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Comparative and Civilizational Perspectives in the Social Sciences and Humanities: An Inventory and Statement

Cover Page Footnote

Paper edited by Joseph Drew and written by Benjamin Nelson and Vytautas Kavolis

Comparative and Civilizational Perspectives in the Social Sciences and Humanities: An Inventory and Statement

Benjamin Nelson and Vytautas Kavolis
(Ed. from the original by Joseph Drew)

This paper was drafted for a discussion of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that was to be sponsored by the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations.

The AAAS conference was held in December of 1972; it is not clear that the ISCSC panel was actually held. However, the paper, described on the cover of the original as “An Essay in Progress,” was definitely deposited in the archives of the ISCSC at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, from which it recently has been retrieved.

The authors of this “Inventory and Statement” were two distinguished intellectuals, founders of the ISCSC in the United States.

The lead author was Dr. Benjamin Nelson, a professor at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, in New York. There he was a Professor of Sociology. Among other roles, he became a mentor and dissertation supervisor for a successful student who has this summer been elected the latest president of the ISCSC, Dr. Toby Huff of Harvard University; Dr. Nelson also lectured to this editor in a 1970 seminar entitled “Maine, Durkheim, and Weber.”

A graduate of Columbia University, from which he received both the M.A. and the Ph.D., Professor Nelson served as the first president of the American branch of the ISCSC, then known as the ISCSC (US). His life was one of great intellectual contribution in the field of the comparative study of civilizations, and in other domains of scholarship.

After his untimely death in 1977, the *Comparative Civilizations Review* devoted its Joint Issue Number 10 (1983) and Number 11 (1984) entirely to a hardcover book entitled Civilizations East and West: A Memorial Volume for Benjamin Nelson. In the preface it is written that the “editors want to keep alive the ideas of Benjamin Nelson himself and thoughts about his life and work as well.”

It turned out that one of the authors writing for that Memorial Volume – less than a decade after this present paper was in the process of being prepared – was Dr. Vytautas Kavolis, who held a titled chair as Charles A. Dana Professor of Comparative Civilizations and Sociology at Dickinson College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, from 1964 until his unfortunate death in 1996. He was also, from 1977 to 1983, president of the ISCSC, immediately following the death of Dr. Nelson, and a long-time board member of the organization.

Born in 1930, he departed his native Lithuania following the Soviet Union's "Baltic Offensive" and takeover of the country in 1944, settling first in the Midwest and eventually receiving his master's and doctoral degrees from Harvard University.

Dr. Kavolis was active both intellectually and politically throughout his life. He wrote prolifically and published more than a dozen books, in English and in Lithuanian. Among his intellectual interests was the conflict between nationalism and liberalism, especially as it related to Lithuania, both in the early 20th century and then after the country received its independence in 1990.

In the diaspora, he founded and edited the Lithuanian-American journal Metmenys, was an active board member of several Lithuanian-American organizations, and functioned as the main ideologist of Santara-Šviesa. After freedom and independence returned to Lithuania, he remained active in both countries; he was the recipient of Lithuania's 1993 National Prize for Culture and Art and two years later, Professor Kavolis was awarded an honorary doctorate by Klaipėda University in Lithuania.

According to Dr. Leonidas Donskis, another long-time member of the ISCSC, writing in his book Loyalty, Dissent and Betrayal: Modern Lithuania and East Central European Moral Imagination, Santara-Šviesa "raised the idea of Westward-looking, fully emancipated, liberal-democratic, inclusive, and cosmopolitan Lithuanian-ness as their banner."

His concept of "the polylogue of civilizations" was cited by Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus at a 2001 UNESCO conference to guide Lithuania's future:

As my old friend, Professor Vytautas Kavolis, former President of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, said, every civilization has its own denominator of cultural liberalism, which enables different societies to understand each other. He was convinced that this denominator of liberalism along with mutual understanding between civilizations should nowadays be promoted by a modern educational system.

Professor Kavolis maintained that sooner or later the comparative studies of civilizations will become an important part of modern education.

I have attempted to reproduce this essay as faithfully as possible, but this has not been an easy project, because the original is covered with excisions and hand-written additions. Therefore, any mistakes are my own.

Joseph Drew
2016

I.

On close inspection our current ways of carrying on comparative studies of social and cultural processes and institutions prove to reflect different horizons, rest on different assumptions, apply different methods, intend different aims. An exhaustive inventory and characterization of these ways will not be attempted at this time.

Here we must be content to develop a more limited agenda. We undertake first to:

- (1) Discriminate two main varieties and eight horizons of comparative analysis.¹
- (2) Differentiate out of these eight horizons four main modes of carrying on the comparative study of so-called civilizations. The modes so differentiated are distinguished by the fact that they avowedly are linked to the levels and structures of civilizational process, civilizational complexes, and inter-civilizational relations.

We then proceed to:

- (3) Indicate why we favor two of the four more recent ways of identifying research aims and methods in this area. Our sense is that the safest way to protect ourselves from committing excesses too often linked by unsympathetic scholars to the names of Spengler and Toynbee who have engaged in direct comparison of “whole civilizations” is by intensive efforts in the third and fourth indirect—rather than direct—modes of analysis.

Our third and fourth modes we may associate with such men as Sir Henry Sumner Maine, Max Weber, Marcel Mauss, and a number of more recent writers, notably Joseph Needham.

Our essay closes with a delineation of what we describe as the civilization-analytic perspective, which is most fruitfully applied in researches at the highest level of contemporary efforts in the seventh and eighth Horizon-Approaches.

II.

As we have just remarked, the main distinctions in the so-called “comparative approaches” refer to eight horizons and divide into two main groups:

- (A) Those directed to the study of “societies” and “cultures”, and
- (B) Those directed more properly to the study of “civilizations.”

¹ As editor, I have omitted much of the underlining, check markings, and printer’s symbols in the original version. These are used in so chaotic a fashion as to render reading the article more difficult and were clearly not intended for a final publication.

Speaking first of “societies” and “cultures”, we may distinguish:

- (1) The comparative study of total societies as social systems – [a]
- (2) The comparative study of analogous institutions of total societies in the social-system perspective – [b]
- (3) The study of cultural patterns or “culture-personality” profiles as wholes – [c]
- (4) The transcultural study of specific cultural processes and effects –[d]

The four horizons which relate to “civilizations” may be described as follows:

- (5) The directly comparative study of so-called civilizations as wholes –[e]
- (6) The “comparative” survey of all civilizations for the purpose of establishing irreversible directionalities of development –[f]
- (7) The comparative study of institutions and “symbolic designs” against the backgrounds of determinate civilizational settings –[g]
- (8) The comparative study of the histories, sociologies, psychologies of civilizational complexes and processes as these are perceived and work in the settings of inter-civilizational relations and encounters –[h]

We shall contend below that the work currently available has contributed greatly to the emergence of what we shall be calling a civilization-analytic perspective.

III.

The first four modes listed above under “Societies” and “Cultures” are often cited as the only promising “hard-scientific” methods for carrying out comparative studies. They do not deserve to be so considered. Our reasons are as follows:

- Horizon-Approaches I and II seem to share two limitations:
 - (1) They are too closely tied to the social-system perspective to allow full access to the comparative historical and sociological frameworks which are developed in this essay; and
 - (2) This last limitation seems regularly to lead to the comparison and attempted measurement of incommensurables.
- Horizon-Approaches III and IV also fall short of constituting a civilizational-analytic investigation in our sense. Theory and research in these modes rarely encourage resort to the flexible contentualism (*sic*) of a comparative historical sociology.

Horizon-Approach III: This only too often allows itself to fall into a non-systematic comparison of cultural structures at very different phases in their processual careers as reared in very different social and cultural foundations.

Ruth Benedict's work is an eloquent evocation of different configurations of so-called patterns of cultures of personalities but her notable efforts fall short of meeting the requirements of contemporary anthropologists or historical sociologists.

Margaret Mead's work too often lends itself to excesses in its stresses on the primacy of infant-rearing practices, such as swaddling techniques, in the civilizational histories of different areas.

In point of fact, it hardly matters with what apparent thoroughness comparisons in this manner are done. They would fall short of our basic requirements so long as they failed to include the perspectives of a comparative historical sociology.

Horizon-Approach IV: this often has resulted in many excellent studies which have carefully built upon the models and results found in the Human Relations Area Files. Other instances of this approach will be found in the work in Trans-Cultural Psychiatry. Two flaws recur in many works in this vein:

- (1) Insufficient attention is paid to the background-foreground relations in the comparisons.
- (2) Only too often the comparisons assume what some have called "trait atomism" and an assumption that forms currently dominant in the United States or other corners of rationalized civilization represent the universally warranted form of expression of the trait involved.

It must, however, be acknowledged that many fine studies have been done in this mode.

Horizon-Approach V: The direct form of comparing "Civilizations as Wholes" is the one most familiar to us in the works of many writers of renown, such as Danilevsky, Spengler, and Toynbee.

Who would deny that the direct comparisons of the souls or essences of civilizations only too often allow impressionistic ethnocentric comparisons of loosely-defined entities or structures?

If truly scientific work is to be advanced under this head, great advances shall need to occur in our theoretical understandings, styles of research, and command of our skills and resources.

To promote these desired outcomes, we make recourse to indirect strategies – as well as the apparently direct ones – for studying “civilizations” and “civilizational complexes,” inter-civilizational complexes, and so on.

Horizon-Approach VI: The comparison of civilizations for the purpose of identifying the irreversible directionalities of development goes back a long way.

It has its origin in the ancient images of the succession of monarchies and empires, reappears in the medieval and early modern times, and more recently recurs in more scientific guise. At times the proofs have been climatological, as in the view of Huntington that the course of progress has been coldward (*sic*).

More recently this Horizon-Approach has been developing in a neo-evolutionist direction and has been given full expression in the language of systems theory. Other forms of expressing this outlook have centered in a sort of technological determinism (originally typed as “determinism”).

Whatever the form, however the varieties, of this approach, they all fail to offer approaches to the comparative study of civilizations. The most subtle type of this sort of analysis has recently been put forward by Talcott Parsons in his discussions of the system of states of societies.

Horizon-Approach VII: The comparative study of institutions and “symbolic designs” against the background of determinate civilizational settings has been the approach most favored by contemporary master historians, historical sociologists, anthropologists and others who have wished to have firm grounding in a determinate civilizational setting while they are carrying on comparative analysis.

Up until now the most impressive studies in this mode have tended to be holistic and configurational rather than oriented to specific comparisons of specific institutional or symbolic frameworks.

[Among the best studies of this holistic sort one would need to mention the following authors who have centered on the civilizational structures described below:

*[E. Balasz, R. Bellah, W. Eberhard, J. K. Fairbank, C. Geertz, M. Granet, H. Nakamura, J. Needham, E. O. Reischauer, A. K. Wright for China, Japan and East Asia;
[A. Chaudhuri, B. Cohn, L. Dumont, L. and S. Rudolph, N. Srinivas for India;
[Sir H. A. R. Gibb, R. Levy, W. C. Smith, W.R. Smith for Islam and Islamic lands;
[E.E. Evans-Pritchard, B. Forde, M. Gluckman, J. Mbiti, V. W. Turner for Africa and African cultures.*

[In the same spirit, I must here limit myself to a selected number of names and works which help us find our way to the understanding of “Western Civilization” in the medieval and modern eras.

[The following may prove especially helpful to researchers in these areas:

[E. Barker, J. Burckhardt, H. Butterfield, G. Chenu, E. P. Cheyney, C. N. Cochrane, S. Dill, C. H. Haskins, F. Heer, J. Huizinga, E. S. Duijksterhuis, A. Lovejoy, L. Mumford, H. Pirenne, C. Morazé, R. Southern, Paul Valéry, Perry Miller, M. Weber, A. N. Whitehead and L. Whyte, Jr.]²

There is reason to believe that a newer sort of work centering in intensive in-depth studies of institutions and symbolic designs is now coming to the fore.

Major forerunners in this field have been Sir Henry Sumner Maine, Max Weber and Marcel Mauss. In our own time one can point to the recent work of I. M. Lapidus on Moslem cities and A. Bozeman on comparative politics and law – and so on.

Horizon-Approach VIII offers us particularly valuable horizons for relating to actual cases of inter-civilizational relations and encounters. It is only as we see the civilizational complexes in the crucibles of intercultural process that we can perceive the distinctive thrusts and patternings of different civilizational and societal structures.

Exceptionally powerful results have developed in the course of exploring questions arising in the study of civilizational encounters in the era of the Crusades, Hellenistic world, the 16th and 17th centuries, and our own times of abrasive civilizational conjunctions.

Wonderful work has been done in this vein by outstanding scholars of inter-civilizational relations. Among such works one would mention the following: Edwin Hatch, C. N. Cochrane, G. von Grünebaum, A. H. Gibb, R. Kopf. Perhaps the most outstanding achievements have been the works of two men especially devoted to the study of China: the too-soon-departed Joseph Levenson and the ever-active Joseph Needham.

There are a host of special questions which can only be gotten at through asking questions which challenge us at the very roots, questions such as those put by Max Weber in his “Author’s Introduction” (1920) and Needham in his Science and Civilization in China and The Grand Titration.

Our reasons for preferring Horizons VII and VIII shall be given in our next two sections. [Here the manuscript ends].

² The typed material italicized above was crossed out in the copy from the archives, but I believe that the listing is valuable for an insight into the orientation of the authors and so this section has been retained here. (J. Drew, ed.)