

Introduction

From World Religions to Axial Civilizations and Beyond

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The founding fathers of sociology in its classical period, Émile Durkheim (d. 1917) and Max Weber (d. 1920), have been long proclaimed as theorists of modernization. In truth, however, both abjured a general theory of modern society and were committed to an empirically grounded, comparative-historical sociology as the key toward an explanation of Western modernity. Durkheim (1982[1895], 139) went so far as to declare: “Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself.” He further demonstrated his commitment to comparative sociology in a note on civilizations co-authored with his nephew, Marcel Mauss; here, he developed a concept of civilizations in the plural (Durkheim and Mauss 1971[1913]). Durkheim’s students in France showed little interest in modern society and instead produced a remarkable set of studies of the Indian and Chinese, as well as ancient Greek and Egyptian, civilizations (Arjomand 2010).

There can be no doubt that Max Weber sought after 1910 or 1911 to understand why the West was the earliest civilization to develop *modern* capitalism and the “rationalization” of “this-worldly” conduct systematically. He sought to do so through a series of highly comparative sociological analyses that placed the “world religions” at the forefront. Major civilizations, he believed, usually developed in reference to them. Interestingly, Weber never used the term *civilization* (as did his brother Alfred). Instead, he viewed regions as civilizational zones (*Kulturkreisen* or *Kulturwelten*), most of which had been strongly influenced by a world religion.

Some four decades later, Weber's younger colleague and friend Karl Jaspers (d. 1969) shifted Weber's pivotal focus on salvation on the one hand and the connection between world religions and sociocultural transformations on the other hand to the nature of the transcendent realm. In doing so, he broadened Weber's civilizational scope to include Greek philosophy. Jaspers then located the radical Greek anthropocentric breakthrough in relation to the theocentric breakthrough of Hebrew prophecy and to major value configurations in Asian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism). He stressed that these breakthroughs occurred in roughly the same historical period—namely, in the mid-first millennium before the Common Era. He called this epoch the Axial Age.

Durkheimians are rare in the second generation of comparative sociologists. Nonetheless, there are notable exceptions, such as Louis Dumont, who published *Homo Hierarchicus* in 1967, and Joseph Chelhod, whose work in the sociology of Islam is discussed in chapter 6. The Durkheimian mode of studying non-Western societies moved to Britain and mainly assumed the form of Radcliffe-Brown's general—and noncomparative—theory: structural functionalism. Eisenstadt opposed this school's tradition-modernity dichotomy sharply and introduced a "multiple modernities" approach. This depiction of modernity emphasized its *divergent* paths and its formation from the dynamics of—what he eventually would call—axial civilizations (Arjomand 2010).

Eisenstadt modified the primarily philosophical interpretation of the Axial Age by Jaspers by stressing a gradual historical shift in this age—namely, to what he and his colleagues came to call *axiality*. At first, Eisenstadt remained faithful to Jaspers and to the temporal component of the idea of a breakthrough to transcendence in a specific age. However, he and his followers had to resort to the idea of a "secondary breakthrough" in later periods and, at one point, in order to accommodate Islam, as Armando Salvatore contends in chapter 6, even to that of a "tertiary breakthrough." Eisenstadt later abandoned the notion of a secondary breakthrough, together with the idea that the breakthrough to transcendence emerged in a specific epoch in human history. Instead, he constructed a contrasting typological approach to "axial civilizations," one that conceived axiality as a configuration of elements and placed an increasing stress on the intertwining of culture and power in the symbolism and institutional patterns of axial civilizations (Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock 2005). The most comprehensive statement of the theory of axial civilizations can be found in Arnason's *Civilizations in Dispute* (2003).

Eisenstadt further drew on Jaspers's key idea: transcendence constitutes the regulative principle of the Axial Age *and* it remains effective in the "civilization of modernity" despite skepticism (see Silber 2011, 272). He eventually reached the conclusion that the civilization of modernity is a distinct, albeit composite, axial civilization comprising the *multiple* forms of modernity and the *different* paths to them laid down by varying premodern axial civilizations.

The aim of the present volume is to recover, examine, and expand the seminal Weberian idea that set this long intellectual journey into motion—that is, the fundamental assumption that world religions can be transformative forces in human history and hence can be considered foundational components around which a type of civilization—one we now call *axial*—can expand. Accordingly, we move from the examination of the dynamic features of several world religions to an examination of their corresponding axial civilizations. Thus, each chapter erects an analytical framework for linking a world religion to an axial civilization—either comprehensively (as does Björn Wittrock in chapter 1) or—more typically—partially, through concepts central to one or more components.

In chapter 1, Wittrock provides an intellectual history of the trajectory from Weber's world religions to Jaspers's idea of the Axial Age and to the contemporary theories of axial civilizations by S. N. Eisenstadt (d. 2010) and Robert Bellah (d. 2013). He shows how the idea of the Axial Age was in fact anticipated by Weber, and rightly considers Weber's collected essays on the sociology of the world religions, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, the largest sociological oeuvre on the Axial Age.

Moreover, Wittrock places the entire trajectory of the conceptual development from the world religions to axial civilizations in the context of the rise, on the one hand, of the social sciences as the epistemic counterpart to the formation of the modern world and, on the other hand, of the debates since the latter part of the nineteenth century on the study of religion in European and North American universities. In this perspective, Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923) appears in the first decades of the twentieth century as a significant historical figure beside Weber, and the abject predicament of Germany immediately after World War II provides the historical context for the return of Jaspers to Heidelberg and the publication in 1949 of his book on the Axial Age. Wittrock subsequently analyzes the changes in the axial paradigm from Jaspers's temporal specification in the history of humankind to the configurational conception by Eisenstadt of a set of

characteristics found in axial civilizations and to the evolutionary scheme developed by Bellah.

Stephen Kalberg, in chapter 2, seeks to compare the mode of causal analysis in Weber's famous study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2011) to the causal procedures in his later sociology of religion writings. Having noted that his causal argument in *Protestant Ethic* rests alone upon ideas and values, and that Weber himself calls for a more far-ranging multicausality in this volume's concluding pages, Kalberg explores whether Weber actually pursued such an agenda. He holds that he indeed sought to formulate and utilize a new causal methodology in his sociology of religion essays, one that recognized "both sides of the causal equation." Weber substituted "ideas *and* interests" causal procedures and strategies, for the *Protestant Ethic's* "one-sided" and "incomplete" focus upon ideas and values.

Kalberg first notes that Weber's post-*Protestant Ethic* writings in important ways clearly continue this volume's stress upon the causal role of ideas and values; he calls attention to Weber's discussions of worldviews, salvation doctrines, and the "rational thought" of theologians. Nonetheless, his later studies on religion *also* attend to the "other side" of the equation, Kalberg insists. Economic, political, and status *interests* assume a pivotal part in three central analyses found in Weber's post-*Protestant Ethic* writings on religion: the discussion of the ways carrier groups influence the ethical ideals and doctrines of the world religions, the manner in which the routinization of the prophet's charisma occurs, and the different ways in which "lay rationalism" is formed and becomes influential. Kalberg concludes that Weber indeed fulfilled in his sociology of religion writings "both sides" of the multicausal methodology first articulated in *Protestant Ethic's* concluding paragraphs.

Chapter 3, by Victor Lidz, turns to the works of Karl Jaspers, the author of the term *Axial Age*. The opening section offers, following Jaspers, a general definition of the Axial Age. Indeed, Lidz's brief overview provides a short-form introduction to several of this volume's major themes. However, he quickly moves ahead; Lidz does not seek simply to offer yet a further scrutiny of the Axial Age's major features. Rather, in one of Jaspers's late volumes, *The Great Philosophers*, he discovers a heretofore neglected, though pivotal, construct: "paradigmatic individuals." Lidz sees this concept as central in respect to one of Jaspers's overarching queries: How did the axial civilizations manage to cultivate and sustain a long-range impact?

In a sweeping analysis, he argues that Jaspers defined the Axial Age through his investigation of *these* heroic figures (Socrates, Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius). All are discussed by Jaspers in depth; their personalities, distinc-

tive origins, and messages are examined, as are the social contexts within which they lived. A focus upon these Axial figures, Lidz contends, provides a “more specific” understanding of their features and broad influence than does, following Weber, an exploration of their charisma and its routinization.

Lidz stresses that any exploration of the impact of these paradigmatic figures must acknowledge the importance of their personal relationships with immediate disciples. Moreover, once the “direction” of a civilization has been established by these heroic individuals, it acquires a significant sustaining capacity. A certain “closing off” occurs, Lidz insists, and further leaders, if their message is to be heard, must present a set of related teachings. While Weber, he argues, analyzes moreso the long-range impact of Axial Age values, Jaspers attends to their short-range influence. His notion of paradigmatic individuals constitutes an indispensable aspect of his analysis of the Axial Age and its impact, Lidz concludes.

Chapter 4, by Roberto Motta, returns to Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* and traces the “Protestant ethic thesis” of 1904–05 both back in the history of ideas to its forerunners and forward to its influence in contemporary Brazil and France. This informative discussion of the *context* for Weber’s pathbreaking study reveals a stark contrast between pre-Weberian, monolithic notions of civilization and modernity on the one hand and, on the other hand, the late-Weberian and post-Weberian conceptions of civilizations in the plural and of modernities as multiple. The contrast clearly reveals the move from the former to the latter as an advance in scholarship. Most of the forerunners of Weber’s Protestant ethic thesis discussed by Motta wrote in France and Brazil in the nineteenth century. With the notable exception of Tocqueville, all are now forgotten, even though the *Protestant Ethic* thesis itself still finds echoes in contemporary Brazil and France.

Chapter 5, by Donald Nielsen, offers a case study of intercivilizational encounters in the ancient Mediterranean world. He traces the unique ways in which the images of a natural order, as manifest in debates on “measure, number, and weight,” are altered as they travel from early Judaism to Greece and then to Roman jurists, as well as to early Christianity. The distinct setting indigenous to each civilization and its intellectual elites influences significantly the particular adoption of this imagery, according to Nielsen, as well as its expansion in the adopting civilization.

He is convinced that his focus upon images of the natural order offers a research strategy that charts “emerging categories and rationales” in a precise manner, as well as their intercivilizational encounters. Indeed, it does so far more accurately, Nielsen holds, than those approaches that

attend alone to large-scale and macrostructural alterations. Finally, Nielsen maintains that the varying ways in which civilizations viewed measure, number, and weight would not be adequately comprehended if the researcher's attention remained focused exclusively upon one cultural setting, for then "the confluence of ideas flowing [across civilizations that] forge new ideas and images" would be missed.

The next three chapters investigate two specific cases of axial civilizations: the Islamicate and the Orthodox Russian heirs to the Byzantine civilization. Arjomand discusses in chapter 6 the forerunners to the sociology of Islam from sociological theory's classical period onward. He argues that limitations of the Durkheimian approach in dealing with the transformative, civilizational impact of Islam as a world religion are due to the fact that it cannot be adequately explained in terms of its birthplace in the Arabian social structure.

He then turns to the work of Weber's student and colleague C. H. Becker, the author of *Islamstudien*, with the hope of in part unveiling Weber's own projected sociology of Islam. Marshall Hodgson's posthumous *Venture of Islam* (1974) is then highlighted as the pioneering second-generation study of Islam as a world religion. Its role in shaping "Islamicate civilization," as Hodgson called it, is emphasized. Arjomand argues that, through the Chicago Comparative Social Anthropology of Civilizations Project, led by the American anthropologist Robert Redfield, the influence of Weber and Jaspers was strong, albeit indirect. Be that as it may, Hodgson did not pay sufficient attention to the military and political importance of nomadic tribes in shaping the Islamicate civilization, Arjomand contends.

Conversely, Ernest Gellner, Hodgson's British contemporary who had worked on the Berber tribes of Mount Atlas, recognized the importance of the tribal component in the social structure of Muslim societies (Gellner 1981). He discovered Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) as its major theorist. In what he claimed to be his new science of history, Ibn Khaldun considered settled urban dwellers on the one hand and nomads of the desert on the other hand as belonging to two radically different forms of social organization to be found in all civilizations. The major changes under dynasties, in which prophets and religious reformers played pivotal roles, were accordingly explained in terms of two components of this dual social structure distinctive to the Muslim civilization: the interaction between the urban centers and the nomadic periphery (Arjomand 2019, 32–33). Gellner inventively extended Ibn Khaldun's paradigm to explain two forms of Islam: that of the Sufi marabouts in the tribal periphery and the "secularization-re-

sistant” Puritanism of the Muslim bourgeoisie. These groups established the dual social structure of contemporary Muslim societies. In his conclusion, Arjomand turns to Eisenstadt’s treatment of Islam as an axial civilization and its multiple modernities. The Jacobin variety, Eisenstadt maintains, is manifest in Islamic fundamentalism.

Marshall Hodgson also occupies the center stage in chapter 7, by Armando Salvatore. Here, Hodgson’s notion of “Islamdom” is viewed as a unique phenomenon in world history: a trans-civilizational multiverse rather than a universe. Islam spans entropically over vast distances in the Afro-Asian landmass and, *pace* Weber’s idea of a world religion and its core, which Salvatore sees as Euro-Christocentric, was not tied to a fixed origin. Instead, it constantly expanded into a powerful “black hole” endowed with a high capacity for trans-civilizational absorption and processing. Hodgson, Salvatore’s argument implies, short-sold the Islam-centered perspective for revisiting the very notions of “civilization” and “civilizational formation” by fitting them into an “Islamicate civilization” straightjacket, as discussed by Arjomand in the previous chapter (6).

Salvatore humorously points out that Islam was only half-heartedly admitted into the civilizational club by Eisenstadt, first, for it represented only a secondary—if not a “tertiary”—breakthrough into axiality. He acknowledged Islam only later as a full member, although even then arguing that Islam/Islamdom remains an awkward member of the club and a misfit. Thus, Salvatore challenges the appropriateness of the very concept of “world religion” to describe Islam and the suitability of using it as the core of an axial civilization comparable to the Western, the Chinese, and the Indian, as is done in the prevailing civilizational analysis paradigm. Salvatore’s argument, in a nutshell, is that the intercivilizational properties of Islam should be taken as the benchmark for the comparative analysis of other civilizational formations, including Eisenstadt’s Eurogenetic civilization of modernity. This provocative argument should be taken seriously.

In chapter 8, Yulia Prozorova examines the Byzantine axial legacy of Russia. Her account of how the medieval Rus joined what had been called the Byzantine Commonwealth directly focuses on the “religious-political nexus” that led Max Weber to characterize the religio-political structure of the Orthodox Byzantine and Russian empires as “caesaropapist.” During the fourth to six centuries of the Common Era, Christianity had become closely associated with Byzantium’s Roman imperial culture, which never underwent the so-called Papal Revolution of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Nor did Russia, as its heir, experience the Reformation that sundered Western

Christendom apart; instead, the land of the Rus succumbed to the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. As Prozorova explains, the Khans of the Mongol Golden Horde, who converted to Islam already in the thirteenth century, became the Tsars of Russia until—and even after—the rise of Muscovy in the sixteenth century. However, the rule of the Golden Horde gradually disintegrated and Muscovy was proclaimed the Third Rome at some point after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans.

As Prozorova shows in careful detail, the Orthodox Moscovite Tsars, as emperors of the Third Rome, transformed the *symphonia* between *imperium* and *sacerdotium* in the medieval Rus regime into the caesaropapist model. Russian Canon Law incorporated Roman imperial legislation and rescripts, including the maxim *princeps legibus solutus* (the emperor is above the laws), thereby placing the tsar, as the Roman emperor, above the law. Hence, the Orthodox Church gradually became a subdivision of the imperial bureaucracy. The relevance of this heritage should be evident to anyone aware of Stalin's restoration of the Russian Patriarchate during World War II and the post-1989 reestablishment of Orthodoxy as the official religion of Russia by Putin. Attention to these developments, however, would require a long chapter on Russia's multiple modernities, one beyond our scope here.

Our final chapter 9, by Eugene Halton, offers a critique of the axial civilizations paradigm for what it leaves out—namely, the earth and our rootedness in nature. Halton begins with a summary of his new book on John Stuart-Glennie (Halton 2014), whom he sees as offering a nineteenth-century precursor to Jaspers's idea of the Axial Age. Halton views the former formulation of it as superior owing to its grounding in an intuitive appreciation of nature.

He then provides an extensive discussion of D. H. Lawrence's tragic view of the Axial Age. According to Lawrence, the idealism of the Buddha, Plato, and Jesus (like the intellectualism of Weber and Jaspers) betrays a deep pessimism about life and alienates them from the living earth and the living cosmos. To this posture, Halton adds his own critique in the form of forgotten conversations with nature. Unlike Salvatore, whose critique engages with civilizational analysis constructively, Halton completely rejects the paradigm, owing to its severance of humanity from nature. As such, it offers a more radical critique than that of Salvatore; nevertheless, it too must be taken seriously.

Each chapter in this volume contributes to our understanding of the axial civilizations and to civilizational analysis in general. Distinct to each is a concern with the manner in which the world religions influenced the

conduct of believers. They did so in ways that—following Weber—“laid the tracks” for enduring, even millennial, “cultural values.” These values not only powerfully influenced the behavior of the faithful over millennia; they also set the *direction* for the development of civilizations for believers and nonbelievers alike. Hence, this volume sets major parameters for a further array of civilizational studies and a further array of cross-civilizational investigations.

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