



3-2024

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Recommended Citation

Greenfeld, Liah (2024) "The Rise of China and the Concept of Civilization: Constructing Conceptual Apparatus for Cross-Civilizational Comparisons," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 90: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol90/iss1/4>

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The Rise of China and the Concept of Civilization: Constructing Conceptual Apparatus for Cross-Civilizational Comparisons

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Abstract

The paper argues that the rise of China to a position of prominence in the contemporary world offers Western scholars a greatly expanded comparative perspective and, thus, an opportunity to re-assess their fundamental view of social reality. This comparative perspective draws attention to supra-national cultural unities, “civilizations,” first suggested by both Durkheim and Weber.

There are deficiencies in the current understanding of “civilization” in the social science literature, among others exemplified by “civilizational analysis,” and so this paper proposes a new concept which adds to the conceptual apparatus of sociological theory a new — fully independent of others — variant of the cultural process.

This independence makes distinctions between civilizations the root cause of socio-cultural diversity. Combined with the idea of humanity as a culturally constituted reality *sui generis*, this concept allows the construction of the theoretical scaffolding necessary for systematic cross-civilizational comparison and comprehensive understanding of social life.

Introduction

The decision of China to turn its nationalist energies to competition with leading Western powers for prestige and economic and political hegemony redraws the boundaries of the empirical world on the basis of which scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, rooted in Western traditions, has developed its understanding of human reality so far. The rise of China represents a unique event in the history of the Western world, for only of the relationship between this colossal society with the West it can be said with confidence that for a very long time, running into millennia, the two have developed virtually *independently* of each other.

Since 2008, the need to take China into consideration has been undeniable.

This new relevance of a huge chunk of humanity, with its 5000 years history, previously almost entirely disregarded and never *systematically* considered within the essentially Western “human science,” not only adds an enormous new reservoir of data but also likely adds a new reservoir for evidence contradicting accepted theories, puts in question its fundamental assumptions. We may be faced with a need (as well as an opportunity) to reconceptualize the socio-cultural world. It is quite probable that our “world,” which we equate with humanity and social reality as such, is only a part of the world, representing only a part of humanity and a particular form of social reality.

Even the most powerful and generally applicable of our explanatory concepts we must now suspect to apply only to our particular form of empirical socio-cultural reality, instead of pointing to mechanisms operative throughout it. Running the gamut of all the Western social sciences, the rise of China undermines their claims to universality and objectivity.

Adding to the analysis of culture the ultimate level of comparison, the rise of China at last allows for a meaningful definition of “civilization.” For the first time, the problem core to the modern understanding of cultural evolution can be approached objectively: is civilization one? That is, is all of humanity interconnected in a common process of development, or are there fundamentally different civilizations, with parts of humanity following their own separate cultural paths, independent of the cultural trajectories of other parts?

This, in turn, for the first time, allows for a reliable answer to the question of whether the modern society centered in Western Europe and North America, which has long been believed to spearhead the development of humanity as a whole, is indeed a vanguard of a general cultural process, or is it (a part of) one separate and independent civilization among several, with its own first principles, not representative of and not shared by the rest of humanity.

Moreover, it allows for an objective definition of its essential qualities and its outlines, historical and geographical — establishing them on logical and empirical grounds, rather than subjectively and arbitrarily, as has been the case so far both in common parlance and in scholarship.

Were it undertaken, a systematic comparison of the socio-cultural system in the last 500 years centered on West European and North American societies with the socio-cultural system centered on China would open several possibilities for social science:

- 1) construction of a consistent conceptual apparatus, appropriate for comparative socio-cultural analysis on multiple levels that includes a meaningful civilizational dimension, which may revise the current understanding of humanity;

- 2) the development of a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese socio-cultural reality, contributing at once to the ability of outsiders to interpret the worldview and priorities of the Sino-sphere, the practical importance of which today could hardly be exaggerated, and to its self-understanding, and
- 3) the development of a comprehensive understanding of what is alternatively referred to as “European,” “Western,” and “Judeo-Christian” civilization — i.e., the understanding of the actual extent and sources of this — our — cultural family, so important for the self-perception, identities, of its constituent populations, and therefore, politics based on these identities, as well as for a self-reflective and self-critical attitude.

The main aim of this paper is to take the first step towards the realization of the first possibility: to propose and explicate a new, logically-sound and empirically relevant concept of civilization.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the differences between the Sinic and all other cases usually included in cross-cultural comparisons go far deeper than all the profound differences among these cases (Bond, 2010, Greenfeld, 2019, Nisbett, 2003, Roulleau-Berger, 2016, Seligman and Weller, 2012). These radical differences are observable on all the levels of the cultural process, from the individual subconscious (e.g., perception) to the collective macrosocial (e.g., nationalism).

This suggests that humanity may indeed be divided into enduring self-sufficient systems, which unite certain to-a-degree autonomous traditions and societies, despite the differences between them, and which separate these traditions and societies, render them independent, from other systems of autonomous cultures. Such enduringly independent systems can be meaningfully called “civilizations,” justifying the addition of the concept of “civilization” to the analytical inventory of the study of humanity because it captures an additional variant of the cultural process.

What makes civilizations such a variant is the characteristic of enduring self-sufficiency, the independence of each civilization from cultural processes around it, which goes much farther than autonomy. In order to understand any autonomous culture fully, it is, in fact, necessary to take the additional level of the civilization to which it belongs into consideration.

The juxtaposition of China and the West, specifically, allows us to define civilization as follows:

A civilization is a distinct, self-enclosed, self-sufficient, and self-generating variant of cultural reality, that — for all intents and purposes independently of other such variants with which it may coexist — has developed over generations, multiplying in the process its interlacing traditions. It is an enduring, self-sufficient culture, with codified first principles, resistant to outside influences; mega- or meta-culture; mega- or meta-tradition, allowing for the existence of numerous specific cultures and traditions within the same set of first principles.

In this context ‘*enduring*’ means spanning many generations — at least five centuries; ‘*first principles*’ refers to binding, unquestioned values, ideas, and modes of thought that determine existential experience, and ‘*codified first principles*’ means principles embodied in the written language and transmitted through language itself. The more explicitly and consistently a tradition is formulated, the more durable it is. Written language allows for the most explicit and consistent formulations.

The juxtaposition of China and “the West” does not suggest a civilizational bifurcation of the world. There is little doubt, for instance, that Indic societies constitute a civilization of their own. No other existing “family of peoples” (Durkheim and Mauss, 1913) but Sinic and Western, however, can be claimed *up-front* to be essentially independent from each other in the course of millennia and thus mutually self-enclosed.¹

Comparative studies in the social sciences so far have been based on a very vague notion of socio-cultural process, and the idea of civilization, though occasionally used in them to great fanfare (Huntington, 1996) has not been of any conceptual help.

The term “civilization” has been brought back into scholarly discourse, after decades of banishment as antiquated and invidious, by a “promising” (Knoebl, 2011, Spohn, 2011) interdisciplinary trend of the past four decades, bearing the name of “civilizational analysis.”

Tracing its lineage to the research agenda in comparative historical sociology conceived as a general human science, set in the early 20th century in two short texts by Durkheim and Mauss (1913) and Weber (1920) but largely forgotten, civilizational analysis was inspired by dissatisfaction with the-then dominant in the social sciences structuralist-functional modernization theory, specifically its inability to account for the cultural diversity in the midst of convergent economic and technological development (Nelson, 1981; Eisenstadt, 1986), and, along with such theoretical reactions in particular disciplines as world history (including, among others, the “great divergence” one regarding separate developmental paths taken by China and the West, Pomerantz, 2000), global sociology, and new institutionalism in political science, catalyzed by the events following the collapse of the USSR.

The main goal of civilizational analysis has been to provide an accurate diagnosis of our time, replacing the uniform image of modernity presented by modernization theory with an understanding that would reflect today's reality. Its promise, however, as I shall explain in greater detail later in the paper, was not fulfilled.

The "civilizational turn" has not produced the results its proponents hoped for. Throughout the course of the last two decades, they have voiced the need to rethink civilizational analysis (Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004) and they have blamed the lack of return — on considerable intellectual investment — on the protracted youth of the approach.

The problem behind this delayed maturation has been the inability to produce a meaningful concept of civilization. Having made its discussion legitimate within the academy, civilizational analysis has continued to use the term exactly as it was used before and after the appearance and the oblivion of Durkheim and Mauss's, and Weber's, research agendas and during the time of its exile beyond the confines of reputable scholarship.

Seen as a bigger and more complex culture, "civilization" has referred to differentiated multi-societal frameworks (i.e., complex religions or societies) but also to the cultural development of humanity in general, often with the overtones of increasing differentiation and greater cultural sophistication of the later stages in this development over the earlier ones (Taylor, 1881; Elias, 1939; Toynbee, 1947-1957; Nelson, 1981; Eisenstadt, 1986; Huntington, 1996; Geertz, 2000; Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004; Knoebl, 2011; Arnason, 2018).

As it recognized no new qualitative dimension in the phenomena under investigation, the term has remained analytically useless, and the lack of a meaningful definition of its central subject has prevented civilizational analysis from developing a viable research program.

The constitutive feature of a civilization, as has been used so far, appears to be its multi-societal character, which equally allows for the term's application to particular complex cultures and to human culture as a whole. On the one hand, this has encouraged its use in reference to social groupings of any degree of differentiation (so that one can call any nation, any set of historical [e. g., modern] institutions, religion, or region a civilization, and any interaction between them an "inter-civilizational encounter"). This makes the term a synonym of any number of others. And, on the other hand, as a universal attribute it has been denied any place in comparative research.

As a result, civilizational analysis research, based on a vague intuition that civilizations are somehow important in accounting for human diversity, is divorced from theory and confined to the collection of various sets of data, however informative and valuable (Arnason, 1997, 2002; Eisenstadt, 1992, 1996; Arjomand, 2001, 2011; Nielsen, 1991; Huff, 2011, 2017), while civilizational analysis theory is reduced to the reiteration of its numerous contradictory statements and attempts, all unsuccessful without a meaningful definition of civilization as the first step, thus unable to resolve the contradictions between them.

The central failing of civilizational analysis is its inability to arrive at a meaningful definition of civilization. This, in turn, makes it unable to account for cultural diversity in the midst of global economic and technological development or to reach a reliable understanding of modernity, and it is at least partly due to the fact that until very recently systematic cross-cultural comparisons were in effect limited to about half of the human world, within which half societies of Western Europe and North America in the past 500 years (i.e., the modern period) constituted the center.

For the last 1500 years, since the emergence of Islam and long before they acquired their dominant position in it, these societies have been a part of a much larger social system, to other parts of which they have been connected by complex relationships, changing but uninterrupted. They and these other parts of the system have been the significant others for each other, always mutually relevant, always to be watched, whether as friends or as enemies, clients, or patrons. Islam evidently belonged, but East Asian societies did not belong to this system of relationships. East Asian societies were not significant, irrelevant for this system through most of the period, and for this reason not watched. The fact that they also represented a quarter of humanity in this system was hardly recognized and rarely kept in mind.

Because of the ultimate dependence of scientific knowledge, i.e., objective knowledge of empirical reality, on the logic of no contradiction, which makes contradiction by evidence the utmost check on proposed theories, all theories that go beyond speculations and descriptions, rather attempting to make sense of reality, must rely on comparisons. Only comparisons in the world that is relevant present themselves to us. Even when intentionally casting about for contradictions, scholars would limit themselves to that world.

Until very recently Sinic societies were not relevant for the social sciences and humanities: they were not a focus of attention, did not constitute a special category, and no distinction was made between them and other “others.” This was true of Western “human scientists” with very few exceptions; even Sinologists were not aware of the profound significance of the differences between East Asian and other cultures, more present to us. That is why “civilization” could stand for any complex “culture.”

The cultural confinement of the Western societies and their science of humanity within an interdependent, very large but still limited cultural system, has naturally encouraged them to substitute their half of the world for the world in its entirety. It has not only prevented the development of adequate knowledge about the other half, but also reduced their — our — ability of self-understanding. Lacking a similar — interdependent within but independent from our system — cultural system for comparison, we were doomed to repeatedly *describe* our limited “world,” never zeroing in on its organizing principles, always stressing one or another subjectively chosen characteristic. The oscillation between considering it the vanguard of the civilization coextensive with humanity or several to-a-degree autonomous civilizations was inevitable.

Likewise irresolvable was the debate over its name. It was impossible to adjudicate between and assess the commonly proposed alternatives: that Europe constitutes a civilization in its own right; that it is a part of a larger cultural family, conventionally referred to as “Western civilization”; that the essence of this civilization is Christianity with its source in the Hebrew Bible, making “Western” a synonym of “Judeo-Christian”; or that, rather, it is based on the Greek, and then Roman, pagan antiquity. The undeniable relevance of Islam to those who have called themselves Europeans, Westerners, Christians from the moment of its emergence 1500 years ago — against the background of China’s previous irrelevance — logically leads to the conclusion that the first principles of our civilization — its essential qualities — derive from *monotheism* and that it should properly be called “the monotheistic civilization.” ²

Thus, the rise of China, which brings a comparable self-contained world to our scholarly consciousness, forces us to regard our world as one among several possible worlds, and not as a necessary, natural development. And, for the first time, we are in a position to raise ultimate empirical questions about ourselves: *Why does our world exist at all? What made it what it is?* In other words, for the first time we can approach our own civilization *systematically*.

Current Understanding of Civilization

The first call for a focus on civilizations in sociological research is found in the famous 1913 *Note sur la notion de civilisation* by Durkheim and Mauss. Specifically, the note urges the recognition of the level of social structures and processes within “ideational [symbolic] frontiers” above the level of nations.

It may seem, Durkheim and Mauss write, that “collective life could not develop but inside political organisms, with definite [territorial] contours and clearly marked borders, that is, that national life is the ultimate form [of social life],” within which all the other “forms of social activity” are comprised.

But logic and anthropological research, they say, prove that “there are social phenomena which do not strictly correspond to a specific social organisms, they extend over areas which transcend national territories and/or develop over periods which transcend histories of any single society. They live a life which is in some sense supra-national.” The different facts or indices of this life constitute “complex and integrated systems, which, while not limited to a particular political organism, can nevertheless be located in time and in space. These systems of facts, which have their specific character, their own mode of being,” are civilizations (Durkheim and Mauss 1913).

Broadly comparative studies on nationalism — the nature of national consciousness and identity, and their political, economic, existential, and even psychosomatic implications — support the conclusion that there is a causally significant “form of social life” (to use Durkheim and Mauss’s phrase) above clearly, territorially, and historically, delineated societies. Further, a comprehensive understanding of social life — i.e., of the life of humanity, including the understanding of such societies and relations among them — necessitates taking this “supra-national” or civilizational level into consideration.

Specifically, it suggests that Eurasio-American societies belong to a separate “supra-national system.” Comparisons of England/Britain, France, Russia, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and Japan, for instance (Greenfeld 1992, 2001), prove that Japan differs from the very heterogeneous Eurasio-Atlantic societies studied more profoundly than all these societies differ among themselves, which is reflected, among other things, in Japan’s remarkable resistance to *ressentiment*.

A comprehensive study exploring the effects of nationalism on modern existential experience (the institutionalization of the psychological dynamics of love, ambition, happiness, and a dramatic increase in the rates of functional mental illness), *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience* (Greenfeld, 2013), confirms this.

While the emergence of nationalism in Euro-American countries within a generation raised the rates of functional mental disease in them by an order of magnitude, nothing of the sort happened in South-East Asian societies, which is indeed considered “a persistent puzzle” in epidemiology (Hopper, 2007). It appears that these societies are immune to the ravages of *anomie* (of which *ressentiment* represents a special expression). Such differences in psychological dynamics — differences of existential significance, impacting the nature of satisfaction and suffering — between two groups of societies on the same level of development (Russia certainly being no more developed, in terms of its quantifiable, political and economic, characteristics, than Japan!) mean that they constitute separate, causally significant cultural unities.

One area of scholarship specifically preoccupied with the concept of civilization — civilizational analysis — traces its lineage to the agenda set by Durkheim and Mauss in their 1913 *Note* and in the 1920 “Author’s Introduction” to the *Economic Ethics of World Religions* by Max Weber (Nelson, 1971, 1974, Weber, 1920, 1930, Tiryakian, 2004, Swedberg, 2010). With its two foundational texts written by founding fathers of sociology and most of its practitioners coming from historical-comparative sociology and macro-sociological theory, it advocates broad interdisciplinarity and claims adherents in history, philosophy, and cultural and social anthropology.

It is closely associated with the agendas of world history (McNeill, 1998, 1999, Spohn, 2011) and global studies (Robertson, 1987, Joas and Klein, 2010, Lechner and Boli, 2014), related to the world-system and world-polity (thus global neo-institutionalism) approaches (Wallerstein, 1974, Chase-Dunn, 1989, Boli and Thomas, 1997, Boli, 2006, Schmidt, 2008, Hadler, 2015, Huff, 2016), and, like these latter, descends from the “classical” (Marxist) modernization theory, dominant throughout the social sciences between 1950s and 1970s. However reluctantly, it also admits its kinship to certain 20th century philosophical (Spengler, 1918, 1922, 1932), historical (Toynbee, 1947-1957), and sociological (Sorokin, 1937-1941) traditions, grouped into the “civilizational approach.”

As an identifiable trend, “civilizational analysis” may be said to have begun in the 1970s and 1980s with the work of two scholars, Benjamin Nelson (Nelson, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1976, 1981) and S.N. Eisenstadt (1986a, 1986b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2003). Their work continues to orient civilizational analysis to this day and is the reference point of all its current practitioners, active throughout 1990s, 2000s, and the recent years (Arjomand, 2011, Arnason, 2018).

The “civilizational turn” of Nelson and Eisenstadt was inspired by the failure of the structuralist-functionalist modernization theory (to which Eisenstadt, in particular, had greatly contributed during his earlier career) to accurately describe — thus explain — the state of contemporary society, modernity (Knoebl, 2011). The theory regarded modernity as opposed to (in fact, as the opposite of) traditions, dividing the world into the two categories of traditional vs. modern societies, saw the attrition of traditions as an inevitable result of the essentially economic evolution of humanity, Western societies as the end point of this evolution and the goal of history, and predicted the imminent convergence of all humanity in a capitalist and democratic rational (free of traditional influences) modern condition of the Western model.

The uncritical dismissal of traditions, which they saw persisting everywhere around them, was what bothered both Nelson and Eisenstadt. To account for their continued presence, i.e., the continued presence of diversity, which contradicted the elimination of differences predicted by the modernization theory, in the midst of modernity, they turned their attention to the grandest of all traditions — civilizations.

The understanding of “civilization” as a complex, exceptionally broad, and very durable tradition was common to the Anglophone general and scholarly discourse. The term entered Anglophone scholarship as a synonym of “culture” through E. B. Taylor’s 1881 *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization*. It remained the preferred designation for differentiated multi-cultural complexes as opposed to simple, limited in their scope, cultures. (Kroeber, 1963, Geertz, 2000).

This understanding of “civilization” was consistent with the way Durkheim and Mauss used the term in their *Note*. Nelson, who in 1971 translated the *Note* into English (Nelson, 1971), took this consistency for the identity of conception, and believed he was realizing the agenda set by the pair. He, therefore, stressed their multi-societal character and historical durability as constitutive of civilizations (as what transformed a culture into a civilization) and, in his empirical research, focused on religious, philosophical, scientific traditions, in which “cultural productions” were of the “highest level” and which defined fundamental categories of thought. Such traditions were “civilizational phenomena” (Nelson, 1973, 1981, Nielsen, 2001).

This conceptualization did not separate “civilizations” from other cultural phenomena and left unclear why some traditions persist over prolonged periods of time and stretch over multiple societies, but simply postulated that they do. The only explanation was purely historical, that is, contingent, constituting in each particular case an *ad hoc* account of the kind “this is how it happened” and providing no analytical apparatus for systematic comparisons between civilizations and discovering the ways of life, the *modus vivendi*, peculiar to them.

Yet, it was this comparative analytical agenda that Durkheim and Mauss envisioned. One would “study what are the reasons for the variance in the areas of civilizations, why the spread of [civilizations] stops at certain points and not others, what forms they take and the factors that determine these forms. All the questions that...are posed regarding political frontiers can be posed regarding the ideal [symbolic] frontiers [of civilizations]” (Durkheim and Mauss, p. 6).

The fact that civilizations constituted larger frameworks which “dominated and enveloped” collective lives of nations implied that the *causal* significance of systematic cross-civilizational comparisons was enormous — finally, it was in civilizations that *the diversity of social life* was rooted.

Nelson misunderstood Durkheim and Mauss and, as a result, could not account for the persistence of diversity in the midst of modernity, which was what he wanted to account for. In fact, Nelson’s understanding of civilizations boiled down to the conception of *one civilization*, a “general march of the civilization,” moving through the “successive stages of human progress,” the view which Durkheim and Mauss specifically criticized in the case of Comte (Durkheim and Mauss, p. 5).

For Nelson it took the form of three successive “structures of consciousness”: 1) sacramental structures, characteristic of archaic cultures, 2) faith structures, characteristic of the Middle Ages, and 3) rationalized structures, characteristic of the modern period (Nelson, 1981). Nelson arrived at this schema despite himself, it could be said, because he considered such social evolutionary approach “unhistorical” (Nielsen, 2001). His work was self-contradictory and, as a result, could not be further developed. He died in 1977, having profoundly influenced several students — current practitioners of civilizational analysis who continue to study the historical contingencies of the perpetuation of particular ideas, adding to the stores of knowledge very valuable information. (Huff, 2011, 2017a, Nielsen, 1984, 1989, 1991).

In concentrating on particular areas of culture in their historical research, Nelson and his students have followed the example of Max Weber. And it was Weber who was chosen as the model by the other pioneer of civilizational analysis, Eisenstadt. He modelled his work, in particular, on Weber’s comparative studies of world religions (Weber, 1905, 1915, 1916a, 1916b, 1920, 1921).

Weber’s 1920 “Author’s Introduction,” the second foundational text of civilizational analysis, distilled the ideas developed in the course of these studies into clear theoretical principles and a research agenda. Weber’s goal was to understand a particular — Western — “cultural world” (*Kulturwelt*).

For reasons that had to do with the old ideological “culture vs civilization” dispute going back to the early (German) Romantics and involving French and German national identities, in which the organic German “Kultur” was opposed to the artificial French “civilisation” (Greenfeld, 1992, 2017, Shaefer, 2001), the word “civilization” was (and still is) rarely used in German and never appeared in the “Author’s Introduction” (Swedberg, 2010).

Weber’s “cultural world,” however, would be recognized as a civilization by Durkheim and Mauss. Like them, Weber believed that specific, clearly delineated socio-cultural entities (with nations being the most comprehensive of these in the modern period) were subsumed under the cultural framework of civilizations. He maintained that it made no sociological sense to talk about one civilization coextensive with humanity, because such a concept had no explanatory purchase (and, specifically, could not account for socio-cultural diversity). Rather, civilizations in the plural, in contrast, had a great causal significance, for the most profound differences among human groupings could be attributed to them, and any civilization could be understood only in comparison with other civilizations.

Weber’s pervading interest was to understand his own civilization, which he called Western, especially its claim to universality.

Weber's question as to why in the West and only in the West "cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we would like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value" is generally misinterpreted as implying the reference to other civilizations' recognition of such universal significance of the West or, worse, that Weber himself believed that Western civilization, as a matter of actual fact, had such universal significance.

The parenthetical remark "as we would like to think" strongly suggests, rather, that the question probed the peculiar Western conviction — the *claim* of Western civilization to universality. His comparative studies were undertaken to answer this question. Remarkably, while Eisenstadt explicitly modelled his own intellectual agenda on Weber's, his thinking developed in a direction contradictory to the principles formulated in the "Author's Introduction."

Eisenstadt's influence on civilizational analysis has been far more profound than Nelson's (Arjomand, 2011, Arnason, 2007, 2017, 2018). It was undoubtedly due, to begin with, to the fact that he was a very active practitioner and one of the most active organizers of this trend of scholarship until his death in 2010. In addition to contributing to the literature a large number of his own essays and monographs (Eisenstadt, 1982, 1986a, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002, 2003) he edited or co-edited several most influential collections (Eisenstadt, 1986b, Sahsenmaier, Reidel and Eisenstadt, 2002, Arnason, Eisenstadt and Whittrock, 2005), which helped to create among the authors the sense of participation in a common project and establishing civilizational analysis as a field in its own right, almost a discipline.

In the meantime, the current was gathering adherents. It was catalyzed by the events of the last 35 years: the end of the Cold War and the subsequent explosion of identity-related conflicts around the world.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, a fixture in the social science imagination of the preceding 50 years (the discipline of Sovietology reflected its presumed permanence) proved a shock. Neither were social sciences prepared for the rise in the political importance of religion, in many cases replacing Marxism, which was discredited and losing its appeal as a political ideology around much of the world.

Modernization theory failed to predict any of this, even though the collapse of communism could be interpreted as the long-awaited convergence of humanity in the final evolutionary (capitalist and democratic) stage of development first reached by Western societies. Indeed, the discourse of "globalization," which upheld the old idea of one civilization (Richardson, 1987), carried on the modernization paradigm (Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004) and some even spoke of the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992).

But human diversity, freed from the effective restraints of the bi-polar order, reasserted itself vigorously and did not leave the ostensibly triumphant West much time to celebrate. Under these circumstances, “motivated by sociological ambitions to achieve an appropriate diagnosis of our own time” (Knoebl 2011, p.16), civilizational analysis in the 1990s acquired new appeal. Eisenstadt’s ideas on civilizations, already developing for some time and appearing in a succession of contemporary publications, provided a ready point of reference.

Unhappy with the modernization theorists’ obliviousness of traditions, Eisenstadt already in the 1970s replaced the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, the latter inevitably driving the former out, with the idea of traditions reconstituting themselves in the direction of modernity (Eisenstadt, 1974). This framework, in which modern societies could be viewed as “post-traditional,” led to the postulation of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000a, 2002, 2003, Arjomand, 2011).

To shore this new conception up, Eisenstadt turned to Karl Jaspers’ thesis on the “Axial Age” (Jaspers, 1953), the period between 800 and 200 BCE Jaspers identified as the time when a major breakthrough in human consciousness “towards reflexivity” occurred in a number of regions in Eurasia, laying the foundations for several world cultures, or civilizations. Perhaps to explain why this happened at that time, Eisenstadt then characterized certain combinations of factors (specifically, the combination of religion and politics, or of “ontological” ideas, state structures, and elites, Eisenstadt, 1982, 1993, 2001, Arjomand, 1993, 2004a, 2006) as “axial syndrome” or “axial constellation,” producing civilizations. By assimilation this led to the identification of religion and politics, in particular, as “axial components” and of civilizations produced by “axial constellations” as “axial civilizations,” whenever they emerged.

The emphasis shifted from an axial, that is, pivotal, turning *period* in history to pivotal *mechanisms*, responsible for the turn, the question — imperceptibly — pivoting from “what is a civilization (or any tradition) and how does it survive?” to “what constitutes (typologically, not historically) a pivotal, axial moment?” The project became one about the structural conditions of (any) social change, rather than about the character (contents) of a particular “world” (community, social grouping) located in time — or civilization, as in the research agendas of both Durkheim and Mauss and Weber.

A further complication resulted from the fact that “axial civilizations” could nevertheless also refer to civilizations that emerged in the “axial age” of 800—200 BCE and that the development that actually interested Eisenstadt and the increasing number of his followers was modernization. That all societies (and traditions) would modernize in the sense of becoming *like* Western capitalist, democratic, scientifically oriented and technologically advanced nations, i.e., that socio-cultural evolution was unilinear and teleologically directed, was assumed in civilizational analysis.

This assumption was reflected in another central Eisenstadt concept — the global “civilization of modernity,” organized around a distinct image of reality, its cultural ontological core, and its characteristic institutions (such as democracy). This concept directly contradicted the argument of multiple modernities, which, against its background, could no longer refer to the persistence of robust cultural (civilizational in the sense of the classics) diversity and was reduced to a very limited diversity in levels of development of the same cultural-institutional complex and at most emphases in interpretation of the same ontological vision.

Both Eisenstadt himself and his followers tried to resolve this contradiction.

“Although this civilization,” wrote the editors of *Rethinking Civilizational Analysis* (Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004, p. 3), regarding modernity as a civilization, “originated in Western Europe, it has become a global civilization with the continual development, constitution, and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs of modernity and modern institutional patterns. It is thus a civilization of multiple modernities, both in the sense of containing totalistic and pluralistic cultural and political appropriations of the program of modernity, which stand in constant mutual tension, and in the sense of culturally specific adaptations to modernity of different countries and civilizational regions.”

But modernity either was a specific type of socio-cultural organization (a specific form of social life, to use Durkheim’s terms, or a specific cultural world, to use Weber’s ones) or was not. The belief that humanity was culturally one, following essentially the same path of cultural evolution directed towards a specific, predestined and predictable *telos* stood firm in the face of empirical evidence of undiminishing cultural diversity. Combined with this belief, civilizational analysis could no better account for this diversity than the theory of modernization, which explicitly denied diversity, or its direct descendants in world-system and world-polity analyses, globalization paradigm and various global approaches.

The concept of civilization was increasingly diluted. Meaning the development of humanity in general, it was deprived of any causal — and, in fact, any empirical — significance. At the same time, it was constantly used in the plural, but as a result of the inconsistency of such usage, as well as to avoid creating an invidious impression (which the concept of one civilization, led by Europe, definitely created, Elias, 1939, Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004), it was felt, apparently, that any culture deserves the name. Any cross-cultural encounter became an “inter-civilizational” encounter. Every situation could be interpreted as inter-civilizational as well as intra-civilizational.

Thus, while every discussion that used these terms would be, by definition, considered broadly comparative, the concept became increasingly inapplicable to systematic empirical comparative research.

Methodologically, the result has been that, while constantly paying lip-service to the methods recommended by the classics (Durkheim and Mauss, and Weber), theory became increasingly separated from empirical research. Theory (especially macro-sociological theory) goes one way, manipulating concepts of civilization and modernity and unable to explain anything concrete, and empirical investigations (called forth by issues of the day) go in many directions, frequently using the *terms* of civilizational analysis as a professional identity marker, but independent of any theoretical orientation. Much rich information regarding diversity is accumulated in social and cultural anthropology, sociology, political science, and history, but all of it awaits synthesis and interpretation.

Logically inconsistent theories cannot develop. Just a decade after its emergence as the most promising direction for macro-sociological and general social science theory, the only one capable of accounting for human cultural diversity and making sense of our time (Knoebl, 2011), civilizational analysis reached an impasse. Calls were sounded for “rethinking” it (Arjomand and Tiryakian, 2004).

Its difficulties were explained in 2007 by the fact that it was “a paradigm in the making” (Arnason, 2007); in 2018 — after four decades since the beginning of its latest revival (Mazlish, 2001) and two since it reached the height of its popularity — it was described as “a project still in the process of defining its tasks,” the “state of the art” making it “premature to propose a systematic survey of its approaches” and its “program [being] still in an early stage of formulation” (Arnason, 2018, pp. xiv-xxi).

Theoretical discussions have been limited to reiteration of Nelson’s and (mostly) Eisenstadt’s statements, attempts to accommodate their shared and separate contradictions within the same framework (a task that, after Eisenstadt’s death mainly devolved to Johann Arnason, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2017, 2018), arguing *sotto voce* about who of the two recognized leaders of the revival was more seminal or more faithful to the classical agenda of Durkheim and Mauss and Weber, approval of Arnason’s slight deviation from Eisenstadt and its reticent criticism (Knoebl, 2011, Spohn, 2011), and claiming any scholar of repute who has ever used the word “civilization” in the last 70 years as a practitioner of civilizational analysis, if sometimes, like Clifford Geertz, a “reluctant” one (Arnason, 2018). One must conclude that the very promising “civilizational turn” has not advanced the understanding of human reality.

The root problem of civilizational analysis has been the inability to develop a logically consistent and empirically informed definition of “civilization.”

This problem was due, in the first place, to the lack of an articulate and systematically examined understanding of cultural and social reality in the social sciences and humanities, in general.

The other reason for this inability was the lack of an adequate comparative perspective because of the very limited familiarity with China, in particular — an obstacle that was eliminated by the recent rise of China to the attention of Western scholarship.

Taking advantage of these newly expanded comparative resources, as I have suggested earlier, we can, finally build *a logically consistent conceptual apparatus for systematic cross-civilizational comparison*, beginning with a logical definition of “civilization,” empirically informed by the existing specialist knowledge about world cultures and methodically tested against the knowledge gained in the comparison between the Chinese and the “Western” (“monotheistic”) civilizations, and embedded in the comprehensive understanding of cultural and social reality, already partly developed in the earlier comparative-historical and transdisciplinary examination of nationalism — and, more broadly, modern culture (Greenfeld, 1992, 2001, 2013). Such conceptual apparatus, in turn, would make possible the implementation of a new research program — the actual systematic cross-civilizational comparison, to be hopefully continued for a long time.³

This research program would lead to a reliable understanding of the overall character of both civilizations, establishing their spatiotemporal outlines and developing a set of hypotheses that could be continuously tested by scholars around the world, (who would expand cross-civilizational comparisons into areas only marginally touched at the initial stage and into other civilizations), specifically considering in an objective, non-Euro- or Western-centric manner the question raised by Weber, why in the West and only in the West cultural productions emerged believed to have universal significance, without presuming the factual nature of such universal significance or that Western societies are the model for others to follow invariably and that all roads inevitably lead to Western-type (capitalist, democratic, scientifically-oriented) modernity.

Conceptual Apparatus for Cross-Civilizational Comparisons

Systematic comparisons lie at the basis of all scientific investigations, constituting the essence of the scientific method in physics and biology as well as in the studies of humanity aspiring to objectivity. Systematic comparison is the only way to test hypotheses about empirical reality — a *sine qua non* of logical deduction, by means of which science advances, induction (i.e., inferences from data upward), as proven already by Hume, never being sufficient for the purpose.

The use of systematic comparison allowed physics and biology to advance rapidly and persistently. If no such advancement has characterized human sciences, this has been due to the deficiencies in using the comparative method, the unmethodical (unsystematic) use of comparisons, as demonstrated, *inter alia*, by civilizational analysis.

A systematic comparison is a comparison between phenomena within the same category (i.e., Granny Smith apples and Red Delicious apples); distinct categories can be compared (as phenomena of the “category” category, for example, as apples and oranges in the “fruit” category) to distinguish one category from another, but phenomena belonging to distinct categories are incomparable.

This means that systematic comparison presupposes:

- a) a clear definition of the category within which comparisons are made and
- b) clear definitions of phenomena compared — to make sure that they belong to the same category.

Simply drawing on a number, however large, of phenomena, without a careful preliminary definitional work, does not qualify as comparative method: methodologically, this is nothing but haphazard jumbling of unconnected elements of reality — apples and oranges.

The study of humanity, in general, has been woefully impeded by the absence of a clear understanding of what separates this central subject matter itself from other categories of research (subject matters of biology and physics).

Instructively, so was biology by the absence of a similar distinction between life and matter before the appearance of Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection. Pre-Darwinian biology did not develop, it stagnated for centuries. It was confined, as natural history, to description and classification of enormous amounts of data, and unable to formulate testable hypotheses that would interpret them — between two theoretical possibilities: that life was reducible to the (physical) laws of matter (the materialist position), which empirical data consistently refuted, and that it was the embodiment of some *élan vital* (the vitalist position), which was not empirically accessible at all.

Darwin’s theory of evolution (Darwin, 1859) separated life from matter as a category of reality: it postulated a general law, applicable to all of life, which was irreducible to the laws regulating inanimate matter and yet existing within their boundary conditions, that is, logically perfectly consistent with them. This made possible the view of life as a reality *sui generis* — an autonomous *emergent* empirical reality — and enabled biology as the focused study of this reality (Polanyi, 1968, Corning, 2002, Chalmers, 2006, Clayton, 2006). Having been thus released from the dependence on physics, biology has developed at an ever-increasing pace.

Similarly to pre-Darwinian biology, the study of humanity is stuck between two unproductive alternatives: a reductionist position (based on the implicit belief that humanity is an essentially biological phenomenon, one biological species among others, better developed than others, and that human history is the continuation of the biological evolution of this species) and a position fundamentally claiming scientific inaccessibility of the causal factors in human reality, because of the inescapable subjectivity of this reality. The former cannot categorically separate humans from all other animals, recognizing only quantitative distinctions between the subject matters of human sciences and life sciences.

So, implicitly but decidedly, this makes the science of humanity a sub-discipline of biology, its poor and ill-informed relative, in fact (because so few practitioners of social sciences and humanities can claim any familiarity with even the basic notions of biology). The latter in advance admits the arbitrariness of every claim a social scientist or a scholar in humanities can make, implicitly but decidedly making the knowledge produced in these areas of scholarship unreliable and thus denying it authority.

In civilizational analysis, as in sociology and political science, in general, this position is expressed by the causally noncommittal stance and preference for the *narrative* approach (Arnason, 2018, Maines, 1993): the argument that all historical explanations are “just” “(theoretical) *narrative*[s], ‘theoretical’ *stor*[ies],” the construction of which “requires the selection of events and structures for setting up a convincing ‘plot’” (Knoebl, 2011, p.17).

Such narratives are only as good as their plots are convincing, but the degree to which any plot is convincing depends, besides the narrative skills of the storyteller, on the readiness of the audience to be convinced, i.e., on what the audience already finds convincing, i.e., on its *prejudices*. Not only do these criteria have nothing to do with logic or correspondence of the *story* to the facts (the two elements which make a proposition testable and the imparted information reliable), but they also obstinately favor established, conventional, wisdom and discourage further development.

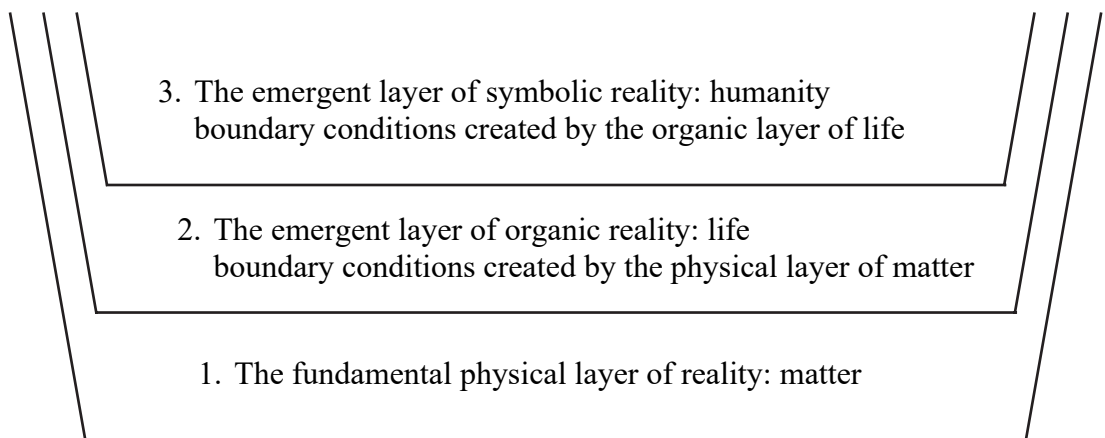
Following Darwin’s example, the science of humanity can escape this predicament if it separates its subject matter from the subject-matter of biology, defines it as a category. All that is needed for that is the comparison, within the category of animals, of humans with other animals (analogous to the comparison of apples and oranges within the general fruit category). Comparative zoology, in other words, is the basis for objectively distinguishing humanity from non-human animals.

The comparison with other animals immediately highlights the astonishing variability — diversity — of human societies, human ways of life, against the relative uniformity of animal societies, i.e., ways of life, even among the most social and admittedly intelligent animals, such as wolves, lions, dolphins, or primates.

Keeping in mind the minuscule quantitative difference in the genomes of *Homo sapiens* and chimpanzee species, for instance, which does not even amount to 2%, it is clear that the enormous difference in variability of ways of life cannot be accounted for genetically, that is, in terms of biological evolution. Instead, it is accounted for by the fact that, while all other animals transmit their ways of life, or social orders, primarily genetically, within humanity ways of life are transmitted primarily symbolically, through traditions of various kinds. It is this *symbolic transmission of human ways of life*, to which the term “culture” implicitly refers, which radically, qualitatively, separates human beings from the rest of the biological animal kingdom.

This reliance on symbolic, or cultural, transmission allows the *treatment* of humanity as a reality *sui generis*, an autonomous *emergent* reality irreducible to the biological laws of the organic reality of life, even though obviously existing within the boundary conditions of these laws, just as life — as established by the law of evolution by means of natural selection — is treated as an autonomous emergent reality, irreducible to the physical laws of matter but existing within their boundary conditions.

Empirical reality in general then can be imagined as consisting of three layers, the upper two of which, the organic and symbolic layers of life and humanity, are emergent, as in the schematic representation below (Greenfeld, 2013):



The argument made here is not ontological, but methodological: just as Durkheim advises in *Methods* (Durkheim, 1895) to treat social facts as things, without committing oneself to any ontological position, humanity here is *treated* as an emergent reality, irreducible to organic reality. Having categorically separated humanity from the subject matter of biology, we can focus on its distinguishing — autonomous — characteristics, leaving biology aside and establishing the study of humanity as an independent line of scientific (logical and empirical) inquiry.

Among other things, this argument suggests that the focus of several important sub-disciplines in this study has been misplaced by nomenclature, that is, by (mis)naming them “social” sciences, since the distinguishing characteristic of humanity, which defines it as a category, is not society (society being a corollary of life among numerous animal species, beginning with insects), but the symbolic process of transmission of human ways of life accounting for their striking variability, culture.

A central implication of the view of life and humanity as emergent phenomena, autonomous but existing within the boundary conditions of layers underneath them (i.e., impossible without these boundary conditions) is that all regularities within these emergent realities must be logically consistent with the laws operating on the underlying layers.

This, in turn, presupposes that every regularity postulated about humanity (every generalization, every theory), to be seriously entertained and acceptable within a scholarly discourse pretending to any degree of reliability, must entail mechanisms that relate this regularity to the human animal organism, mechanisms of translation or mapping onto the organic world. The recognition that humanity is a symbolic reality implies such a mechanism: it connects every regularity in the symbolic reality to the human biological organism through the mind — the symbolic process supported by the individual brain.

The idea of the mind as the cultural process on the individual level — “culture in the brain” or “individualized culture” — was developed in *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience* (Greenfeld, 2013).

This understanding of the mind, in particular, allows us to offer a comprehensive interpretation, heretofore lacking, of the functional mental illness (from depression to schizophrenia) which ravages Western societies, helping to explain the disastrous trend of the growing rates of such mental illness in them, which before that evaded all explanation. The reasoning behind this explanation becomes clear when one realizes that the idea of the mind as “culture in the brain” makes the mind analogous to the processing of external (independent from the body) stimuli, e.g., food or air, in the organs such as stomach or lungs, i.e., to digestion and breathing.

It is easy to understand that both could be obstructed by harmful external stimuli, leading to disease even in the case of perfectly healthy organs. This makes it understandable how problems in the surrounding culture (i.e., certain ideas and values) can affect the biological organism, leading to an actual, medical disease. Such translation of cultural processes into organic ones dramatically increases the importance of cultural analysis.

A number of other characteristics of the subject matter of human sciences follow from its recognition as a symbolic (cultural) reality. They are logically implied in the nature of symbols. Symbols are arbitrary signs; the meanings they convey are defined by the contexts in which they are used. A context changes with the addition of every new symbol to it, i.e., constantly: every present meaning depends on the context immediately preceding it and conditions contexts and meanings following, the changes thus occurring in time. This means that symbolic reality is a temporal phenomenon — a process.

It must always be remembered that the concept of structure in the discourse about it is only a metaphor: nothing stands still in culture, it is *essentially historical*, in other words. One of the central difficulties in civilizational analysis and in the social sciences generally has been the reification of structures, treating them as causes, and, as practitioners recognized, insufficient understanding of the processual nature of phenomena under investigation (Arnason, 2018).⁴

The symbolic process, that is, the constant assignment and reassignment of meanings to symbols, or their interpretation, is actually happening in the mind, which makes culture an *historical and a mental process*. This necessarily involves psychology in the interdisciplinary discussion of civilizations — another weakness of civilizational analysis, which, while insisting on interdisciplinarity, never considered the importance of the discipline taking the mind as its focus.

The very preliminary understanding of culture charted here, which is only the understanding of what aspects of it must be studied, implies both continuity and contingency, the recognition both that the mind is creative and that its creativity is necessarily oriented by cultural stimuli operating on it from the outside. The relative weight of continuity and contingency in every particular case must be established empirically, but the relationship between them is a central question within every process.

It should be pointed out that Durkheim and Weber, both of whom envisioned a unified science of humanity, analogous to biology, with numerous subdisciplines, understood that the focus of this science must be on culture. This understanding was explicit in Weber's work (among other things, in originally defining the science he envisioned and eventually named "sociology" and of his own research agenda as "cultural history," but also in the unhesitant use of the term throughout his writings) and only implicit in Durkheim's, the word "culture" made problematic in France by the aforementioned, emotionally-laden and German-instigated "culture vs. civilization" dispute, pitting French and German national identities against each other.

Nevertheless, the cultural focus of Durkheim's opus is made evident by his emphasis on collective representations, the centrally important concept of collective consciousness, the insistence that the vast majority of social facts were mental, the use of "moral" for social. The two classics were also in agreement that culture was a process, not a structure (both would think it ludicrous to separate history from sociology — this would amount to separating research from its data) and that the active element in this process was the individual, namely, the mind.

In this sense, both Durkheim and Weber could be characterized as sociological *mentalists* (Greenfeld, 2015). This, mentalist understanding of humanity, which, unfortunately, neither of them got the chance to develop further, underlies their programmatic statements for civilizational analysis — Durkheim and Mauss's *Note* and Weber's *Author's Introduction*.

Reflecting the reductionist position of the social sciences in general, in turn however implicitly rooted in Marxism, practitioners of civilizational analysis from Eisenstadt on, though, for all their reverence towards the two founders, entirely missed that they were discussing cultural reality. Culture, within contemporary social science (and civilizational analysis which, ostensibly, regards civilization as a cultural phenomenon and tries to account for human cultural diversity) is understood as *an element, a special aspect*, of human social life like any other, political, economic, or whatnot. This is analogous to treating life itself as a special aspect of organic reality.

In civilizational analysis, if "structural" (mostly political) aspects of civilization or civilizations are not given equal weight with culture, the analysis becomes subject to accusations of "culturalism" (analogous to accusing the focus on life processes in biology of "biologism"), of which Spohn, for instance, accuses Arnason, who, under the influence of Cornelius Castoriadis (Castoriadis, 1975), in Spohn's opinion, places an excessive emphasis on the cultural "element" of the problem (Spohn, 2011).

It is this fundamental misunderstanding, inability to recognize in culture the very category within which all specifically human phenomena belong, that does not allow civilizational analysis to develop a logical definition of civilization and, therefore, to conduct systematic comparisons that would deepen our understanding of the human world and enable civilizational analysis to answer questions it has posed to itself.

The clear categorical definition of the subject matter of human social sciences — humanity, approached as an emergent phenomenon — makes possible its logical and empirical (scientific) study with a justifiable claim to authority and to producing reliable, objective understanding of this subject. Among other things, this also frees the student of humanity from the recourse to the narrative metaphor, intended as an excuse for the inescapable arbitrariness and subjectivity of the proposed interpretations.

Instead, one is encouraged to employ another metaphor: the building of a case, as in (especially, criminal) law. In distinction to telling a story, convincing to the extent of the author's skill and the audience's credulity, a legal case is the ground for administering justice, and as such is expected to be perfectly objective, that is strictly logical and corresponding to the facts. It is specifically required to establish motive (answering the question *why* the crime/a trespass is committed) and opportunity (answering the question *how* this is done, i.e., establishing the mechanisms through which the cause is translated into the effect). Building a case starts with a conjecture as to *why* and *how*, a preliminary hypothesis, or a tentative outline, i.e., a *definition* (to be examined and tested empirically in the course of investigation). The definition must contain the possibility of answering the why and how questions.

Civilizational analysis at no point arrived at a definition of civilization that allowed for systematic comparative work. While both Durkheim and Mauss, and Weber intuited that this process was qualitatively different from others within the same (i.e., cultural) category, they did not postulate what the difference was. Later representatives of civilizational analysis lost sight of the essentially cultural nature of civilizations altogether and, therefore, of the logical requirement to distinguish them from other cultural phenomena as the first step in their analysis.

Without exception, they defined civilization quantitatively as “the ultimate tribe,” “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.” (Huntington, 1996), *a multi-societal grouping* of any kind, taking purely descriptive remarks by Durkheim and Mauss for analytical statements and seeing them implied in exploratory (not systematic) studies of Weber.

This allowed for the common equation of civilization and religion, leading to the routine identification of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (as well as different forms of Christianity and Islam) as separate civilizations (Huntington, 1996, Arjomand, 2004b, 2010, Eisenstadt, 1992, 1999, Huff, 2017a, 2017b), for the view of modern society as a civilization as well as multiple modernities, of Europe as a civilization, Western society as a civilization, Eurasia as a civilization (Arnason and Wittrock, 2004, Arnason and Hann 2018, Hann, 2018a) and humanity in its entirety as a civilization, because all these are multi-societal groupings to one or another degree.

In fact, any nation can be regarded as a multi-societal grouping, beginning with such explicitly federal nations as the United States or Switzerland, and including Russia with its autonomous regions, China with its recognized minorities, and any other to any extent heterogeneous national collective. Indeed, even Japan — as close to homogeneity as a social grouping gets — has been considered a civilization by both Eisenstadt (1996) and Arnason (1997, 2002).

This, in turn, makes it possible to regard relations between the Mid-West and the coasts in the United States, between Switzerland and the European Union, between Japan and China, and so on as “intercivilizational encounters.” Everything without distinction becomes a subject of civilizational analysis, making it theoretically meaningless. But, on the basis of the methodological considerations above, it is possible to begin constructing the *conceptual scaffolding for systematic cross-civilizational comparison*, starting indeed with a methodologically-sound definition of civilization.

Let me reiterate: the focus of this definition is suggested by the new configuration of world politics and economics (as essentially cultural and processual phenomena as anything human, it must be remembered), which brings China, for a very long time generally regarded as irrelevant in the Western world (which never regarded either Russia or the Islamic world as irrelevant), prominently to the attention of Western scholarship.

The long-time irrelevance of China to the West implies that the West has developed *independently* from China (while it cannot be said that it developed independently from Islam or Russia from the moment these came into existence) and, therefore, justifies assuming that China too has developed independently from the West.

The very rare quality of (mutual) cultural independence makes possible a meaningful definition of civilization as qualitatively different from other cultural phenomena. Religions are autonomous but not independent, nations are autonomous but not independent, institutions are autonomous but not independent. All these cultural processes (or traditions, processes of symbolic transmission) are distinguished from each other by the nature of their autonomy. But civilizations, which are independent from each other, unite various autonomous traditions in cultural families and separate them from other cultural families.

Durkheim and Mauss refer advisedly to “familles de peuples” which are united in civilizations; practitioners of contemporary civilizational analysis equate these “families of societies” with any multi-societal groupings, forgetting that, to constitute a family, its members cannot be haphazardly thrown together but must be, as Durkheim and Mauss stress “*issus d’une meme origine*” (Durkheim and Mauss, p. 4) — be related to a common (in this case, cultural) source.

The cultural process is happening simultaneously on several levels, which can be analytically distinguished from each other, but cannot be empirically separated.

To begin with, there are the levels of the individual mind and the collective level, in general. But in the latter one can distinguish three levels (of processes of symbolic transmission, i.e., traditions), civilization being the most durable and causally significant level, subsuming the other two, which are:

- a) the level of social institutions, that is, to use Durkheim's original definition which underscores their cultural nature, in the sense of being both symbolic and mental, established "ways of thinking and acting" (Durkheim, 1895) in particular spheres of social life, such as economy, family, and politics, whose *autonomy* in each instance reflects the constraints of the sphere of life, and
- b) *functionally-integrated, geo-politically bounded systems* of social institutions — in the past mostly religions, today nations — whose autonomy is a function of the historically-evolved characteristic image of reality, with the system-wide organizing principles (systemic tradition) reflected in every institution and — which is worth stressing — in the shared identity of their members.

Civilizations are family sets of such autonomous systems, sharing the same (civilizational) first principles and, although not systematically related to each other, interdependent in their development.

As pointed out earlier, functionally, culture is the process of transmission of human ways of life. The chief mechanisms of this transmission are institutions or institutional traditions, which are aspects of each other. Institutions, as already noted, are ways of thinking and acting; traditions are spelled out from institutions, prescriptions/premises for or summaries/narratives of ways of thinking and acting.

As explicit formulations of thinking and acting, traditions may be said to support institutions, while institutions, which are expressed in thinking and acting, perpetuate traditions, keep them relevant, alive, developing. When the relationship between institutions and traditions is recognized, it follows that both institutions and traditions may be either specific to a sphere of activity (family, science, literature) or else general to a community of identity (religious, national, civilizational) and cutting across spheres of activity in it.

Identity, as explained in *Mind, Modernity, Madness*, is the central process in the mind, essential for its adequate functioning, and therefore general institutions and traditions override the specific ones and inform them (i.e., religious, national, civilizational institutions and traditions would inform family, economy, and politics).

As argued before, the more consistently an explicit tradition is formulated, the more durable it is, and only written language allows for consistent formulations.

Traditions may contain elements specific to themselves only (whether they are specific to a limited institutional sphere of life — i.e., economy — or general to a community of identity).

In other words, original to a tradition; or they may contain such specific/original elements in addition to elements derived or borrowed from earlier or more general traditions in which the original elements are embedded or to which they are superadded.

Only written language ensures identification of these elements and tracing continuities between layers of tradition (and therefore understanding of the institutional structure and cultural character of any given society). Purely oral traditions necessarily present themselves as original, separate, and discontinuous from developments of longer duration. It is impossible to trace their history.

Roots of all the recent (last 500 years) written traditions are found in the three ancient, 5000 + year old traditions explicitly formulated in written language: the monotheistic, the Chinese, and the Indian. These ancient, explicitly and consistently formulated general traditions are the three civilizations coexisting in today's world.

All the more recent written traditions, general and specific, can be traced back to them. They contain the first principles on which all the more recent written traditions are based.

Each collective level of the cultural process is the level explaining the similarities between particular processes on the level below it — despite the differences between these processes, explained by their autonomy. So, being part of the same institution would explain the similarities (despite the differences) between behaviors of particular individuals (the ways particular minds operate).

- Belonging to a nation would explain the similarities (despite the differences) between various institutions: e.g., family, economy, politics in the United States would share certain characteristics and differ systematically from family, economy, politics, let's say, in France or Russia.
- Belonging to a civilization would explain the similarities (despite the differences) between different nations: the USA, France, Russia *and* Turkey or Egypt, for instance, would share certain characteristics, bear a certain family resemblance, and differ systematically from China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, all bearing family resemblances of their own.

Explanation of every institution/tradition must be based, first of all, on the consideration of the history of its original elements (elements which define the tradition in question and separate it from all the others), and then on the consideration of all the prior traditions in which it is embedded, down to the first principles. This applies even to traditions/institutions which are imported.

For instance, a doctrine, such as Marxism, should be expected to be interpreted differently — and motivate different actions — in the United States and in Russia or, even more so, in China.

Interpreting it uniformly from the American point of view, as if such an interpretation is objective, would, for example, lead to the misunderstanding of a geo-political context and positions of this nation's geo-political rivals; indeed, it is quite likely that some of the most consequential conflicts of the Cold War, if not the Cold War itself, resulted from precisely such an “objective” view of the Communist ideology.⁵

The mind is the active element in the collective cultural processes on every level, constantly involved in their perpetuation and change, while being constantly affected, constrained and stimulated, by them. Civilizations constitute the *independent and thus fundamental* level of the cultural process on the collective level, in the sense of depending on no other cultural process on the collective level, but only on the mind in their origins, a framework subsuming all the others and subsumed in none, causally significant on every level below and ultimately responsible for cultural diversity in the world.

Conclusion

The definition of civilization proposed above may be reiterated here for convenience:

*A civilization is a distinct, **self-enclosed, self-sufficient, and self-generating** variant of cultural reality, that — for all intents and purposes **independently of other such variants** with which it may coexist — has developed over multiple generations, multiplying in the process its interlacing traditions. It is an **enduring, self-sufficient culture, with codified first principles**, resistant to outside influences; mega- or meta-culture; mega- or meta-tradition, allowing for the existence of numerous specific cultures and traditions within the same set of first principles.*

In this context ‘enduring’ means spanning many generations: transmitted over at least five centuries; ‘first principles’ refers to binding, unquestioned values, ideas, and modes of thought that determine existential experience, and ‘codified first principles’ means principles embodied in the written language and transmitted through language itself.

This definition fulfils the methodological requirement of possible answers to the questions of why and how a civilization exists, i.e., why and how it is independent — durably self-enclosed, self-sufficient, and self-generating. It is so because of its codified first principles, binding ideas transmitted through language itself and therefore determining existential experience, that is, forming the mind. *It is this paramount influence on the minds within it* that makes civilizations resistant to outside influences, erecting barriers of disinterest on the way of cultural diffusion.

The definition, therefore, makes possible the examination of the core question posed by Durkheim and Mauss: What determines the area in which a civilization can spread? What puts a stop to the spread of one or another civilization? It also makes possible the definition of the cultural family (i.e., civilization) to which European/Western societies belong as *monotheistic* civilization, including Russia and, most importantly, Islam, which, from the moment of their appearance, have been significant others for European/Western societies — thereby, in effect, answering Weber's question.

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Endnotes

¹ The conceptual framework based on this juxtaposition would provide for the understanding of limits to intercivilizational influences, allowing for the consideration of India. It should be applicable to all civilizations, past and present.

² The extensive implications of this proposition for our self-understanding, i.e., for the understanding of the social world on which Western social sciences and humanities have been focused thus far – its mode of thinking, values underlying its social institutions, its psychological dynamics, and behavioral patterns in every sphere of life, from politics to family relations – will be developed elsewhere.

³ As a suggestion, one might begin with studies of genesis and evolution in the history of civilizations (Eichenbaum 1929; Tynianov and Jacobson, 1928; Greenfeld, 1987) and of foundational texts, channels of transmission, and contemporary conditions of the "monotheistic" and Sinic civilizations.

⁴ This, among others, necessarily affected policymaking relying on social science, encouraging policy makers to focus on the salient features of any immediate situation to the exclusion of its context, which could not but lead to misinterpretations of the significance of these salient features and mis-assessments of relevant realities. This practice could be likened to attempts to interpret a film on the basis of a randomly chosen still shot.

⁵ Today, in the context of geo-political competition between the US and China, policy-makers must pay careful attention to the meaning of nationalism and capitalism -- a Western form of consciousness and Western orientation of economic activity, respectively, lately imported into China: what these phenomena signify, the actions to which they lead may be dramatically different in the two countries, and an accurate assessment of the geo-political situation depends on the anticipation of such differences.

These considerations apply equally to geo-political analysis in the inter- and intra-civilizational contexts. The logically and empirically valid understanding of the cultural processes involved would enable policymakers to assess accurately the positions of a nation's geo-political rivals *within* the civilization to which the nation belongs, as well as those in other civilizations, not to mention increasing their awareness of the nation's actual interests and motives.