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Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions; Axial Civilizations and World History

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Johann P. Arnason, ed., *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions*. Leiden: Brill, 2003, 380 pp., ISBN 9004132821.

Johann P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock, eds, *Axial Civilizations and World History*. Leiden: Brill, 2005, 573 pp., ISBN 9004139559.

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Together with two other recent publications to which this reviewer contributed (Arnason and Wittrock, 2004; Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004), the books under review continue the trend in comparative historical sociology set by S. N. Eisenstadt with his work since 1975. This especially applies to his edited volume, *Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Eisenstadt, 1986), and his celebrated two-volume collected essays, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (2003), entirely bypassing Huntington (Huntington, 1996).

Arnason's *Civilizations in Dispute* is the first systematic treatment of this renewed study of civilizations, and as such represents a major contribution to what Tiryakian and I refer to as 'civilizational analysis'. According to Arnason, the rediscovery of civilizations in sociology has gone hand in hand with a shift from the unitary to the pluralist conception of civilizations. Building on the old German dichotomy of culture vs civilization, it is still possible to maintain that there is one civilization and many cultures. However, Arnason prefers the majority position that there are simply many civilizations and not just one. The pluralistic conception is more sensitive to historical experience, and as a result, 'civilizational analysis is an essential corrective to uniform and over-generalized models of mainstream differentiation theory' (p. 5).

Arnason does not refrain from commenting on the persistence and resilience of the unitary concept of civilization, and he pays considerable attention to Norbert Elias. His discussion of Elias's work focuses on its linking of the process of

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civilization and state formation. It is also true that Elias's idea of *the* civilizing process is a striking example of the unitary concept and that its Eurocentrism is at sharp variance with the pluralistic conception of civilization. If there are many civilizations, there cannot be only one civilizing process and each civilization should have its distinctive dynamics. Like Elias, Arnason, Eisenstadt and other contributors to civilizational analysis underline the close connection between culture and power and their entwined symbolism in the dynamics of axial civilizations. Little attention, however, is paid to any distinctive process after the presumed breakthrough in the axial civilizations.

It is worth noting here that in his survey article on an earlier generation of studies of civilizations, Eric Wolf commended Robert Redfield's 1950s model of civilizational processes. Redfield, who defined civilization pluralistically as 'an interaction of many little local cultures and a "high culture", a "great tradition"' (cited in Wolf, 1967: 460), offered a model of two distinct civilizational processes, which he called orthogenetic, referring to intracivilizational approximation of the little to the great tradition, and heterogenetic, referring to innovative trends quite possible under intercivilizational influences. Redfield's model is admittedly only cultural. Should the new generation of civilizational analysts weave the power component into it?

Arnason's book comprises two parts, with considerable overlap and repetition. The first is a comprehensive conceptual history of the idea of civilization from 'classical sources' – Durkheim and Mauss, Weber, Spengler, and Borkenau – as well as comparative sociology, such as Nelson, Eisenstadt, and Krejči, with passing discussions of social and historical theorists, including Voegelin, Toynbee, McNeill, Parsons, Elias, Dumont, Castoriades, Wallerstein, Huntington and a few others. Of special interest among Arnason's valuable exegetical interpretation is the observation that after Durkheim was sidetracked by elaborating religion into a supra-societal force or a 'meta-institution', Marcel Mauss returned to their 1913 idea and elaborated the Durkheimian perspective on civilization as 'a family of societies' and a 'hyper social system of social systems' (cited on p. 73); an ecumene or a civilizational complex, which was characterized by a high level of cultural integration, but with multiple centers of power.

Arnason's account of Weber is interesting for its challenge to the prevalent interpretations of rationalization by Schluchter and Habermas, which detach rationality from its cultural context. According to Arnason, Weber's conception of '*cultural human beings*' as 'endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it significance' (cited on p. 89, emphasis in the original) makes such a detachment unwarranted. Instead, Weber's conception links rationality to cultural premises of each civilization, albeit implicitly (pp. 96–7). This would explain why 'rationalizing processes unfold in divergent and discontinuous ways' – a Weberian insight Arnason finds confirmed by the elaboration by Benjamin Nelson (p. 156).

Oswald Spengler is also given his due, though Arnason might have underlined the striking similarity of his notion of the *Ursymbol* as the factor that 'articulates the distinctive access to and vision of the world that defines a high culture' (p. 108) to Eisenstadt's notion of the basic premises of a civilization. The difference is that

Spengler's specification of concrete symbols carries little conviction, while Eisenstadt's abstract and unspecified premises remain untested.

The second component is Arnason's systematic treatment of main themes in civilizational analysis as the changing constellations of meaning, power and wealth. Taking meaning, power and production as the fundamental dimensions or levels of social ontology, Arnason proposes an agenda for civilizational theory around six thematic foci: (1) the cultural premises of civilizational formation, whose discussion comprises the cultural articulation of the world, religious traditions and civilizational trajectories; (2) the social context or institutional patterns into which the cultural premises are translated and whose discussion comprises politics and ideology, organization of the economy and the institutional context of science; (3) intercivilizational encounters; (4) civilizational multisocietal groupings; (5) the formation and transformation of tradition in civilizations; and last, (6) civilizational regions, whose discussion comprises the historical geography or geopolitical and geocultural setting of civilizations.

The first two themes emanate from Max Weber, the third from Benjamin Nelson, while the fourth and the last are inspired by Marcel Mauss. The fifth theme (pp. 304–14), though extending the Maussian metaphor of civilizations as families of societies to generations of societies, is in fact an original contribution to the analysis of the temporal integration of civilizations. Civilizations are coherent units through time because they relate to their past by means of continuous interpretation and codification, through their historical memory, and by the canonization of certain texts – in short, through the formation and transformation of tradition.

This thematic section of *Civilizations in Dispute* is not as distinct from the intellectual history component as one would wish. The exposition of classical and contemporary concepts is interspersed with Arnason's analytical comments, while his thematic often brings in background conceptual-historical sketches, often of the same ideas and theorists. Arnason offers us many interesting observations in his treatment of civilizational regions, notably on the civilizational background of Islam (pp. 317–18) and of Communism as an alternative modernity (pp. 332–4). By contrast, the distinction between religion and ideology in two adjacent sections on the two key Weberian themes (pp. 232–61) is particularly unclear, and many of the observations under 'ideology' seem to fit better under 'religion'.

I would argue that the idea or implication that the basic premises of civilization can be divided into two analytical categories of religion and ideology is misleading, or at least alien to Max Weber's thought. Weber did not aim at abstracting the basic premises of a civilization and into religion and ideology as distinct domains of social life. For him, civilizations could cluster around the world religions because the latter were comprehensive solutions to the problem of the meaning of human life. His interest was in comparing these historically specific constructions of meaning and their consequences. He may have underestimated the accommodation of the earlier symbolism of power by the grand, axial religious constructions of the meaning of human life, but this cannot be mended by the duplication of religion as ideology, a separate analytical category presumed to be a direct reflection of basic civilizational premises.

In his introductory essay to the collective volume, *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Arnason offers a revised and much more concise treatment of the second

component of *Civilizations in Dispute*, the analytical framework for the study of civilizations. This essay is a tightly argued narrative of the theoretical development from Karl Jasper's seminal idea of the Axial Age in the philosophy of history to 'Eisenstadt's historical-sociological reconceptualization of the Axial Age' (p. 37), reflecting a gradual shift from the historical to the typological conception of axiality. Eisenstadt's conceptualization is shown to be continuously evolving, while he remains constant in considering civilizations as analytical units in terms of their basic premises, even though he stresses that these premises are subject to contested interpretations.

S. N. Eisenstadt's own concluding essay in the collective volume sums up the development of other aspects of his thought, with Jaspers as a reference point. In attributing the breakthrough to dynamism in Axial Age civilizations to the 'chasm between the transcendental and the mundane' in 1986 (pp. 6–7), Eisenstadt remained faithful to Jaspers and to the temporal component of the idea of a breakthrough to transcendence in a specific age. The idea, however, already had to be shored up by the notion of 'secondary breakthroughs', mainly to accommodate Islam, which falls beyond the Axial Age specified by Jaspers. The notion of secondary breakthroughs had to be abandoned, together with that of a specific age in human history, as Eisenstadt now elaborated a contrasting typological approach to 'axial civilizations', dropping the word 'Age'. Furthermore, Eisenstadt put increasing emphasis on the intertwinement of culture and power in the symbolism and institutional patterns in axial civilizations.

This interplay of the symbolism of culture and power had two important consequences. The interpretation of central symbols and values by the orthodoxy could be contested, opening the possibility of radical transformation by heterodoxies, which could thus play a crucial role in civilizational dynamics. The same interplay of culture and power generated collective identities that were distinctive of each axial civilization. Eisenstadt then completes the transition from the temporal to the typological approach by defining four axial components that constitute 'the axial syndrome' (also, 'axial constellation'): 'programs ... shaped by basic premises of cosmic and social order ... in their "orthodox" and "heterodox" formulations'; 'the pattern of decoupling between ... the social order and institutional formations'; internal tensions and conflicts in these societies, and their 'encounter with other societies or civilizations' (pp. 559–60).

Furthermore, Eisenstadt put forward the idea that the basic premises of the Enlightenment generated the breakthrough to a new and distinct axial civilization, the civilization of modernity. Finally, Eisenstadt develops this last idea by claiming that his characterization of this last civilization as 'multiple modernities' can be extended to earlier axial civilizations because they incorporated elements of pre-axial civilizations and because of their interaction with other axial civilizations. This is what Benjamin Nelson called 'inter-civilizational encounters'. Thus, Eisenstadt opens his concluding essay (p. 531) by speaking of 'multiple axialities which interacted continually among themselves and with non-axial civilizations in the shaping of different patterns of world history or world histories'.

Björn Wittrock's essay is devoted to the exploration of the meaning of Axial Age as a model for processes of cultural crystallization in global history, and thus akin to other ages, such as the 11th to 13th centuries, which he has elsewhere

called the era of the Eurasian renaissance, and that of the constitution of modernity. Wittrock (p. 67, also p. 82) concisely defines the characteristic of these ages of transformation in terms of 'reflexivity, historicity and agentiality'.

Although the essays in *Axial Civilizations and World History* generally subscribe to Eisenstadt's program for the study of axial civilizations, they are not necessarily uncritical. The most fundamental, albeit sympathetic, critique comes from Peter Wagner. Wagner gives a concise formulation to the 'dark suspicion' of the idea of axial transcendence alluded to by Benjamin Schwartz in 1975 and reiterated by Sheldon Pollock in this volume (p. 397). He does so by considering it to be a projection of the pet notions of 'the short European twentieth century' back to earlier millennia and other civilizations (p. 90). The two notions he has in mind are modernity – retrojected as axiality – and the nation-state – retrojected as the culture–power/civilization–empire constellations. I argue that the second notion is more robust than Wagner thinks, but I find his first point rather devastating with regard to Eisenstadt's afore-quoted characterization of multiple axiality and Wittrock's trinity of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality.

A most valuable feature of the collective book is that it offers reflections by area studies specialists and historians on the axial civilizations paradigm. These are highly commendable, but here space only permits me to consider three critical contributions. Jan Assmann, here as in his other major works, blurs the distinction between axial and non-axial civilizations, stressing the importance of continuity in the development of civilizations, while accompanied by shifts in the constellation of 'axial' elements, as opposed to breakthroughs. Moses' subversive inversion of the Egyptian political theology is therefore better conceived as semantic 'relocation' rather than a 'breakthrough'. Kurt Raaflaub argues that the Greek transcendent vision was entirely this-worldly, and developed in intimate connection with the formation of the *polis*. In fact, the unique feature of Greek axiality consisted of what Arnason characterized as a uniquely self-limiting state formation based on the fusion of the state and political community (*Civilizations in Dispute*, p. 210). This view is similar to Christian Meier's (2001) argument that the distinctive contribution of the Greeks to world history was not as an intellectual breakthrough to philosophical transcendence, as Jaspers had claimed. Rather, it was the discovery of the political nature of the *polis* as an autonomous order. Although the implications of Raaflaub and Meier's important critical observations are not brought out, their position – if pushed to its logical limit – suggests replacing the generic typological notion of axial syndrome and axial constellations by a set of ideal types of different axial civilizations as 'historical individuals'.

Last but not least, the essay of the Indologist, Sheldon Pollock, 'Axialism and Empire', highlights an entirely different relation between axiality and the culture–power nexus. The robustness of this connection is demonstrated by the salience of sacral kingship in studies of civilization that did not use the axial concept, notably Frankfort's (1956) study of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Pollock's essay, however, brings out the complexity and variability of the connection. While agreeing that 'the problem of the political should occupy a more central place in axial theory', Pollock insists that 'imperial power in antiquity did not recapitulate a theology of transcendence' (pp. 444, 446). In fact, the civilizational area he characterizes as 'the Sanskrit cosmopolis' developed largely, if not entirely,

independently of empire formation. Conversely, the Mauriyan empire of Ašoka owed nothing to Buddhism, but much to the Achaemenid empire to which it considered itself the successor. By contrast, during the subsequent 'vernacular millennium', around 1000 CE (Pollock, 1998), he finds an intimate connection between the growth of vernacular cultures and literatures and the formation of collective communities and identities around royal courts in sub-imperial, local polities.

When addressing the theme of the unity of civilizations through time in *Civilizations in Dispute*, Arnason does not consider the implication of the distinctiveness of each civilization and the problem it poses for their comparative study. I have suggested in passing that Weber's comparisons of the world religions as historical individuals is in one respect a contrasting approach to civilizational analysis. It is the approach that corresponds to Spengler's more sweeping claims for a morphology of civilizations, but in Weber produced such unique ideal types as those of the Indian and Chinese *literati* and of the ascetic Protestant personality. It is underexplored in the school of civilizational analysis under review, but does find occasional exponents elsewhere. Claudio Véliz (1994), for instance, draws on Vico's conception of civilization and Isaiah Berlin's metaphor of foxes and hedgehogs to compare the two variants of the Christian/Atlantic civilization. Véliz effectively captures the consistency of the civilizational styles through time on the basis of the cultural clusterings produced by elective affinities in English and Spanish America, and presents them as the contrasting and historically unique ideal types of 'Gothic foxes' and 'Baroque hedgehogs'.

I do not wish to suggest that the historical ideal types are incompatible with the general typological approach. In fact, they are complementary. This much is clearly implied by the impressive array of case studies of the formative development of specific civilizations in *Axial Civilizations and World History*. One can only hope that the high quality of these case studies will stimulate a much broader dialogue between area studies and comparative sociology, without which the promise of civilizational analysis cannot be fulfilled.

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This book contains 18 articles, 14 of which were published previously in 2001 as a special double issue of *International Sociology*. A wide range of authors are included, and they deal with a myriad of issues. In general, the editors declare that the present volume is designed to 'recapture the analytical and empirical significance of civilizations and their dynamics globally within major regions' (p. 1). They claim that this task has become more pressing, given the recent events in the Middle East. The implication is that civilization analysis may help to promote sound policies that foster peace and reconciliation. And clearly such an outcome is desirable.

The volume is divided into four sections: I. Intellectual Background, II. Theoretical Essays, III. Historical and Comparative Essays and IV. Critical Essays. By far the largest section is number two, which contains eight essays, among them chapters written by Bruce Mazlish, Edward Tiryakian, Donald L. Levine, Randall Collins, Saïd Amir Arjomand and Daniel Chirot.

Definitions abound in this book. In the essays, time is devoted to discussing the various meanings, for example, of culture, progress, modernity and hegemony, all in the context of presentations related to different theories of culture, history and civilizational analysis. The histories of important terms are traced. As a result, readers are made aware that definitions matter. In clarifying what culture or civilization is, authors convey the important point that realities change, depending on how such a question is answered. Still, the answers that emerge are often shaped by irrational considerations, such as racial animosity or the desire to