10-1-1999

Ernest Gellner: Civilizational Analysis as a Theory of History

Leonidas Donskis

Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol41/iss41/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Ernest Gellner: Civilizational Analysis as a Theory of History

LEONIDAS DONSKIS

There seems to be no general reason why specialists in coercion, and specialists in ritual and legitimation, should not be identical. These two supremely important specializations are indeed sometimes combined. But it is a fact crucial for the history of mankind that they were very often distinct to a greater or lesser degree. The sword may dominate, but the priests help crystallize cohesion among swordsmen.

Ernest Gellner

In mapping Gellner's (1925-1995) philosophy of history and civilizational theory, it is very important to refer to his intellectual and even ideological background. He obviously belongs to a small minority of the twentieth-century social theoreticians who never passed through a Marxist phase. Gellner's consistent, severe and analytically incisive criticism of Marxism and its sociopolitical effects brings him to the company of such critics of the totalitarian regimes and their ideologies as Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers, Raymond Aron, Leszek Kolakowski, and Czeslaw Milosz. Having started from the powerful influence Arthur Koestler and George Orwell made on him in literature, Gellner has later experienced the strongest impact Karl Popper made on him in philosophy, and Raymond Aron in sociology. Those writers have provided a basis for Gellner's social and cultural critiques. It is not accidental that nothing other but power, individualism, freedom, coercion, ideocracy and their (trans)civilizational idioms have eventually become the major problematical foci in Gellner's social philosophy.

He notes, not in vain, that: "The toolbox of the half-track I drove to Prague for the victory parade in May 1945 contained four books: Koestler's Darkness at Noon, Orwell's Animal Farm, the now forgotten but then widely discussed Managerial Revolution by James Burnham, and Cyril Connolly's Unquiet Grave." This is exactly where Gellner's severe critiques of various sorts of ideological brain-washing, contamination of consciousness, instrumental and manipulative exchanges, and ideocratic societies sprang from.
However, Gellner's theoretical maturity is marked by his capitalization on the founding fathers of sociological theory: Emile Durkheim and Max Weber's theories have come to provide him with an interpretive framework within which Gellner's comparative studies of scripturalist/doctrinal religions and monotheist civilizations became possible. Through the Durkheimian concepts of collective ritual, social cohesion, social atomization, and anomie, Gellner rediscovered and recontextualized Ibn Khaldun and even Plato; whereas Weber's sociology of religion and, particularly, his concept of the routinization of religious belief became Gellner's point of departure in rediscovering David Hume's sociology of religion (especially, the distinction of decisive importance that Hume made between the religions of superstition and those of enthusiasm).

The issue of the role and place of Christianity in the emergence of modern industrial civilization brought Gellner not only to the classic Weberian concept of the Protestant ethic of labor and the spirit of capitalism but also to Louis Dumont's (1911-1999) theory on the religious origins of Western individualism. In this context, Gellner reinterprets St. Augustine, Edward Gibbon, James Frazer, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Fustel de Coulanges. This is how a sociology of religion and a theory of history coincide, thus providing an explanatory framework for the comparative study of civilizations.

Yet the discursive map of the ideas and issues Gellner had addressed would be incomplete without at least briefly mentioning the strong impact Robert Montagne and Edward Evans-Pritchard made on Gellner in social anthropology (in his studies of Muslim societies and Islamic civilization, Gellner capitalized on some insights of the former into the social structure of Muslim societies). However stimulating and rich Gellner's legacy of social anthropology, we will further focus, in this study, on his civilizational analysis as a theory of history.

The Gellnerian Notion of History

Even for early Gellner, the theory of history seems to have been just another term for sociology, the latter having been taken by him in the broader sense. According to him,
The problem of explanation in history is also the problem of the nature of sociology. The views adopted in this field are held to have profound moral and political implications. We have recently often been reminded of this. The simplest argument connecting a premise about the nature of historical explanation with political or ethical consequences runs as follows: if rigid, unchangeable, and wide-ranging generalisations are attainable with regard to historical processes, then an outlook which presupposes individual responsibility is basically misguided. Having pointed out this implication, philosophers hostile to the conclusion then devote themselves to undermining the premise. They may do so either by pointing out that the required historical laws have not been found, or by arguing that they could not be.

Gellner leaves aside all considerations of the existence or possibility of historical laws, and traces the well-known theoretical alternative—holism versus methodological individualism in history and sociology. It is interesting that Gellner, in assessing both methodological approaches, seems to have tried to reconcile holism to methodological individualism. (His equally respectful attitude to Durkheim and Max Weber proves this to have been the case.)

Small wonder, that, on the one hand, "the proper study of mankind is human groups and institutions," and, on the other, the very actors of history are individuals who "do have holistic concepts and often act in terms of them." Moreover, "when the holistic ideas of many individuals are coordinated and reinforced by public behavior and physical objects—by ceremonials, rituals, symbols, public buildings, etc.,—it is difficult for the social scientist, though he observes the scene from the outside, not to use the holistic concept."

In fact, the very essence of holism lies in taking social wholes, rather than particular human individuals, as the basic unit for historical and sociological study. If we are going to admit that individuals act guided by nebulous holistic concepts, our study of history enables us to employ in-depth exploration of historical, social, cultural, political and moral imaginations disseminating over time. Otherwise, we are inevitably forced to limit ourselves to a mere analysis of human behavior. (This is why methodological individualism is quite natural and even inescapable in economics; yet it seems to have been artificially imposed, in the twentieth century, by economics on the rest of the social sci-
ences—if we are to admit that theoretical sociology, with Durkheim, obviously came into being as holistic.) As Gellner put it himself:

We cannot even describe the state of mind of typical individual participants in the situation without referring back to the situation as a whole. This to some extent throws light on a fact mentioned earlier, namely that whatever the logical rights and wrongs of the case, individuals do think in holistic terms.5

Although it is in principle hardly possible to reconcile such mutually exclusive research strategies and intellectual stances as holism and methodological individualism/nominalism, Gellner's attempt at combining at least some elements of them makes much more sense than his mentor Popper's attacks and tirades against holism and methodological essentialism.

In Plough, Sword and Book, Gellner provides an explanatory framework for what he calls the philosophic history—a combination of philosophical anthropology, political philosophy, interpretive sociology, sociology of religion, social anthropology, and intellectual history. In crossing the boundaries of disciplines and of methodological approaches, he seeks what might be termed the deductive history, the latter being equally accessible for the inductive/historiographical verification and deductive-logical correction. "Definitive and final truth is not granted to theories in general. [. . . ] What method is employed in this undertaking, then? Basically, it is deductive. Conclusions are extracted from clearly stated assumptions; various possible conclusions are then checked against available facts. Assumptions are revised if the implications fail to tally with available facts."6

What should be noted first as the specifically Gellnerian feature of his philosophic history is the exceptional flexibility and inter-subjectivity of his analytical language. In every formulation and passage of his theorizing, Gellner shows himself as capable of adjusting a set of analytical tools he employs to those sociological and philosophical issues he addresses. Through sociological or anthropological discourse, he quite naturally comes to internalize the issues both of the philosophia perennis, i.e., classic metaphysics, and of the modern social philosophy, and vice versa—Gellner easily, though in a provocative way, recontextu-
alizes sociological and anthropological problematical foci by switching, from time to time, to the massive philosophical equipment. Thus, Gellner’s incisive and iconoclastic theorizing, resulting from his attempt at bridging philosophy, sociology and anthropology, may be considered as quite a challenging model for current social philosophy.

Gellner’s philosophic history is two-fold and two-dimensional: he divides the entire human endeavor into three fundamental activities—production, coercion, and cognition—and then examines how these activities were transformed by the “great leaps” of the agricultural and industrial revolutions. His explanation of the structure of human history is formally depicted as a simple three-by-three diagram, which constitutes the basic framework for the overall argument: one dimension includes hunting/gathering, agriculture, and scientific/industrial production, whereas the other rests on the fundamental classification of human activities—production, coercion, and cognition. Since the latter are taken as the three great stages of human history—in order to trace their transformation and interrelation,—Gellner’s philosophic history comes to acquire the form of a Trinitarian theory of history.

In so doing, Gellner joins one of the most widespread theoretical traditions within the Western philosophy of history. He assesses this in the following way:

Trinitarian theories of human history are not uncommon. Some are of considerable interest and merit, and we shall have cause to refer to them. Their beginnings may lie in the medieval thinker Joachim of Fiore, who postulated Ages of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Hegel thought that the doctrine of the Trinity was the outstanding merit of Christianity, and provided the clue to the understanding of human destiny. Auguste Comte distinguished the religious, metaphysical and positive stages of the human spirit and of human society. Sir James Frazer, an intellectualist like Comte (at least in his main and as it were official theory), distinguished the age of magic, that of religion, and that of science, though he also stressed that each of the ages was defined, not by the exclusive presence, but rather by the mere predominance of one of these three elements of styles of thought. Marxism operates with more stages than three but it can plausibly be reinterpreted as using three basic epochs: one in which men knew neither a surplus nor exploitation; another in which both surplus and exploitation are both pervasive; and a third in which the surplus remains but exploitation vanishes. [...] Karl Polanyi, seeking the defining crucial
While listing the most influential Trinitarian theories of history, Gellner should have added Giambattista Vico’s *La Scienza Nuova* as well. Moreover, like Marxist philosophy of history being plausibly placed by Gellner in that same context of philosophical Trinitarianism, the cyclic theories of history may also be reinterpreted as having been based on the three-stage scheme of societies or cultures or civilizations: birth, dissemination, and death. It may well be generalized to the extent of the entire paradigm of the morphological theories of history and culture, including of course Oswald Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* and Arnold J. Toynbee’s *A Study of History*. From the standpoint of the inner organization of the cyclic theories of history it makes no difference concerning how many stages of the life-cycle of every theoretically identifiable culture or civilization a cyclic theoretician lists—two (like Spengler) or four (like Toynbee). The theoretical idiom nevertheless remains the same.

Gellner seems to take into account only evolutionist/progressivist and forward-looking theories of history (that may in fact be derived from St. Augustine’s classic Christian concept of history and/or from Joachim of Fiore’s medieval Trinitarian philosophy of history—both rest on the paradigmatically Judaico-Christian idea of the final redemption at the end of the world): within this framework, the idea of progress in history is merely a certain secular version/historical transformation of that of the final redemption. However, the point is that the cyclic and backward-looking theories of history operate within the same idiom, for they are nothing else but inversion of the progressivist and forward-looking ones. It is not so clear whether Gellner himself would have accepted such an implication or slight correction of his thought; yet it still remains to be done and theoretically contextualized in a proper way.

The crucial issue, in Gellner’s philosophic history, is that of the emergence of modern/civil society. In addressing this issue, Gellner raises a number of complementary questions: Did Christianity play a key role in the emergence of modern industrial civilization? What are the basic differences between the pagan religions and the great monotheist ones in their social and politi-
cal effects and impacts on the modern world? May such a blueprint of a social order as Islam be looked at as containing the same civilizational tendencies and trajectories of consciousness, though historically failed, that manifested themselves in Christianity over time? Why is it that under Christianity the modernization both of consciousness and of social structure has solely become possible? What are the origins of modern individualism? What is the role of ideology, religious or other, in the genesis of the modern world in general?

In doing so, Gellner was not simply endorsing the Weberian sociology—he rather reinterpreted and recontextualized Weber by placing him in that same interpretive framework within which St. Augustine, Edward Gibbon, David Hume, James Frazer, Fustel de Coulanges and Louis Dumont were critically examined and articulated. This is to say that Gellner, due to his consistency, came to theoretically translate the great Weberian sociological issue into a key issue of the philosophy of history. In Muslim society, Gellner points out:

Two dominant sociological questions were inspired by Christianity, more so than by other faiths. Each concerns its role, either in the rise or in the fall of a civilization. The first question was: did Christianity contribute to the fall of the Roman Empire? The second was: did a special segment of Christianity play a key role in the emergence of modern industrial civilization? The first of these questions is now somewhat dated. Time was when men found this question central and compelling: their obsession was the preservation of an old civilization, not the attainment of a new affluence. But the demise of the Roman Empire is no longer a source of current sorrow, and the attribution of blame for that disaster is not a hotly debated issue amongst us. It was not always so. St. Augustine was eager to rebut any such charge. More surprisingly, the question was revived in the Augustan age; Gibbon and Hume saw the relationship of religion and civilization in these terms, and their conclusion was not the same as St. Augustine’s.\(^9\)

One wonders why and how Gellner never mentioned Toynbee’s theory of history. In fact, it was Toynbee who addressed, in the twentieth century, the issue of the relationship between the fall of a civilization and the rise of a new religion. Moreover, behind his impressive historiographical paraphernalia, one may easily perceive Toynbee as having revived St. Augustine’s concept of history and the Augustinian paradigm in the philosophy of history in...
Leonidas Donskis

general. ( Particularly, in the distinction Toynbee made between the perished civilizations, dominated by the archaic, i.e., cyclic, time—likewise the civitas terrena in St. Augustine’s De Civitate Dei,—and Western civilization which still has a chance to survive and carry on by virtue of being the very descendant of classic Christianity and its modern concept of time, that is, by virtue of having attached itself to the civitas Dei.) So the picture of the debates, held among the philosophers of history concerning the relationship between religion and civilization, is more complex than that depicted by Gellner; and the issue itself is by no means exhausted.

However, in addressing the other great sociological issue, Gellner demonstrates his analytical incisiveness and ability to identify and embrace the most interesting and provocative theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “The other great sociological issue, by contrast, is very much alive. The role of ideology, religious or other, in the genesis of the modern world and of its industrial or bureaucratic institutions, is still of burning interest and at the very centre of our concern.”

And although Gellner clearly shows his theoretical preference defining Max Weber as “the greatest of the sociologists associated with the question of the affinity of faith and modern socio-economic organisation,” he nonetheless comes to relocate his emphasis from Max Weber to Louis Dumont—in tracing the religious/clerical origins of individualism.

In his comparative work on Indian and European societies, Dumont has ambitiously attempted to uncover hierarchy/holism and equality/individualism as the controlling principles respectively of the traditional (in its paradigmatic shape—Indian) and Western civilizations. The other-worldly individual, according to this theory, comes into being along with early Christianity (from its inception), thus implementing the civilizationally normal condition—social practice/political power is inferior and, subsequently, submits to social theory/ideology. Being prior to equality/individualism, hierarchy/holism represents early Western civilization as disseminating within the framework of the classic configuration of values and ideas.

However, the participation of the pope in the coronation of the king (this is the case from the eight century) starts undermin-
ing this model—this-worldly political power and its agencies become superior to the other-worldly ideology (even when they become intertwined, it is dangerous for the model of civilization-al normality). The final inversion occurs in the epoch of the Reformation: here comes into existence the inner-worldly individual. Therefore, modernity, according to Dumont, is civilizationally abnormal per definitionem. From the dramatic efforts of the West to reconcile somehow individualism to hierarchy there can only result totalitarianism, which is conceived of by Dumont as the tragically irrelevant response of Western societies to the challenge of exaggerated nominalism and social atomization.\(^{12}\)

Commenting on Dumont’s theory, Gellner notes:

The first deviant step away from this stark dilemma was taken by the European tradition when the Church centralized and controlled such opting out. It replaced monk/hermits by monastic communities. The second crucial step took place when this organization of centrally administrated escapees from the social world was deprived of monopoly, and became universalized by the Reformation. You might sum up this story as follows: First, dissidents out (of society); next, all dissidents into well-supervised rule-bound hostels; third, with the reformed generalization of priesthood, everyone may be a dissident and opt out of prescribed and ascribe roles. No further supervision or restriction on individualism. In this way, an unrestrained, socially pervasive individualism is born. [. . .] The entry of the Church into the world had modified the situation: a kingly priest, in this view, was basically different from the previous priestly kings.\(^{10}\)

A key role of the Church and of the monastic communities in the genesis of modern individualism (which should be confused neither with the escape from the dictates of caste into religious ascesis—as described by Dumont in his comparative analysis of the Indian caste system and Western sociocultural dynamics—nor with the renunciation of the world in general) has also been reflected on, at least in some way, by Toynbee. It suffices to recall Toynbee's concept of the Withdrawal-and-Return and its decisive importance in the process of the Challenge-and-Response. However broad and inclusive, Gellner's theoretical horizon might have been more enriched by his critical dialogue with Toynbee's philosophy of history. Yet Gellner's dislike of culturocentric theories (permeated by what has been called by him the auto-functionalist approach to culture) sheds new light on cyclic theories of history into...
Although Gellner found Dumont’s theory interesting and illuminating, he could not endorse it entirely—for Dumont’s most elegant theoretical design is obviously culturocentric (one should never expect the opposite from a structural historian of ideas operating within the framework of the history of consciousness). This is to say that Dumont seems to be much more concerned with the “how” approach to history than with the “why” approach (these approaches may well serve as a watershed between culturocentric theories and sociocentric ones). Small wonder, then, that Gellner sums up his attitude to Dumont’s theory—and to its implications as well—in the following way:

The trouble with this theory is, of course, that the second step is in no way restricted to the Western tradition. Monastic communities are very common elsewhere. The doctrine that the monastic condition should be generalized, an aspiration in that direction, can also be found elsewhere. On occasion monasticism in fact expands in a cancerous manner and absorbs an astonishing proportion of the total society. What is lacking elsewhere is not an aspiration towards reformation, but its successful and unreversed implementation. Islam too preaches the direct relation of individuals to the deity. But generally attempts at reformation are quickly followed by a reversal, a backsliding to the earlier condition. Social pressures making for a clerisy distinct from civil society are too strong. So the success of one particular Reformation, the presence of a bed on which the seedlings of individualism could flourish, needs to be explained. Perhaps this account presupposes, rather than explains, the idiosyncratic individualism of the West.¹²

Therefore, Gellner’s theory of history may quite correctly be characterized as sociocentric, that is, focused on society, rather than culture (assuming that the composition of societal life is prior to any kind of cultural coherence), on the one hand, and conceiving of the history of humankind as a theoretically identifiable, though unpredictable, interplay of socioeconomic factors and of sociopolitical agencies, on the other. Human intellectual passions and sensibilities, their striving for freedom and self-fulfillment, and their endeavors in general are very similar, if not the same, in distinct civilizations; yet the West is a single civilization which has come to institutionalize and implement most of them. To be more precise: monastic communities; religious asceticism, the metaphysical tension between the notion of transcendence and
this-worldly social/moral order; religious and political dissidents; individualism (no matter completely released or suppressed and latent)—all these phenomena virtually are universal tendencies of human consciousness and self-expression. The most puzzling question is: Why it was the West that has solely developed them to the extent of, and transformed into, a viable world order?

Gellner was looking at the history of humankind as the realm of the invisible/forsaken human dramas and of the failed attempts at modernizing faith, politics, and consciousness. Gellner’s fascination with Western modernity, though accompanied by his skepticism about its offsprings (not least of which are, in Gellner’s view, nationalism and cultural relativism), proves his theory of history to be a West-centered phenomenon par excellence. One may have a feeling that empirical data on non-Western civilizations (particularly, on Islamic civilization) are needed for Gellner insofar as he tries to imagine what would have occurred in the West if this or that would have been so. Such an exercise in a counter-history, supplemented with Gellner’s cross-cultural sophistication, shows the richness and intensity of his historical imagination; yet from the theoretical standpoint, it is less plausible. For instance, he writes the following on the historic rivalry of Christianity and Islam, thus releasing tricky and graceful historiographical variations on the cuius regio eius religio theme:

I like to imagine what would have happened had the Arabs won at Poitiers and gone on to conquer and Islamise Europe. No doubt we should all be admiring Ibn Weber’s The Kharejite Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism which would conclusively demonstrate how the modern rational spirit and its expression in business and bureaucratic organisation could only have arisen in consequence of the sixteenth-century neo-Kharejite puritanism in northern Europe. In particular, the work would demonstrate how modern economic and organisational rationality could never have arisen had Europe stayed Christian, given the inveterate proclivity of that faith to a baroque, manipulative, patronage-ridden quasi-animistic and disorderly vision of the world. [...] A Muslim Europe would also have saved Hegel from the need to indulge in most painfully tortuous arguments in order to explain how an earlier faith, Christianity, nevertheless is more final and absolute than a chronologically later one, namely Islam.¹⁵

However, in entering the symbolic realm of Islamic civilization, Gellner arrives at another research strategy and analytical equip-
ment: the search for structural isomorphism and historical homologies/analyses is replaced by a civilization-analytic perspective—in order to critically examine the social structure and symbolic organization of a given civilization. The argument provided by his notion of history—the latter being speculative and rationalist in at once—is no longer sufficient. Hence the need for the concept of civilization.

The Concept of Civilization

Gellner's point of departure, in applying his sociological constructs and philosophy of history to the comparative study of civilizations, is the Durkheimian assumption (reinterpreted first by Michel Foucault, and then—in various ways—by current civilizationists and theorists of culture) that concepts do not have a separate existence and that they do participate in collective rituals as a means to achieve social cohesion. So we have quite an important implication at the level of epistemology: concepts are in essence the interpretive frames of meaning within which humans can articulate and grasp themselves and social reality as a whole. If the cognition of the world deals with its symbolic representations (this is more than true with regard not only to the humanities but to the social sciences as well), we should admit that one's interpretation of social reality coincides with one's symbolic participation in it. Thus civilization analysis leaves room for what may be described in terms of thought-and-action system (following Dumont who coined the term). As Gellner notes himself:

Concepts need to be instilled. The authority of concepts is not self-evident or self-imposing. The Durkheimian hypothesis that the prime role of ritual is the instilling of important concepts, and that this is what endows a community with its shared ideas and obligations, deserves the greatest respect. In a sense, every concept has and is a ritual. Important notions are served by important rituals. 16

Therefore, Gellner is very consistent in stressing the crucial importance of religion for a civilization-analytic perspective. (Although Gellner has never used the term, this is obviously where he belongs—in virtue of taking civilizations as consisting of social structure and symbolic organization, on the one hand,
and of analytically embracing all identifiable dimensions of civilizations—from the religious experiences and metaphysical notions of the other-worldliness to this-worldly institutional networks and political practices/exercise of power, on the other.) Gellner’s attentiveness to religion brings him closer to such civilization theoreticians as Dumont (who is actually a successor of Durkheim by virtue of being a disciple of Marcel Mauss) and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (who, in turn came to capitalize on Max Weber, though refracted through Talcott Parsons’). After all, Gellner follows, in some way, Max Weber for whom civilizations were unthinkable without world religions.

Moreover, Gellner, in his inclusive theory of the genesis of modern industrial society and of modernity in general, makes the distinction between pre-Axial and post-Axial societies, thus following two more theoreticians—Karl Jaspers, who coined the terms “Axial ideas” and “Axial epochs,” and Eisenstadt, who applied the Jaspersian concept for his civilization theory. Strictly speaking, Gellner can hardly be qualified as a civilization theorist, for civilization analysis and comparative studies in general seem to serve for him merely as a means to provide more data for his all-embracing social philosophy. Although he contrasts, in his sociocultural analysis of Islam, “Great Tradition” to “Folk Tradition,” or “High Culture” to “Folk Culture” (thus implying the opposition “High Islam” vs. “Folk Islam”), we can only theoretically reconstruct his concept of civilization—too many things are taken for granted, and no clear definition of civilization is provided.

However, Gellner would, most probably, have subscribed to Eisenstadt’s point of view concerning a civilizational perspective. Eisenstadt put it thus:

... a civilizational perspective strongly emphasizes the interrelations of the cultural and institutional aspects of the historical experience of different peoples, the interrelation between ontological visions or conceptions of the world, on the one hand, and the major arenas of institutional life patterns of social stratification, on the other. [...] The first crucial aspect of this interrelation is the formulation, on the basis of such visions and beliefs, of the fundamental conceptions of ontological visions and premises about the nature of social life, authority, and the like. The second aspect is the attempt to implement these premises in social life—or, in sociological parlance, to institutionalize them in specific ways. Thus, in greater detail, and
in somewhat abstract and theoretical terms, the first component of a civilization is the formulation, promulgation, articulation, and continuous reinterpretation of the basic ontological vision of a society or sector thereof, its basic ideological premises, and its core symbols. The second major aspect of the interrelation between ontological visions and institutional formations and dynamics is the symbolic and ideological—i.e., cultural—definition of the different arenas of human activity in general and the political arena in particular.

Notwithstanding the fact that Eisenstadt has arrived at the comparative study of civilizations from political sociology (in this, Eisenstadt’s comparative studies and, particularly, their disciplinary background and analytical equipment are also very close to Gellner’s and even the way Gellner has arrived at civilization analysis and Islamic studies), he is likely to have underestimated neither the importance of religion nor that of political power structure for the sociocultural dynamics of civilizations. Eisenstadt is theoretically accurate in defining the relationship between religion and civilization as well:

Although in the history of humankind civilizations and religions were very closely interwoven, at the same time many religions have been only a part or a component of civilizations and not necessarily the most central component. This distinction, which can be found clearly in many preliterate and archaic societies, even those of the ancient Near East, becomes clearly visible in the ‘great’ Axial Age civilizations, in the monotheistic religions and civilizations; however, in some places they constituted religious working within the framework of other civilizations.

As noted, Gellner feels much at home subordinating civilization analysis to the theory of history, that is, contextualizing Islamic studies within the framework of philosophical and sociological issues derived from world history. One of such issues is that of the emergence of Islam itself on the stage of world history. Gellner incisively uncovers Islam both as religion and as a blueprint of a social order, the rise of which is impossible to place within the model of the fall of an empire. So the model of the emergence of Christianity simply does not work in the case of Islam and, therefore, can in no way be overgeneralized as the universally valid explanatory framework. According to Gellner,
Islam, unlike Christianity, was not born within an empire which subsequently went into a decline, a decline which a hostile observer could blame on the faith; nor did it become a kind of politically disembodied receiver of the pre-existent world empire which had collapsed, and which it could perpetuate by ecclesiastical organisation at a time when the political one was beyond recall. On the contrary, it was born outside two empires, one of which it promptly overran, and the second of which it conquered in the end. It was the basis, first of an oecumenical empire, and then of a number of others which closely identified with the faith and found their legitimization in it. This makes the question of religion as the social cement of civilisations appear in quite a different light, when considered from a Muslim viewpoint. It had not corroded an earlier traditional civilisation, nor lived on as its ghost. It made its own empire and civilisation.

One more interesting implication for a comparison of Christianity and Islam (and, especially, of their differences in handling or assessing political power) might be derived from Bernard Lewis’s brilliant study of the political language of Islam. Islam was born modern—in the sense of its highly positive attitude to political power and its holders. Unlike Christianity and its long-lasting negative, even contemptuous attitude to polity as such (which was the case until the thirteenth century), Islam recognized—nearly at once—the emergence of an Islamic polity. The profound contempt of the Fathers of the Church for the body politic (particularly, in St. Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*; although this contempt is deeply grounded in early Christianity as well—almost from its inception, it remains hostile to this-worldly authority and political power) lasts until the thirteenth century when Thomas Aquinas, “recognizing the emergence of a Christian polity accorded some legitimacy to the state and some positive value to political institutions.”

Therefore, Islam was born modern but never achieved—economically, politically, and institutionally—what Gellner takes as civil society. Ibn Khaldun preceded and anticipated all preeminent Western social philosophers and political thinkers (from Niccolò Machiavelli and David Hume to Emile Durkheim and Max Weber), and far surpassed his contemporaries and counterparts in the West; yet by sad historical paradox, he remains on the margin of their glory. After all, Islam was born modern in the sense of the minimalist concept of clergy (one should take into account Alexis de Tocqueville’s note that Islam is a unique reli-
Leonidas Donskis

igion, for it has no priesthood). More than that—it seems to be a clergy-free religion.

In traditional Islam, no distinction is made between lawyer and canon lawyer. Moreover, there is no dividing line between theologian and lawyer. Nearly from its inception, Islam preaches what is considered the revolutionary discovery and exclusive achievement of the Reformation in Europe—namely, the direct guidance of God in human affairs (including the sovereign power and the body politic), the reciprocity of God and human being, and direct dialogue of God and human being. Nonetheless, Islam is accompanied by a series of the failed modernizations (if we are to believe Gellner and other students of Islam). It was modernized Christianity which historically succeeded where Islam failed. So what happened in history?

The clue to this puzzling issue might be Gellner's insight into the secularization-resistant nature of Islam. As we shall see, religious enthusiasm, in Islam, seems to have never been politically and institutionally adjusted to the modern social structure; nor has it ever been ideologically neutralized/secularized (i.e., routinized, in the sense of the Weberian concept which Gellner capitalizes on). Hence the fundamental tension, within the configuration of Islam, between its ab ovo modern or at least modernizable social structure, on the one hand, and pre-modern (pre-industrial, in Gellner's terms) symbolic organization, that is, faith and value-and-idea system, on the other. Gellner offers the following comparison of four major literate world civilizations:

Four major literate world civilizations were in existence at the end of the Middle Ages. Of these, it seems that Islam alone may maintain its pre-industrial faith in the modern world. The faith of the Christian world has been reinterpreted and adjusted out of all recognition. (Modernist Christian theology, with its elusive content, asymptotically approaching zero, constitutes by far the best evidence for the secularisation thesis, far more so than any overt 'rationalism'.) Confucianism is repudiated in its homeland, however much it may be possible to trace the survival of its spirit. Hinduism survives as a folk-religion, neither endorsed nor discouraged by the elite of its land. Only Islam survives as a serious faith pervading both a folk and a Great Tradition. Its Great Tradition is modernizable; and the operation can be presented, not as an innovation or concession to outsiders, but rather as the continuation and completion of an old dialogue within Islam between the orthodox centre and deviant error, of the old struggle between knowledge and ignorance, political order and anarch-
chy, civilisation and barbarism, town and tribe, Holy Law and mere human custom, a unique deity and usurper middlemen of the sacred, to cite the polarities whose linked opposition, sometimes dormant, sometimes virulent, seems perennially latent in Islam.22

In order to grasp those tensions and oppositions within Islam, i.e., modern and pre-modern/anti-modern patterns within the same society and culture (perceived by Gellner but as civilizationally common tendencies of consciousness and political/institutional practices equally latent both in Western and in non-Western societies), we have to leave the realm of civilizational frameworks and enter that of the empirically elusive ideological dramas of humankind, not least of which is the clash of *Umma*, i.e., ideocracy, and civil society. This is how Gellner works out a philosophy of history which merges with political philosophy, sociology, social anthropology, and the comparative study of civilizations.

**Postscript**

Although Gellner’s incisive and critical scholarship represents a unique combination of philosophy, sociology, anthropology and intellectual history, it fails to make some important points that we could expect from one of the most eminent and accomplished students of Islamic civilization, Western European modernity, civil society, and nationalism. Why did the West succeed where non-Western societies failed? Are Western civilizational and theoretical idioms the only frames of meaning and expression within which humans can interpret themselves and the world around them? Are Western theories (and their political implications for social action) in a position of imposing their sensibilities and vocabularies on other modes of discourse? In fact, Gellner’s philosophy of history gives no clue to those highly debatable points.

The trouble with Gellner’s comparative theory of civilizations is that it depicts non-Western civilizations as answering (or obliged to do so and, therefore, desperately trying to cope with) those great questions that have been solely formulated by the West. And an even more dubious and unpleasant implication is that, in doing so, Western civilization transforms itself into theory-emitting entity, whereas the rest of the world serves merely...
as empirical evidence whose paramount mission becomes to substantiate the theory.

For Gellner's is a West-centered theory of modernity par excellence. He might serve as a perfect example of how a theory of society and culture of this type fails to embrace post-modern realities and sensibilities.

Dickinson College, Pennsylvania

NOTES

3. Idem.
4. Ibid., p. 493.
5. Ibid., p. 498.
7. For more on this issue, see Ibid., pp. 20-21.
8. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Ibid., p. 4.
11. Ibid., p. 5.