Shintoism. As an ancestor cult with local deities, Shintoism is rather particularistic and the subordination of Confucianism, Buddhism and other more universalistic Chinese religious currents to Shintoism means – as Eisenstadt (1986) emphasizes – also a de-axialization of the Chinese import. On the other hand, Japan also adopts the Chinese universalist-imperial notion of the cosmic heaven as a transcendental order, but again transforms it into a more particularistic notion of sacred kingship. Also in this respect, as Eisenstadt again underlines, a de-axialization of the universalistic elements of the Chinese model is characteristic. However, as Arnason, in my view, convincingly shows, this double de-axialization is only partial, because the Japanese civilization is able to mobilize the universalistic elements in its own modern imperialist endeavours.

The second important feature of the Japanese peripheral centre relates to imperial state formation (Arnason, 1997, Part I; 2002: Chapters 2–4). On the historical background of the Yamato state (fifth and sixth centuries CE) within a multi-centred East Asian state system (with involvements in Korea and a temporal crisis of the Chinese Empire), the centralization of the Japanese state in the Nara period went hand in hand with the import of the Chinese imperial state model in its institutional format and the simultaneous withdrawal from its East Asian involvements. Although the following Heian period experienced a serious political decline, the Chinese imperial model remained intact and served for the later reconstruction of the Japanese state in the Kamakura and Muramachi periods. The same cyclical pattern of imperial state formation followed also in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods. In this inter-civilizational framework of Japanese state formation, Arnason develops a highly fruitful perspective on Japanese feudalism and absolutism (Arnason, 2002: Chapters 5 and 6). Drawing on influential historical comparisons between Western Europe and Japan by Marc Bloch and Otto Hintze (one should also add Perry Anderson, 1978), he makes particular use of Norbert Elias's historical sociology of Western European state formation as a comparative framework for Japan. Although Arnason does not deny some general similarities, he points to several important particularities in the Japanese case: the infra-structural power in terms of the twin state monopoly on tax raising and military organization is much less developed; the warrior class of the Samurai developed in cooperation with the Japanese state, not against it; and similarly, the urban middle class supported rather than opposed the imperial state. In other words, the imperial state framework integrated the class structure much more than European absolutism. The same is true for the modernizing state in the Meiji and Taisho periods. Here also the imperial state is able to integrate the class structure much more than in the respective European cases and on this basis to embark on imperialism and colonialism in mainland China.

The third dimension Arnason (2002: Chapters 7 and 8) discusses at some length is the pattern of Japanese capitalist development. Following Fernand Braudel, Joseph Schumpeter and Cornelius Castoriadis, Arnason combines objective and subjective dimensions of capitalism, defining it as an economic regime based upon accumulation, profit-making and reinvestment on an increasing scale, along with specific institutional frameworks and motivational foundations, i.e. a continuing 'spirit of capitalism' is needed (against Max Weber) for both the origins and the developmental dynamics of capitalism. Despite this objective-subjective definition of capitalism, however, the emphasis of Arnason's civilizational analysis is neither on the political economy nor economic sociology, but on the spirit or imaginary significations of the Japanese variety of capitalism. Regarding the already solidly advanced state of economic development during the Tokugawa phase in the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, Arnason critically notes the difficulty of applying the Western European notions of proto-industrialization or anti-feudal bourgeois development, but his emphasis is on the specific type of Japanese mercantilism as a variety of the Japanese 'spirit of capitalism'. The mercantilist strategy combined a stronger closure of national markets with the development of the national economy. This laid the foundation for the Meiji developmental strategy that under the increasing pressure from European imperialism, deliberately imported technological, scientific, military, administrative and educational knowledge from the West but at the

same time closed off foreign access to the Japanese market. These parameters of Japanese capitalist development were also reproduced in the post-Meiji Taisho period and the phase of Japanese military fascism. However, they consisted not only of a national strategy but combined with an imperial model of an East Asian civilization that guarded against the West – the ‘defensive’ intervention into mainland China and the conquest of Manchuria and Taiwan.

Arnason’s historical sociology of Japanese civilization can be regarded as the most systematic application of his civilizational theory and methodology to a specific case. In particular, he highlights the cultural core of Japanese civilization; its crystallization and transformation over long periods; its institutional foundations in the specific pattern of Japanese state formation; the inter-civilizational context in the East Asian region and the increasing impact of the West in modern times; as well as the specific interrelations of these civilizational dimensions to the domains of economics, politics and religion. As Arnason (2002: 199f.) explicitly emphasizes, his civilizational analysis does not assume a continuity of deep structures over long periods, nor a super-system that directs the Japanese civilizational trajectory. Rather, it has to be understood as a reconstruction of the central civilizational and inter-civilizational learning processes that generate the long-term strategies, premises and orientations, that guide the actions of the historical protagonists and their adaptations to and reinterpretations of practical contexts: ‘The civilizational perspective to be defended here concerns the institutional and organizational domains of social life, as well as the cultural ones, but not in the sense of a totalising and self-sufficient framework’ (2002: 200). In other words, the civilizational dimension is to be seen as one cultural dimension embedded and inter-related in the institutional and social dimensions of human life.

Conclusion: civilizational analysis and historical-comparative sociology in a globalizing world

As I have tried to show, Arnason’s civilizational studies synthesize a richly elaborated civilizational theory and the development of a systematic civilizational methodology, that is operationalized in several case studies. The fruitfulness of his civilizational theory and methodology have materialized particularly in the two outstanding inquiries into the Soviet model in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Third World, and the Japanese civilization in the context of the East Asian region – both with important implications for the civilizational study of China. The fruitfulness of his civilizational theory and methodology are not limited to the Communist and Confucian world, however; it is also manifest in his many attempts to clarify the issue of the early crystallization of the main world civilizations, as well as in his recent suggestions to take up the increasingly relevant topic of post-colonial studies (Arnason, 2003b). Moreover, he does not follow the predominant postmodernist trend, but tries to develop a civilizational approach that transcends the invidious dichotomies haunting the Orientalism and Occidentalism debate. However, as I tried to point out, there are several theoretical and methodological issues that need further elaboration regarding its application in the historical sociology of civilizations as well as its relation to the related field of historical-comparative sociology.

A primary issue needing more clarification concerns Arnason's analysis of the cultural core of civilizations. In theoretical terms, his insistence on the creativity and hence contingency of culture, is well taken and therefore also his criticism of cultural structuralism in all its varieties. Yet his own analysis of the civilizational core in the case of the Soviet model, its cultural origins and developmental dimensions does not fully stand up to this important theoretical insight. As I have tried to argue, such a civilizational analysis – not only in the special cases of Russia and Japan but also in general terms – would imply the consideration of the various cultural codes and currents within a civilization in its inter-civilizational constellations – within the elites and counter-elites, the middle classes and popular strata as well as their interaction with each other; in its orthodox and heterodox, predominant and subdominant forms; and the transformations and changes of these cultural constellations over time.

A second issue relates to the causal relationships between the cultural civilizational core and the other civilizational dimensions or the mode of configurational analysis. As I outlined, Arnason's highly relevant methodological device requires linking the cultural core of civilizations to the institutional setting as well as the political, economic and cultural domains in inter-civilizational constellations. At the same time, in pursuing this complex multi-dimensional civilizational analysis, he primarily considers the cultural imaginations and symbolic meanings embedded in the political, economic and cultural institutions and domains. Accordingly, the main analytical direction is to trace the inter-relational causality between the civilizational cultural core and the cultural aspects of the structural institutions and domains. What to my mind is less clear is a configurational analysis of the impact of the structural dimensions and domains on the related cultural codes as well as the other way round – the impact of the cultural civilizational significations on the structural dimensions and domains. Here, a methodological comparison with similarly complex civilizational analyses would show important differences. For instance, Shmuel Eisenstadt's study of Japanese civilization (1996) highlights how the civilizational cultural cores, through the structuration of collective identities, influence other societal dimensions such as state, political system, nation, social movements, the public sphere, etc. From a different angle, Michael Mann in his history of social power (1986/1993) shows how different ideological cultural, economic, military and political sources produce specific path-dependent civilizational and national configurations.

Third, Arnason rightly insists on a mode of civilizational analysis that does not reify the cultural core of civilizations over long stretches of time. At the same time, there is the danger as in similar examples of long-term civilizational analysis of highlighting the crucial importance of the civilizational dimension but then to neglect or underrate the time-space context-specific features and transformations of the cultural civilizational core. In other words, a more historical sociological methodology within civilizational analysis should be developed. This would include the sub-division of long-term civilizational trajectories in specific time periods, the specific civilizational gestalt in this time period, its path-dependent processes and configurations as well as its conflicts, transformations and breaking points (Knöbl, 2007). Furthermore, this would also contain a sub-division of the inter-civilizational constellations over similar time-space and context-specific periods; their inter-civilizational constellations and a closer comparison of different time-periods in these inter-civilizational configurations (Osterhammel and Peterson, 2003).

Particularly important here would be again to consider the different and changing power hierarchies in the economic, political and military as well as the cultural and cognitive spheres.

Lastly, such a historical comparative sociology of civilizational trajectories and inter-civilizational encounters would also allow a more precise analysis of the contemporary globalization processes and an emerging world society and how they relate to the previous phases of inter-civilizational encounters and globalization (Robertson, 1992). As with nation-states, globalization in the sense of an increasing and intensifying connectivity and compression of the world, does not dissolve civilizational complexes as multi-societal groupings, but changes their formations and inter-relations. Accordingly, what would be needed is a global historical sociology that compares the different civilizational complexes, together with the inter-civilizational constellations and the connected multiple forms of modernity, and their interrelations in the contemporary phase with previous phases in world history (Spohn, 2006b). In this respect, Arnason's civilizational theory and methodology have laid new ground, that can and hopefully will, inspire future historical sociological research, not only regarding past world history, but also contemporary global developments.

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