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Review Essay

Johann P. Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute. Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003.

Over the last decade or so, Johann Arnason has done a great deal, often in association with the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies, to revive civilizational analysis. In addition to writing or editing books on the subject, he has published major articles in encyclopedias on the subject.¹ He is an Icelander who migrated to the Continent via Prague, then to Germany, followed by immigration to Australia where he spent thirty years of his career before returning again to Europe. For much of that period Arnason was left-leaning, more intrigued with Marx than Weber, serving on the editorial Board of *Thesis Eleven* in Australia. A more attentive reading of Weber back in the 1980s, however, seems to have awakened his interests in civilizational analysis.

This book is a composite of five essays loosely tied together. The main effort is to reclaim civilizational analysis as an integral part of modern sociology. It is an attempt to link this reinvigorated civilizational analysis to the classic theorists, especially to the seminal essay of Durkheim and Mauss, and the unsurpassed work of Max Weber. The book is a veritable Who's Who of contemporary civilizational analysts, though some remain unknown even in Europe. A related general theme of the book is the displacement of civilizational analysis by concern for "agency and structure" that emerged in modern sociology during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

¹ Johann P. Arnason, "Civilizational Analysis. History of," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (London: Elsevier, 2001), pp. 1909-1915. A longer version is in "Civilizational Analysis: A Paradigm in the Making," *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (2002-2009), 34 pp < www.eolss.net >

The grand figures of Toynbee, Spengler and Voegelin get some attention, but a student's first encounter of them here would not be efficient. We have to take the subtitle of the work seriously, "Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions." It is a reconnoiter with a very broad cast of contributors that only a deeply read person such as the author would readily know.

The five chapters carry the following titles: "The Rediscovery of Civilizations;" "Classical Sources;" "Patterns and Processes;" "Meaning, Power, and Wealth"; "Questioning the West: The Uses and Abuses of Anti-Eurocentrism." Although Weber's pioneering foundations are appreciated, greater credit seems to go to S.N. Eisenstadt for keeping civilizational analysis alive, albeit through his ambiguous and inclusive ruminations on the "Axial" shift first brought to attention by Karl Jaspers. The Axial Age transformation (defined here as "the middle of the last millennium BC") gave rise to some major civilizational configurations centered on the Mediterranean, but also India and China.

For some writers an important question is the relationship between "modernity" (not very clearly defined) and "civilization." A suggestion that seems largely to come from Eisenstadt is that a "new civilization" has emerged, the "civilization of modernity," that has been spreading in a manner similar to globalization. According to Arnason, the "issue is whether modernity should be theorized in terms of advances and inventions within the framework of Western civilizations, more or less open to replication by non-western latecomers, or as a breakthrough to new civilizational dimensions" (35). This formulation adds a layer of interpretation to the longstanding question of whether there is simply one civilization or many. Arnason favors the view that there are multiple civilizations, defined in a Weberian or Durkheim-Maussian fashion, or alternatively, "civilizations as paradigms of the human condition" from the work of Jaroslav

Krejci. This and many other notions of civilizations vie with each other with no attempt to reconcile them.

The second chapter begins with Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, giving attention to their “Note on the Notion of Civilization” published in 1913, rescued for English readers by Benjamin Nelson, a founder and former President of the *International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations*. His translation of the Durkheim-Mauss essay was published in 1971.²

Durkheim and his nephew noticed that “social phenomena that are not strictly attached to a determinate social organism do exist; they extend into areas that reach beyond the national territory or they develop over periods of time that exceed the history of a single society. They have a life which is in some ways supranational.”³ Accordingly they suggested that “*A civilization constitutes a kind of moral milieu encompassing a certain number of nations, each national culture being only a particular form of the whole.*”⁴ This point of view stands in contrast to the traditional, more common view among anthropologists and ethnographers who try mainly to identify any distinctive cultural group, ancient or modern, and call such a group a “civilization.” Consequently the latter view does little to advance the study of civilizations conceived as trans-local, transnational entities that evolve processes and phenomena that are more than local or regional.

Max Weber’s approach to civilizations, Arnason points out, is more indirect in that he spoke of “cultural worlds” and “cultural areas” that have a regional basis, especially India and China, as well as Western Europe. He notes that Weber’s work

² Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, “Note on the Notion of Civilization,” *Social Research*, 38 #4 (1971): 808-813.

³ *ibid.* p. 811

⁴ *ibid.*

on the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* probably led him to his comparative civilizational research and the effort to determine how unique the economic and legal patterns found in the West were in “universal history.” This leads to a discussion of the “rationalization” process whereby various components of culture are refashioned in more logically consistent and value-maximizing configurations. There is neither a developmental nor temporal organization of these reflections on Weber, so that here and throughout the volume we have comments, notes, and reflections on major figures.

On the other hand, in the chapter on “Patterns and Processes” Benjamin Nelson’s point of view and contributions to civilizational analysis are attentively laid out. Before turning to that, it should be noted that both Spengler and Toynbee are discussed mainly as examples of historical concern for *cycles* of civilizational rise and decline, elite formation, and attendant processes. Still, Spengler is credited with focusing on the decline of *civilizations* rather than just societies or national groups. Arnason sees Toynbee’s project as a negative reaction to Spengler, though without directly confronting it. In Arnason’s view, Toynbee’s “civilizations” are large-scale societies with enduring identities. At the same time Toynbee neglected Spengler’s concern for civilizational “styles.” In the end Toynbee seems to present a comparative interpretation of religions.

Franz Borkenau is then brought in as a “corrective” to the excesses of Spengler and Toynbee. According to Arnason, Borkenau had a more appreciative role of death and decay in civilizations, along with recognition that “barbaric” elements often played instrumental roles in both decline and rejuvenation. The point seems to be that civilizational entities should be seen as having life cycles and that civilizational analysts need to study their patterns.

For this reviewer, chapter 3, “Patterns and Processes” is the most interesting of these essays. The writings of four

contributors to civilizational analysis are considered: William McNeill, Benjamin Nelson, S. N. Eisenstadt, and Jaroslav Krejci. Voegelin and the unknown Czech philosopher Jan Patočka also get attention. According to Arnason, McNeill's various discussions of "the rise of the West" serve to bring back the notion of civilization in the singular. McNeill's conception contains the idea that civilization in the singular (meaning Western civilization) "expanded because most people most of the time preferred the enhanced wealth and power" that it provided, and the notion that such advances reflect "civilized patterns" of society (126). The latter expression has always seemed to me a rather provincial and unhelpful conception that does little to advance our understanding of peoples or civilizations. Perhaps it is for this reason that Arnason has omitted any discussion of Elias's work on the "civilizing process," so-called. Nevertheless, McNeill's critique of the cyclical image of civilizations seems beneficial, along with his understanding of some of the processes that aided Western Europe in its cumulative march toward "progress." However, I would have suggested that McNeill did not probe very deeply into the cultural level of developments, especially legal innovations, that produced structures and processes that added stability and hence facilitated unparalleled political and economic development in Western Europe. In his own reflections on the fate of his book, McNeill grants that, "Being too much preoccupied by the notion of civilization, I bungled by not giving the initial emergence of trans-civilizational process the sustained emphasis it deserved."⁵

According to Arnason, Benjamin Nelson's contribution to civilizational analysis, especially his concept of intercivilizational encounters, is a major corrective to the enterprise. As a former student of Nelson's, I agree with that

⁵ William McNeill, "The Rise of the West after Twenty-Five Years," *Journal of World History* 1 (1) 1990: 13.

assessment and most of what Arnason says about Nelson. I shall, however, suggest some modifications of Arnason's analysis based on my contact with Nelson back in the late '60s and '70s.

The author of *Civilizations in Dispute* is correct to say that Nelson was opposed to the "uniformitarian" perspective (of which multiculturalism is today often another variant) according to which all peoples are everywhere and always the same. Nelson believed instead that civilizations could be built on entirely different "geometries" with radically different conceptions of law, morality, reciprocity, and rationality. He thought this was evident when one compared the West with Islamic civilization, China or India, for they proceed from contrasting axial assumptions.

Although Arnason is thoroughly conversant with Nelson's work, it needs to be said that Arnason has a European and I would say quite different conception of the role of "theory" in sociology and the social sciences. Arnason's approach is one that calls on the investigator to "theorize" any range of phenomena according to pre-existing categories, that is, categories found in the writings of other theorists which then set the range of thing to be studied. Such an effort would presumably lead to a "complete system." Nelson, however, would not have used that expression and was strongly opposed to system building. Nelson had very productive and cordial relations with Talcott Parsons, but strongly opposed Parsons' idea of a "social system" and the urge to build such an intellectual structure. His approach was much closer to the "theory of the middle range" of Robert Merton that always begins with the historical and empirical differences.

Consequently Arnason's suggestion that Nelson's "framework" is incomplete rather misses the point: Nelson neither wished to create such a thing nor attempted to do so. What he did attempt could be put in more systematic form and probably would have

been had he not died unexpectedly at the age of 66, returning from a visit to Tübingen on a train in September 1977.

I agree with Arnason that Nelson's notion of civilizational encounters is an indispensable insight that represents a significant advance for civilizational analysis. For Nelson the idea was a sort of *symbolic probe* that could help us to discover just where the differences lie between one civilization and another. The question is, how do we examine such encounters? What *grid* is available whereby we may productively compare civilizational sectors (or civilizational complexes) in two or more entities? Nelson had many ideas about this.

In his discussion, Arnason reviews Nelson's idea of "structures of consciousness." This is a theme deeply embedded in Western thought and of course recalls Hegel as well as Auguste Comte's triadic phases of religious, metaphysical, and positivist stages of philosophical awareness. Nelson's efforts focus on religious sensibilities and suggest three distinct forms of consciousness: "sacro-magical," "faith structures" and "rationalized" structures of consciousness such as one finds in the moral accounting system (casuistry) of medieval Christianity that entailed a forum of conscience, the confessional. As Nelson looked at China and the Islamic world, it was evident that nothing like the last phase existed in the other civilizations or their religious structures.

In the meantime, Nelson attempted to identify a set of conceptual anchors that he thought had played an unusually central role in the development of Western civilization. These included such terms as *nomos*, *logos*, *civitas*, *polis*, *conscience*, *scientia* and several others. He gave such a list of Latin terms to a medieval Islamic scholar and asked him to supply the Arabic equivalents, of which there were not many. In other words, Islamic civilization was indeed built on a very different "geometry" or symbolic landscape. The same was true of

China. One of the best examples of this is the idea of “conscience” for which there is no linguistic counterpart in Classic Chinese⁶ or Classical Arabic. Only in the 19th century with the translation of the Bible into Arabic does the word “conscience” (*damir*) emerge in Arabic.⁷ Likewise, our most cherished term, science, especially in its modern sense, was something, as I have pointed out, not well cultivated in China or the Muslim world.⁸ Joseph Needham pointed out long ago that the concept of “Laws of Nature” is missing in Chinese scientific thought.⁹

Still more cogently, the comparative study of law within a civilizational context, as Nelson and Weber suggested, would reveal very different legal conceptions in other parts of the world. It would reveal, as I also showed in a Nelsonian vein, that the very idea of a *legally autonomous entity*, the *corporation*, without which a great variety of public and private activities would be greatly impeded or impossible, is absent in the other legal systems of the world.¹⁰ This obviously relates to the current discussion of what lies behind “globalization” and whether this is possible without several key legal concepts found only in the West.

⁶ Chung-Ying Cheng, “Conscience, Mind and Individual in Chinese Thought,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2 (174): 3-40.

⁷ Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Knowing By Oneself, Knowing the Other: Al-damir,” *Human Conscience and Christian-Muslim Relations*. (Oslo: University of Oslo Press, 2002).

⁸ Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 2nd edition).

⁹ Joseph Needham, “Human Law and the Laws of Nature” in *The Grand Titration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

¹⁰ Huff, *ibid*, chapters 4 and 7.

Nelson had a conception of “civilizational complexes,” as Arnason points out, that suggests “a segment of the paradigmatic cultural patterns in the sphere of expressive and instrumental production” in societies and civilizations. These complexes, conceived in a variety of social and cultural contexts, provide a powerful grid within which one can carry out highly useful comparative analyses. In Arnason’s view they “open up a vast problematic” for future research.

In a word, civilizational analysis has not been without a very useful set of conceptual devices that could have advanced the enterprise far more than it has by neglecting Nelson’s insights as well as those of Durkheim-Mauss.

Following the analysis of Nelson’s contributions, Arnason considers other aspects of S. N. Eisenstadt’s work. His conception of civilizations is far more philosophical, placing emphasis on “the combination of ontological or cosmological visions” that seem to be embedded in civilizations (158). It would seem that Eisenstadt’s most significant contribution has been that of opposing “functional analysis” in mainstream sociology. He did this by pointing to the deeper, if more amorphously shaped ontological and cosmological aspects of cultural life that have been at play in civilizational entities as distinct as the West, Japan or China.

Eisenstadt’s early work concerns “empires” and only gradually did he shift his focus to the Axial Age problematic and civilizational development. More recently he has spoken of civilizational “breakthroughs” and thinks in particular that the West had just such a “breakthrough to modernity” which he suggests represents a new kind of civilization. At the same time, Eisenstadt’s analysis lacks the clarity of Nelson’s analysis of the European breakthrough of the 12th and 13th

centuries that Arnason highlights.¹¹ He concludes by suggesting that Eisenstadt's approach "raises meta-theoretical questions of the most challenging kind" (176).

From this reviewer's point of view it is regrettable that the author of *Civilizations in Dispute* next takes up the idea of "civilizations as a paradigm of the human condition" suggested by Jaroslav Krejci. This is an interesting idea but as a contribution to civilizational analysis it lacks the cogency of the other major contributors to the fields, at least as laid out here. The discussion adds another nuance to the canvas without aiding the task of giving civilizational analysis a steady vision.

Chapter 4 of the book is a long foray (127 pages) into "Meaning, Power, Wealth: Changing Civilizational Constellations." It seems likely that this essay ought to have been published separately as a contribution in its own right. In the present context it seems disconnected from the major themes and thinkers of the preceding chapters. It represents Arnason's own thinking, quite in another vein than the trajectory one expected to come out of the survey of earlier pioneers. It is mainly the idea of intercivilizational encounters and a brief review of my own work on comparative historical analysis of science that carries over from earlier discussions. The cause of investigating intercivilizational encounters is not advanced but identified as an obligatory starting point. Otherwise the chapter allows the author to follow his own muse.

The final chapter, "Questioning the West," takes up many general themes that now confront those who enter comparative historical studies of civilizations. The shift of interest towards civilizational analysis that has broken out recently, especially

¹¹ I have amplified the significance of this breakthrough in Huff, *ibid*, chapter 4, especially pp. 127ff.

since 9/11, brings to mind the sensitivities that always arise when social scientists study “others” and report their finding to “natives.” Natives of whatever sort are not always happy with what observers say about them. In our globalized world, all sorts of others read what we say and take objection. For many people around the world it is painful to recall that for the four hundred years stretching from 1600 to the present, the Western world has been ascendant.

Furthermore, the economic, political, and military dominance of the Western world during that period has often looked unjustified to observers of many persuasions. Europeans around the world in those days were not always good visitors or benign rulers. Nevertheless, there were real disparities of intellectual achievement, especially in science and economic development between Europe and the underdeveloped areas of the world. Europe did pioneer developments in law and parliamentary structures that became requisites for modernity but which were absent outside Europe.

Recollecting all those disparities, now that Asia and “the Pacific Rim” may be rising, has led to anti-European sentiments. Arnason attempts to deal those disparate assessments evenhandedly, while rejecting the extreme versions of Euro-bashing that one finds in certain quarters. Arnason gives the reader a wide panorama of considerations along these lines from the Middle East to Japan and China. Here again Arnason’s extraordinary broad familiarity with writers of many colors can be a feast for hungry readers.

It may be too soon to expect a more systematic analysis of the many varieties of civilizational studies, but this volume is a welcome addition to the cause of civilizational analysis. It is to be hoped that those interested in this area will consult this rich undertaking.

Toby E. Huff