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Theories in Dispute

Arnason, Johann P. (2003). *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions*.
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Johann Arnason's book is not for the feint hearted. A wide-ranging background in history, historical sociology, cultural anthropology and, to a lesser extent, philosophy, is essential to amply understand his work. At the same time, though, his book serves as an overview and summation of thoughts and theories that have led us, generally, to a broader view of sociological and historical issues, and him, particularly, to an adherence to civilizations (in the plural) theory. His premise calls for a return to the shifting paradigm of civilizations theory that he says has re-emerged in sociological thought.

In five chapters, which Arnason says can each stand on their own, he explores the rediscovery of civilizations; classical

sources; patterns and process; meaning, power and wealth as changing constellations; and the uses and abuses of anti-eurocentrism. In the first chapter, he examines the juxtaposition of culture and civilizations, Arnason paints a picture of civilizations comprising cultures, not the reverse, with cultures influencing, shaping, and helping to sculpt civilizations. Additionally, he makes the case for a study of civilizations rather than the study of civilization. The plurality of civilizations is not just an important distinction, but is actually a decisive one in Arnason's approach. Only such a viewpoint, according to Arnason, will expose the entire image of the evolution, interactions, development, and waning of civilizations through history and across time and boundaries. Futility lies in trying to study one civilization without studying in context and without looking at the broader scope of their influence of and upon each epoch. Comparative studies are only a part of this all-encompassing process. Moreover, a look at modernity must be pursued in tandem with civilizations study. Arnason criticizes both functionalism and structuralism as lacking in the pluralistic approach he sees as fundamental and the closure inherent in these as antithetical to an integrated view.

Arnason then examines the classical sources of sociological thought with an eye to fitting them into (or not) the civilizations model. Durkheim and Mauss are his starting point. Arnason sees Durkheim's work as seminal (his word) in the study of civilizations. Durkheim and Mauss articulated the concept that civilizations reach beyond the boundaries of

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nations, societies, and cultures and that the concept involves a plurality not previously emphasized. Durkheim's studies of religion are essential readings in understanding not only civilizations, but the progress of the academics of their study. Mauss then puts forth in unique detail the points on which civilization study should focus. "Max Weber's comparative studies are without any doubt the most important substantive part of the classical legacy." (pg. 86) His studies of the comparison of societies, changes in the context of religion, and "cultural areas" are indispensable in the formation of Arnason's standard of concept. While Arnason sees these three authors, whom he sees as essential contributors and innovators, and the others with which he finishes out the chapter, as informative and enlightening, their works are best viewed in the context of a civilizations theory, rather than taken as definitive on their own.

In "Patterns and Processes" (Chapter 3) Arnason analyzes the more modern works of Benjamin Nelson, S.N. Eisenstadt, Jaroslav Krejčí, and others. The cyclical view of history and societies is incomplete and does not allow the emphasis of diversity and pluralism needed to study civilizations. Patočka's comparison of primitive and civilized society emphasizes the important dimension of power (internal and external) in civilizations. Recent authors have brought a more global, balanced view to theoretical examinations. Nelson's work, meritorious in Arnason's eyes,

points to the interactions between and among civilizations. His study of faith traditions, transformations, and structures deserves a closer look, according to Arnason, though the Euro-centric emphasis of his work needs to be altered to a more pluralistic approach. Eisenstadt specifically calls for a civilizations theory. His highlighting of the diversity of modern societies, historical contingencies, and the sources and motives of revolutions has contributed to the return to the civilization paradigm. His study of Axial civilizations and the turning points that led them to be described as such, has shifted the simply evolutionary and cyclical views of progression. Philosophy and religion weigh heavily in Eisenstadt's approach. Krejčí concentrates on the human condition in his view of the world and its history. The religious view of a society, and whether it has a world-renouncing attitude, affects the civilization. A theocentric approach comes into play in Krejčí's estimations of sociological changes. How these civilizations approach encounters with each other (and the tensions those encounters produce) results in fusions and alterations of their respective courses.

Arnason names Chapter 4, "Meaning, Power, and Wealth: Changing Constellations" the central part of his current work. He compares and contrasts his tripartite (meaning, power, and wealth) with those of Marx (economic, political, and ideological structures), Eisenstadt's levels of social life (organizational, institutional, and cultural) and Giddens' social model (allocation, authorization, and signification)

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with others' demarcations of sociological entities and "ways of worldmaking" (pg. 199). His categories, he says, are a result of the "move from anthropological premise to units of social analysis" which leads to a "focus on economic, political and ideological structures as specific determinations of social-historical being" (pg. 212). He calls for a viewpoint which revolves around the institutional or organizational level (infrastructure) of society.

It is beyond the scope of this review to be able to articulate in a far-reaching manner the next steps of Chapter Four, so a basic outline will have to suffice. *The cultural articulations of the world*: Arnason continues, in this section, to reject the concept of a self-contained culture replacing it with his preferred, dynamic, interactive, diverse, cross-civilization view. He examines the state-centered and class-divided societies and the relation of cultural elites to these entities. Arnason, in his acknowledgements, specifically credits Cornelius Castoriadis's writings as the most influential in his own synthesis of concepts. His themes of the imaginary component of civilizations are important to Arnason who puts forth four aspects of this view. Societies develop an image of themselves and the world(s) around them. Self-images and world-images combine and play against each other to build a society's self-concept. These images result in a criterion of needs and goods. Subsequently, there emerges "the being of the group and the collectivity" (pg. 228.) The

disenchantment of the Enlightenment and the attempt at re-enchantment of the Romantic period are interesting examples in the role of the imaginary self/world-concept.

Religious tradition and civilization trajectories: Max Weber's work and the role of religion, and the re-reading of it, is the basis of not only Arnason's view, but that of a whole group of sociologists. Whether or not a religious belief leads a civilization to a rejection of the world plays a basic role in its view and approach to others. The transcendent nature of those beliefs contributes to the investment a civilization gives to those mores. A study of the principles and the actions of a group (on the large level) is instructive. In addition, the civilization's view of its religious elite, and the span of its religious authority, especially in relation to kingship and priesthood, gives another level of inspecting diversity and plurality. The role of the Supreme Being (for instance as divine legislator or as infinitely good or omnipotent) in the life of civilizations' constituents plays an integral role as well.

Politics and ideology: Along side of religion, especially in earlier civilizations, comes the issue of power and politics and ideology. The early kings were ostensibly given their authority (power) by divine decree (sacred kingship). This is linked, by Arnason, to the emergence of the state. He briefly discusses R. Bin Wong's development of the state through a quadrangle of challenges (difficulties faced), capacities (to use resources), claims (expectations of the state), and commitments (ideological principles). Arnason points out

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that the tensions between orthodox and heterodoxy are determinative in the path of a civilization, especially when the dominant view has standards of a universal nature.

The historic forms of economic life: Transitions of culture, with reference to the economics of a civilization have three major components, according to Arnason. The building block of the Neolithic era, especially in reference to the agricultural base, remained fairly stable. The origin of the state added to the diversity and plurality (a favorite pairing of Arnason) of the civilization affected the economy, particularly in relation to the division of labor. Cross-cultural trade which is closely related to state formation and to cultural exchange is the last in his list. Max Weber's contrast of the home economy versus the market economy is deemed instructive. Arnason follows with a discussion of capitalism, markets, money, material life, technology, state property rights, interstate competition, and commercial development and their relation to the trajectories of civilizations. His Marxist bent strongly shows in his discussion of money. For example he quotes Deutschmann's comment about the individual's search for wealth as "utopian" and he calls the concept of unlimited accumulation of wealth a phantasm which is present in the capitalist imagery.

Culture, institution and organization: the case of science: Lamenting the lack of attention given to the role of science in

civilization building, Arnason calls for an “interpretation of science.” (pg. 282) He touches on the waxing and waning of Arabic and Chinese scientific thought. It would stand to reason, though Arnason does not make this point, that our reluctance to conceptualize the scientific experience may be due to just that fact—it is mainly “our” (our civilization’s) experience and we lack the perspective with which to regard it, study it, and judge it.

Intercivilizational encounters: Rejecting McNeill’s approach to a unified civilization, Arnason more closely identifies with Nelson’s civilization theory as it relates to intercivilization encounters. Cross-cultural trade is the most obvious encounter, with its roots in capitalism. Particularly important is the economic interaction between the Islam and Chinese groups. But the spread of religion, principally Christianity and Islam, beyond boundaries is perhaps the most significant phenomenon in the realm of encounters. Notably missing in Arnason’s discussion of encounters is the role of colonization in civilization progression, though he touches on the subject later in another context.

Arnason’s section, *civilizational groupings*, is one of the most readable and engaging of the book, but it is unclear why a “grouping” is something set apart from other delineations in his work. He goes on in the rest of chapter to discuss changing boundaries, transformations, continuity (and discontinuity,) geo-cultural areas, and cultural memory and the effect writing has on it.

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In Chapter 5, Arnason purports to analyze the Euro-centric bent of social, historical studies and its uses and abuses, a subject which has been examined, and re-examined, in multiple other venues. His treatment sheds no new light on the subject. In fact, he may do well to examine his own sources of support for his thesis to see yet another Euro-centric approach. Finally, as almost a postscript on the whole presentation, he mentions the question of colonization. Why this area is set apart in a seemingly unworthy manner without being integrated into his broader concept is left to his explanation.

Arnason is obviously, well-read, and well-studied in the area of historical sociology and his book would serve well as a graduate text in this area. Leaving out his repetition of certain themes and terms would make the book more readable. Perhaps it was the power of suggestion at the outset that made this reviewer feel that the chapters were indeed separate treatments and then feel a lack of continuity or cohesiveness between them. His persistent focus on the “problematic” gives a negative bent to the work. More than pointing out where others and the arena of sociology have failed, one would prefer to see a more complete, non-reactionary treatment of Arnason’s own views without the clutter. Perhaps subsequent works of his will achieve this

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end. His book, though, deserves a place on the reading list of any historical sociologist.