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# The Cultural Turn and the Civilizational Approach

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## **Abstract**

The revival of civilizational analysis is closely linked to a broader cultural turn in the human sciences. Comparative civilizational approaches accept the primacy of culture, but at the same time, they strive to avoid the cultural determinism familiar from twentieth-century sociology, especially from the Parsonian version of functionalism. To situate this twofold strategy within contemporary cultural sociology, it seems useful to link up with the distinction between a strong and a weak program for the sociological analysis of culture, proposed by Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith. The strong program, also described as cultural sociology, stresses the constitutive role of culture in all domains and across the field of social life; the weak program, more precisely the sociology of culture, treats culture as a variable factor among others, and in some important respects subordinate to others. From this point of view, civilizational analysis is, first and foremost, a particularly ambitious version of the strong program: its emphasis on different cultural articulations of the world, as well as on the large-scale and long-term social-historical formations crystallizing around such articulations, adds new dimensions to the autonomy of culture. It also reinforces the hermeneutical stance of cultural sociology and cautions against the acceptance of mainstream explanatory models. On the other hand, the civilizational perspective highlights the variety of interconnections between culture and other components of the social world, and thus takes into account some of the themes favoured by the weak program.

## **Key words**

■ civilizations ■ culture ■ explanation ■ hermeneutics ■ understanding

The revival of civilizational analysis during the last decades of the twentieth century was closely linked to a broader cultural turn in the social and human sciences; similarly, the interest in classical sources of the civilizational paradigm went hand in hand with a more general rediscovery of cultural themes in classical sociology. As will be seen, civilizational approaches lead to distinctive views of the cultural field, often different from those grounded in other perspectives.

But to begin with, the defining problematic of civilizational analysis must be situated within the orbit of the cultural turn, and more specifically in relation to cultural sociology.

The distinction between a strong and a weak program for cultural sociology, proposed by Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, is a convenient starting-point for this preliminary mapping of the field. The two authors use the terms 'cultural sociology' and 'sociology of culture' to draw the same dividing line: cultural sociology then becomes synonymous with the strong program, and sociology of culture is equated with the weak one. As I will argue, the agenda of civilizational analysis can link up with the framework sketched out by Alexander and Smith, but it also gives a more specific twist to the basic distinction. Civilizational perspectives involve, on the one hand, a particularly strong version of the strong program. They represent, in other words, an attempt to theorize and thematize broader horizons and frontier areas neglected by the main currents of sociological thought. But they can, on the other hand, also serve to enrich and develop the weak program, by adding new dimensions to the social context of cultural patterns. To sum up, civilizational analysis is, in the first instance, an extension and a radical version of cultural sociology, but precisely in that capacity, it has to deal with an enlarged spectrum of factors and conditions with which 'culture intersects . . . in the concrete social world' (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 14).

### **The Strong Program: Culture as World-Articulation**

For Alexander and Smith, the idea of cultural sociology begins with the claim that 'every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive or coerced, vis-à-vis its external environments, is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning' (2003: 12). For present purposes, the focus is on constellations of meaning and their civilizational dimensions. Alexander and Smith spell out the basic principles of meaning-centred sociology in three steps which they describe as analytical and methodological; but as will be seen, all three points have to do with social-historical ontology, and this aspect becomes more visible when we add to each step the further implications needed to clarify the civilizational connection. The first step is a 'sharp analytical uncoupling of culture from social structure, which is what we mean by cultural autonomy . . . As compared to the sociology of culture, cultural sociology depends on establishing this autonomy' (p. 13). On this view, the sociology of culture may throw light on a wide range of social phenomena with cultural backgrounds or implications, but the inability to accept a radical autonomy of culture – and thus to move beyond a conception of culture as a dependent and adaptable factor of varying relative weight – sets strict limits to its insights. However, this autonomy and the 'analytical uncoupling' in which it is expressed call for a more substantive grounding. If culture is irreducible to social structure, that is primarily due to its meta-social dimension: the interpretation of the world (which may also be understood as a unity of world articulation and world disclosure). Civilizational analysts, classical and contem-

porary, have insisted on this aspect. Weber's 'cultural worlds', Durkheim's civilizational clusters of basic concepts that serve to structure the world, and Eisenstadt's 'cultural ontologies' are, in that sense, variations on the same theme. But the specific twofold activity of grasping and forming the world ('saisie du monde' and 'mise en forme du monde' are the expressions coined by Merleau-Ponty) has been explored more extensively from philosophical angles, external to the sociological tradition, and civilizational analysis can in turn draw on these sources – which cannot be discussed at length here – to distinguish its frame of reference from more widely used sociological models. If we adopt the phenomenological notion of the world as an ultimate, open and enigmatic horizon of meaning, the concept of a cultural problematic will seem more adequate than that of a cultural program. The latter is frequently used in Eisenstadt's writings; the former suggests a less determinate framework, compatible with different levels of elaboration and more open to divergent interpretations. These connections correspond precisely to points that have proved important to the analysis of cultural patterns on a civilizational scale. As for the underlying constellations of meaning that in the last instance set cultural problematics apart from each other, they are, as I have argued elsewhere (Arnason, 2003) best understood in terms of imaginary significations. Castoriadis introduced this notion as an antidote to all kinds of structural and functional reductionism, Marxist and non-Marxist; although not presented as such in its original formulation, it signals a particularly radical version of the cultural turn, and it has proved eminently adaptable to civilizational levels of analysis.

One further implication of the hermeneutical relationship between culture and the world should be noted. The multiplicity of world perspectives translates into a plurality of socio-cultural spheres, each of which crystallizes around a cluster of meanings, distinctive and cohesive enough to constitute world-forming patterns – microcosms of meaning – in their own right. This view suggests a model of differentiation, very unlike the more widely accepted conception of subsystems; it has not been elaborated by sociological theorists, but the most interesting classical adumbrations can be found in Max Weber's reflections on the 'world orders' (Weber, 1982). In this short but wide-ranging and still not fully appreciated sketch, Weber analyzes the major domains of social life as frameworks of meaning, with an inbuilt tendency to become self-contained worlds, but also coexisting, competing and sometimes colliding within a broader field. The argument applies to core institutional complexes, such as the economic and the political sphere, but also to the religious one, which comes closest to the role of a meta-institution, as well as the intellectual and the aesthetic one, where the institutional aspects are less structured. Weber's account of the world orders leaves much to be desired, but in view of the broader context, it seems clear that he was not referring to specifically modern developments. The text in question is a digression inserted between detailed analyses of China and India, and at least implicitly related to the claim that Indian traditions went further than Chinese ones in distinguishing between different domains of human life and spelling out their organizing principles. Rather than translating Weber's analyses into the

language of a pre-existing theory of modernity (as Habermas did in his very influential interpretation of Weber), it would seem appropriate to take it as a starting-point for a more extensive comparison between civilizational modes of demarcating, interpreting and evaluating basic socio-cultural spheres.

The Weberian problematic of world orders also has some bearing on the distinction between cultural sociology and sociology of culture. To clarify this point, we may begin with a quote from a historian who draws on contemporary theories of culture: 'If culture is the semiotic and semantic dimension of the social, the separation of culture and society makes no sense. Culture is not a particular domain of society, it is a dimension necessarily present in all domains' (Flaig, 2003: 12). This is a usefully pointed reminder of the question at issue, but not a satisfactory answer. The distinction between cultural sociology and sociology of culture presupposes that we can analyze culture at two levels: as a specific domain and as a general dimension; and we need a common denominator that would allow us to theorize it on both levels. As suggested above, the notion of imaginary signification would – so far – seem the most promising response to that problem.

This twofold character may also be described as the paradox of culture, and the task of theoretical analysis is to unfold it rather than to dissolve it. As a first step, the distinction itself must be duplicated. On the one hand, the factors or spheres with which culture intersects in the social field, particularly the economic and the political, are structured around inbuilt cultural orientations that lend meaning to corresponding activities and processes, but these orientations manifest themselves in more or less autonomous sectoral dynamics. On the other hand, the cultural premises that constitute an overall framework for social life are more explicitly articulated (and in some cases problematized) in some spheres than others; in Weber's terms, this applies primarily to the religious, the intellectual and the aesthetic spheres, and their autonomous logics add up to a rationale for considering culture as a particular domain. But its particularity consists in a specific capacity to express more general orientations, and to expose them to further elaboration and questioning. On closer examination, the religious sphere appears as a bridge between the two levels. It plays a key role in the development and codification of cultural perspectives on the world, but it has also – for much of human history – been decisively involved in the institutionalization of other spheres, in particular, the political one.

All these considerations indicate ways of developing the distinction between cultural sociology and sociology of culture, with proper emphasis on each side, and in conjunction with the specific agenda of civilizational analysis. To round off this part of the argument, the question of historical limits to the civilizational framework – and more particularly to its focus on culture – should briefly be raised. There is no denying that the comparative approach to cultural articulations of the world has proved most easily applicable to the major traditional civilizations; less has been done to develop our understanding of modernity along the same lines, and those who conceive of modernity as a post-civilizational phase of history (it would thus have achieved the 'exodus from civilizations' that

authors like Voegelin and Toynbee ascribed to universal religions) link this claim to some kind of supposedly universal world-view replacing more particular perspectives. When this universalizing turn is identified in conceptual terms, its core characteristics tend to reflect the Kantian demarcation of two worlds – the natural and the moral – governed by universal principles of cognition and conduct. Habermas's evolutionary model of a definitive differentiation into three worlds – objective, intersubjective, and subjective – is perhaps the most complex variation on this theme.

A civilizational view of modernity must relativize this line of argument. Here I can do no more than outline the main thrust of a debate that merits broader participation. Those who prefer to analyze modernity as a specific civilizational pattern (and therefore insist on specific contexts of the universalizing trends that are also an integral part of the picture) can point to several aspects of the modern cultural constellation. First, the presence of divergent or conflicting currents (as well as of attempts to reconcile or synthesize them) within modern interpretations of the world casts doubt on the idea of a unified and uncontested world-view. In particular, the complex relationship between enlightenment and romanticism has been an enduring source of diversity in modern thought, and is still a key theme for philosophers and historians of ideas working with pluralistic conceptions of modernity. A further argument in support of such views is the role of dominant images or significations that confer a certain degree of unity on the cultural and intellectual field, but are at the same time open to conflicting interpretations and thus conducive to a higher level of pluralism. Visions of human autonomy are the most obvious case in point; their central place in the modern imaginary is uncontested, but closer analysis encounters a whole cluster of different images with changing connotations and contrasting implications, on both sides of the abovementioned divide. Finally, it has been argued that modern transformations of the world-view – or, more precisely, of the general preconditions for world-view formation – are incomplete in the sense that they leave fundamental questions open, and that together with the ambiguity of key modern significations, this absence of closure leads to an ongoing appropriation of themes and arguments from older traditions. All these points strengthen the case for seeing modernity as a new tradition (related to others, as are the major historical traditions, but distinct from them), rather than an irreversible break with traditions, and that is already a significant step towards the idea of a new civilization.

### **The text as cultural pattern and as interpretive model**

In brief, the analytical distinction between culture and social structure presupposes an interpretive context that becomes more visible when we move to the civilizational level. With this in mind, the second step of the strong program should now be considered. It centres on 'the commitment to hermeneutically constructing social texts in a rich and persuasive way' (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 13). The hermeneutical aspect, latent in the first step, thus comes to the

fore and serves to justify a strong emphasis on understanding culture before going on to explain its interactions with social forces. This hermeneutical turn is explicitly aligned with the Geertzian procedure of 'thick description', applicable to the whole range of meanings in social life. But the main focus is on 'the notion of the culture structure as a social text' (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 14), not least because the paradigm of the text can draw on conceptual resources from outside the social sciences. The strong program thus joins the most representative hermeneutical thinkers – such as Gadamer and Ricoeur – in singling out the text as a model case of articulated, embodied and effective meaning, and therefore as a master key to the whole problematic of culture. The generalized notion of 'social text' stands for a whole spectrum of meaningful patterns, more or less directly linked to social practices.

Texts in the literal, non-metaphorical sense are of course an important part of the cultural world, although their relative weight and specific roles vary widely. But the textual model, meant to be incorporated into the strong program, does not simply stress a prominent and significant part of culture as a whole; it also proposes to explore pertinent analogies between the part and the whole. To use a language now less popular than it once was, the paradigm combines a metonymic and a metaphorical aspect. This twofold rationale for the textual model is an obvious theme for further reflection on its meaning, problems and limits. As I will try to show, a civilizational perspective – and more specifically a comparative one – can throw light on these issues. But before continuing the discussion in that context, a brief reflection on conceptual boundaries is in order; the implications of a civilizational viewpoint for specific issues – in this case the question of texts, their role and their paradigmatic status – will depend on prior demarcations, not least on the inclusion or exclusion of historical experiences.

Advocates of civilizational analysis have defined its historical horizons in three different ways. The most inclusive view applies the model of multiple civilizations to stateless societies (or primitive ones, to use a term that has fallen into undeserved disrepute, but need not be understood as an *a priori* downgrading label). Comparative civilizational analysis can thus, in principle, extend its framework back to the beginning of human history. This was – notwithstanding some unsettled questions – the approach that prevailed in Marcel Mauss's writings. It entails a minimalist conception of civilizational patterns: they appear as characteristic features of social formations on a large scale. In a seminal text written together with Durkheim, Mauss had already emphasized this macro-social aspect, and it remains essential to civilizational perspectives; the problem is that the generalized concept of civilization seems to leave no scope for more specific defining characteristics. Civilizations are simply societies writ large. Max Weber did not raise the question, but his focus on cultural worlds and great traditions implies a different conception of the civilizational field: it lies within the domain of recorded history and presupposes certain levels of social development. A definition of that kind, but much more explicit and specific, has been most influential in recent debates. S.N. Eisenstadt accepts a 'civilizational dimension' of human societies in general, centred on the interplay of interpretive patterns and

institutional regulations, but argues that it only became manifest as such in the 'Axial Age', roughly equated with a few centuries around the middle of the last millennium BCE, and characterized by unprecedentedly radical changes to the world-views of major cultural traditions. For Eisenstadt, the underlying logic of these innovations and its translation into long-term social dynamics become the main themes of civilizational analysis. A common denominator of 'axial' transformations – a new division of the world into 'transcendental' and 'mundane' levels of being – can then be invoked to justify a shift from chronological to typological criteria: changes of the axial type are no longer limited to a particular period, but can occur in other settings. It has, however, proved difficult to sustain the model of a common pattern, first exemplified by a period of exceptional creativity and then replicated in other contexts, and it seems clear that the current phase of the debate is marked by a growing emphasis on diverse constellations during the Axial Age, as well as on the originality of later transformations. A further point coming to the fore in these discussions is the need for a more complex understanding of cultural patterns and developments prior to the Axial Age. The over-generalized axial model went hand in hand with an oversimplified view of preceding cultures – more particularly the archaic civilizations, as we may call them – and their legacies.

None of this casts any doubt on the extraordinary importance of the Axial Age. But in view of controversies about its meaning and its relationship to other transformative phases, it seems inappropriate to single it out as the entry of history into an explicitly civilizational stage. A stronger case can be made for a third alternative: the turning-point that is often identified with the origin of civilization *tout court*, but can also be seen as the first formation of different civilizational patterns (Mesopotamia and Egypt are the exemplary cases, but comparative analyses must deal with a broader spectrum). These archaic civilizations share basic components which they define, combine and develop in multiple ways. Early patterns of statehood and urban life are defining features that differ in specific regards from case to case; moreover, sacred rulership seems to have been the paradigmatic form of the early state, subject to significant variations, but not exposed to more radical challenges until later. The emergence, the inherent problems and the later transformations of sacral rulership are linked to a broader restructuring of relations between human and divine worlds. Finally, the invention and use of writing – in contexts that differ across the spectrum of archaic civilizations – represent a major cultural transformation. It paved the way for the formation of written traditions, which became key factors of civilizational dynamics.

One advantage of taking this set of changes as a starting-point for comparative civilizational analysis is that it directs attention to the crucial but changing role of writing and textuality in the cultural dynamics that set the paths as well as the phases of world history apart from each other; and as will be seen, this pluralistic long-term perspective also has some bearing on the question of analogies between the text as a part and culture as a whole. These themes have not been among the main concerns of civilizational analysts, but the argument to be



outlined here can link up with Aleida and Jan Assmann's analyses of cultural memory. This concept, defined both in contrast to and as an extension of the more familiar sociological notion of collective memory, refers to ways of bridging the 'floating gap' between past and present, by condensing the past into symbolic and foundational figures that possess normative as well as formative force (cf. Assmann, 1997: 48–56). Cultural memory differs from the communicative memory that links everyday life to the recent past and shifts its framework as generations succeed each other; the transfiguration of the past across longer temporal distances links history to myth and anchors collective identity in the sacred. It remains a debatable point whether the concept of collective memory is meant to be a more precise substitute for the idea of tradition (the latter has proved vulnerable to levelling interpretations, not least those associated with modernization theory), or as a step towards the construction of a more complex model of tradition, which would also allow for other dimensions and corresponding concepts. Some of Jan Assmann's formulations suggest the former alternative, but the second seems more promising. Here I cannot take this issue further, but it may be noted in passing that the formation of traditions also involves the appropriation of historical experience, in which memory obviously has an important role to play, but not one that would entail the absorption of all other factors. Phenomenological reflections on experience and memory – not least the approaches developed in Paul Ricoeur's more recent writings – may be the most promising road to better understanding of these issues.

If cultural memory is a crucial yet never all-embracing component of tradition, we can envisage a comparison of its particular roles and relative weight in different civilizations; for example, it seems clear that the contrast between – on the one hand – traditions dominated by exclusive and highly sacralized figures of memory, and on the other hand, those that give greater scope to alternative figures, will be reflected across a wide range of cultural orientations and practices. But the present discussion is less concerned with cultural memory as such than with its transformation through the invention, development and diffusion of writing. A recapitulation of Jan Assmann's analysis will help to identify some key aspects of this problematic. The varying forms of writing invented by the archaic civilizations represent a major landmark; they create the preconditions for a text-based instead of a ritual-based continuity of cultural memory. It might be objected that oral transmission of texts (e.g. the *Vedas* in India) can sustain a tradition, but such cases seem exceptional, and the analogy with writing is needed to clarify the meaning of oral transmission. On the other hand, the first uses of writing do not fully realize its potentialities. According to Assmann, another turning-point is reached when texts become significant and central enough for cultures of interpretation (*Auslegungskulturen*) to crystallize around them. Decisive developments of that kind occurred during and in the aftermath of the period commonly known as the Axial Age, which thus returns to a prominent albeit not exclusively dominant place in comparative cultural history. This thesis brings a new perspective to bear on a much-debated theme; for our purposes, however, some less explicit connotations seem more important. All accounts of writing as

a self-contained cultural technology are found wanting (it is in this context immaterial whether they stress the impact of writing in general, the particular advantages of the alphabet, or the changes resulting from the diffusion of writing skills beyond the narrow elite circles that had at first monopolized them). Rather than on writing systems, the emphasis is on the concept of 'writing culture': it relates to 'questions about the institutions and traditions of writing, the treatment of texts, the social embedding of writing and of texts fixed in writing' (Assmann, 1997: 265). The above reflections on culture as the world-making and world-disclosing level of social life apply to this domain. The quoted outline of writing culture and its variable components refers to context-dependent factors, embedded not only in social practices, but also in cultural perspectives. Texts are at their most authoritative and representative when they are at the same time most formatively involved in the cultural articulation of the world. And the cultures of interpretation that took shape around key texts during a decisive period were at the forefront of broader cultural shifts toward a more explicit and therefore more conflict-prone interpretation of the world.

At this point, it seems appropriate to turn to Paul Ricoeur's reflections on the text as a paradigm for the human sciences. They culminate in comments on the 'effacement of the present world in text, but the return of the world at another level' (Ricoeur, 1981: 148). The point is elaborated at greater length:

The eclipse of the circumstantial world by the quasi-world of texts can be so complete that in a civilization of writing, the world itself is no longer what can be shown in speaking but is reduced to a kind of 'aura' which written works unfold. Thus we speak of the Greek world or the Byzantine world. This world can be called 'imaginary', in the sense that it is *represented* by writing in lieu of the world presented by speech; but this imaginary world is itself a creation of literature. (1981: 149)

Ricoeur's allusions to civilizational contexts and imaginary significations underline the relevance of his argument to our theme. The autonomous and creative force of texts is most manifest when they embody the core significations of a cultural world on a civilizational scale; in this way they become central to the self-articulation of civilizations as well as to interpretation across civilizational boundaries. It is the multi-faceted and variously modifiable relationship between world and text that justifies the use of the textual metaphor for culture. But the same background is also reflected in a more direct and literal privilege of texts. The eminent status of particular texts, not always of the same kind but comparable in terms of cultural authority, did not go unnoticed by historians interested in the comparative study of civilizations; among civilizational theorists, Jaroslav Krejčí has most explicitly included core texts and their characteristics among the defining elements of the field, but his analyses tend to focus on single texts, rather than construct an adequate category. The concept of the canon, as re-worked by Aleida and Jan Assmann, seems to fit this requirement of civilizational analysis. A canonical text 'embodies the normative and formative values of a community, the "truth"' (Assmann, 1997: 94). The canonizing turn represents a 'stabilizing of the stream of tradition' (p. 93), as well as the beginning of a new

type of traditionalization, centred on interpretations in conflict. Sacred texts are, on this view, not *ipso facto* canonical: it is the link to cultures of interpretation that guarantees the latter status (in India, canonization began with Buddhist texts, not with the *Vedas*). On the other hand, non-sacred texts can develop into a canon. The Hellenistic – more precisely Alexandrian – canonization of the Greek classics is the most obvious and seminal example.

## Explanation and Understanding

This discussion of writing and its historical ramifications should have thrown some light on the background mostly taken for granted when culture is compared to a text. At the same time, it has touched upon a range of themes that come into focus when civilizational analysis extends the boundaries of cultural sociology. But there is one more part of the strong program to be considered. The interpretation of the cultural text is to be succeeded and corroborated by an ambitious explanatory strategy on the more properly sociological level. Alexander and Smith (2003: 22) accept the ‘vision of culture as webs of significance that guide action’, but not the general reluctance of cultural theorists to specify ‘precise mechanisms through which webs of meaning influence action on the ground’ (p. 22). It is easy to agree with the general claim that both theories of culture and theories of action would benefit from closer mutual contact, and that they have kept each other at a distance through restrictive assumptions. But the strategy proposed by Alexander and Smith calls for closer examination, and civilizational analysis may have its own angle on that level too.

The third step of the strong program begins with arguments in favour of a structuralist – or at least structuralism-friendly – version of hermeneutics. For Alexander and Smith, the starting-point is ‘an effort to understand culture not just as a text (à la Geertz), but rather as a text that is underpinned by signs and symbols that are in patterned relationships’ (2003: 24). This general guideline is linked to the insights of structural linguistics and to Lévi-Strauss’s extension of linguistic models. Its relevance to the explanatory aims of the program is twofold: it helps to conceive of culture as ‘a structure as objective as any more material fact’ (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 24), and it paves the way for the construction of general theories; the structural patterns can be translated into formal models applicable across cultural boundaries. At this point, however, the strong program does not take the line that might seem most tempting. To the extent that structuralist trends gave rise to explanatory models of their own, the main emphasis has been on abstract systemic logics. Alexander and Smith see such constructions as a blind alley; their idea of cultural sociology is not a culturalist alternative to the economy- or power-centred models inspired by Althusser and Foucault. Their explanatory ideal is meant to satisfy ‘hardheaded and skeptical demands for causal clarity’ and to ‘anchor causality in proximate actors and agencies’ (2003: 14). The stress on ‘proximate actors’ leaves no doubt about the main aim: the involvement of culture in action is the crucial link between *explanans* and *explanandum*. This

should not be taken to imply an exclusive focus on individual actors. A concluding paragraph refers to 'institutions and actors as causal intermediaries' (p. 26). A Durkheimian connection is thus retained, with the proviso that the social world – in its cooperative as well as its conflict-ridden guises – is to be deciphered as a web of actions, permeated by the cultural web of meanings.

To sum up the most salient points, this part of the strong program assumes a smooth progress from interpretation – or understanding – to explanation. The hermeneutical horizon is, as we have seen, defined in very broad cultural terms, without any concessions to psychological reductionism. But the interpretation of culture is, in the final instance, only a prelude to the causal explanation that is supposed to complete the program. As for the meaning of that final step, the demand for causal clarity is not qualified by any reference to the contested status of the concept of causality. The debate between the nomological conception of causality, commonly known as Humean, and those who defend the idea of causal powers is, if anything, more open now than it may have seemed in a recent phase. References to direct influence 'on the ground' would seem to indicate some sympathy for the latter view, but the question is not raised. Nor is it clear how the new emphasis on culture in the explanation of human action would affect or integrate the models based on motivation, intentionality and practical reasoning. In short, key questions remain not just unanswered, but unasked.

The following thoughts on civilizational themes will certainly not attempt to answer these questions; they are merely intended to suggest ways of broadening the frame of reference, and thus to underscore connections that are less visible within the standard framework of cultural sociology. A brief glance at Lévi-Strauss and later uses of his model may be the best way to set the course for these reflections. Although Alexander and Smith credit him with providing a powerful key to the autonomy of culture, there is no doubt that he understood his own project in a very different way: his goal was to demonstrate the primacy and omnipresence of the rational unconscious. This was, if we follow his autobiographical indications, a new variant of the 'geological' model in the human sciences (i.e. the proposal to explain manifest realities through the uncovering of more deep-seated ones), exemplified by Marxian and Freudian ideas, and at the same time an attempt to displace these two dominant versions (it might also be described as a self-transcending perfection of the hermeneutics of suspicion). The very phenomenon of meaning was to be reduced to a surface effect of combinations operating at a level where the question of meaning could not only be posed, and be ultimately reducible to elementary rules of the rational unconscious. On the other hand, the very effort to generalize this reductionistic strategy across the multiple domains of the human sciences led Lévi-Strauss to construct units and patterns of a more complex kind and with troubling implications for the original model. The 'mythemes' that figure in his comparative analyses of mythology are meaning-laden units and relate to each other as such. On that level, his example could be followed by scholars who did not necessarily accept his background assumptions about the rational unconscious. One particularly productive case of structural analysis without structuralist dogmas is not mentioned by Alexander

and Smith: Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's work on Greek mythology, directly inspired by Lévi-Strauss's writings but never dependent on his most basic anthropological premises. The flexible autonomy of their approach is further confirmed by its extension to other aspects of Greek culture, especially tragedy and philosophical thought. An evolving version of structural analysis thus serves to explore the imaginary of a whole civilization, and affinities with themes and procedures more familiar to civilizational analysts may be suggested. An appropriately adapted structural method can help to clarify the long-recognized but still under-theorized role that configurations of basic concepts play in the constitution of civilizations. And on the most fundamental level, growing acceptance of the idea that civilizational ways of world-articulation are based on different constellations of recurrent notions, rather than on separate and mutually exclusive significations, opens up new fields for structural perspectives beyond structuralism.

Questions implicit in the third part of the strong program have to do with three main issues: The relationship between understanding and explanation (the interpretation of texts, and of culture treated as text, is taken to be the most paradigmatic form of understanding); the explanatory focus on action and the justification for explanatory reference to complex agencies; finally, the role of causal claims in explanation. All these problems are linked to long-standing controversies, going far beyond the field of civilizational studies, and none of them can be discussed at length here. In regard to the first one, those who accept the strong program of cultural sociology – or tend towards similar views from other angles – will also find it easy to agree that discussions so far have failed to produce a convincing reductionistic account of understanding, be it as a mere variant of explanation or a specific but subordinate procedure, geared to explanatory goals. On the other hand, the exclusive association of understanding with the human sciences and of explanation with the natural ones prove untenable, and the only plausible alternative is a distinction between different combinations of both aspects on each side. But it should be added that at least in the case of the human sciences (it is less obvious in the other main branch of scientific inquiry), the relationship between understanding and explanation changes with the shifting frameworks that prevail at successive stages (once again, Ricoeur's analysis of these transformations (1981: 145–64) should be singled out as a particularly insightful overview). The specific implications of the civilizational approach are, first and foremost, conducive to broader contexts of understanding, both on a general level (in regard to the large-scale and long-term constellations of meaning that define civilizations) and because of the particular perspective that has served to reactivate the civilizational approach: the axial transformations must be seen as exemplary cases of creative innovations whose understandable ramifications of meaning go far beyond the connections that can be invoked for explanatory purposes. Moreover, the particular complexity, endurance and interpretive potential of traditions based on axial sources make them highly illustrative of the hermeneutical principle, most clearly formulated by Gadamer, that meaning unfolds in ways not reducible to intentional action.

That said, a few words should be added on the explanatory aspects of the civilizational problematic. If the primary focus of historical and sociological explanations is on actions and agencies, civilizational studies have, within this broadly defined field, stressed the strategies of diverse elites and the changing types of coalitions into which they enter (both themes are extensively discussed in Eisenstadt's work). Differences in these respects are linked to other civilizational contrasts; in particular, the interaction between elites and coalitions on one hand, institutions and their variously interpreted specific webs of significance on the other, calls for analysis in explanatory terms. Whether such explanations are best understood as causal ones is another issue. It still seems useful to draw on G.H. von Wright's classic discussion of explanation and understanding (1971), especially on his basic question about explanations in the human sciences: is the commonly used quasi-causal language translatable into a properly causal one, or should it be seen as a provisional account of less determinate connections? But this line of inquiry cannot be pursued without reference to philosophical considerations that would go far beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that civilizational perspectives add to the complexity of the field, and therefore to the *prima facie* plausibility of the second view, already favoured by von Wright.

## Reconsidering the Weak Program

It remains to be seen whether the civilizational approach can bring new viewpoints to bear on the 'weak program', as defined by Alexander and Smith, and thus perhaps make it a more integral part of the sociological discourse on culture. This is less central to the questions raised at the beginning than are the above reflections on the strong program; the following comments will only indicate a few starting-points for further debate.

According to Alexander and Smith:

[To] speak of the sociology of culture [in the sense of the weak program, J.P.A.] is to suggest that explanatory power lies in the study of the 'hard' variables of social structure, such that structured sets of meanings become superstructures and ideologies driven by these more 'real' and tangible social forces; culture is 'more or less confined to participating in the reproduction of social relations. (Alexander and Smith, 2003: 13)

We can tentatively identify these supposedly more real factors as economic and political. If the sociology of culture treats them as independent variables and culture as a dependent one, it is as incompatible with the civilizational frame of reference as it is with Alexander and Smith's strong program. Cultural definitions enter into the making of the economic and political spheres. But if we allow for the possibility that some cultural definitions might be particularly compatible with – or even conducive to – autonomous political and economic dynamics (to which cultural conditions and resources are then to some extent subordinated), a modified version of the weak program can be envisaged as a part of the civilizational approach. There is, moreover, a classical precedent for this line of

argument. When Max Weber outlines the long-term transformation of modern capitalism, from an economic regime sustained by ethical commitments of religious origin to one functioning as a self-propelling system, he suggests a process that translates cultural orientations into economic mechanisms; as Weber's project unfolds, more complex views on both the emergence and the later development of modern capitalism begin to take shape, but the absorption of cultural sources into a rationalized economic machinery remains central, and at the same time, an analogous trend emerges in the political sphere. The bureaucratic machine that appears both as an essential complement and a potential threat to capitalism is also a product of multiple historical forces, including cultural patterns. Without entering into the specifics of Weber's unfinished and controversial work on these two themes, the main lines of his analyses can be taken as an anticipation of ideas to be tested on a more general level.

To allow for autonomous economic and political dynamics is to presuppose basic concepts of wealth and power, linked but not reducible to culture. I have discussed this tripartite conceptual scheme at some length elsewhere (Arnason, 2003: 195–322) and cannot repeat the details within the limits of this article; suffice it to say that both categories have to be defined with reference to anthropological dimensions that lend themselves to further specifications. Wealth has to do with the satisfaction of human needs and the concomitant development of human capacities that in turn give rise to new needs; the surplus-generating dynamic inherent in this aspect of the human condition calls for symbolization (representations of 'wealth in general' or 'abstract wealth', to use Marxian categories, are not confined to capitalist societies), and the varieties of symbolism are – in conjunction with other factors – conducive to different modes of accumulation. Technical progress, commercial expansion and capitalist development (in the broad Weberian sense that includes both modern and premodern versions) are the most important historical trends at work in this sphere. As for power, the first step seems to be to bridge the gap between definitions that stress the general transformative capacity of human action and those that conceive of power only in terms of asymmetric relations between actors. The intertwining of both aspects generates the complex formations that have been emphasized by relational conceptions of power (from Elias to Foucault). And as the category of power is broadened to account for this complexity, its openness to cultural definitions becomes more obvious. The 'cultural plasticity of power', as it has sometimes been called, is now widely accepted; but its obverse is the point that some kinds of plasticity can be more conducive to a sustained and autonomous dynamic of power structures than others.

To conclude, a brief overview will indicate ways of translating these general reflections into specific tasks for civilizational analysis. The list can begin with developments internal to civilizations but nevertheless illustrative of cross-civilizational trends that in each case bring about changes affecting the whole framework. Recent scholarship has highlighted the 'economic efflorescences', to use a term introduced by Jack Goldstone, that occurred in otherwise different premodern settings, from the Graeco-Roman world to the Qing formation (as

the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century synthesis of Chinese and Inner Asian imperial traditions is now often called). Specific features of such processes reflect the cultural and institutional contexts, but some fundamental cross-cultural mechanisms remain central to all inquiry in this field. Apart from the elementary structures of statehood most memorably analyzed by Norbert Elias, the twin monopolies of taxation and violence, other ways of concentrating power resources have to be taken into account.

Both economic and political formations acquire new historical dimensions when they expand beyond civilizational boundaries. The economic worlds (*économies-mondes*) analyzed by Fernand Braudel, and more specifically those that crystallized around Chinese, Islamic and early modern European centres, were shaped by their civilizational contexts, central as well as peripheral, but they also constitute intercivilizational spaces and structures with their specific temporal pattern as well as mechanisms of reproduction and accumulation. The idea of economic worlds has proved applicable to various periods and regions, even if its implicit use is sometimes masked by the less fortunate terminology of 'world systems'. However, from a broad comparative historical perspective, the problematic of empires seems even more important. Forms of imperial rule and organization reflect the cultural patterns that are at the centre of more complex civilizational constellations, but imperial boundaries are hardly ever coextensive with civilizational ones, and at the same time, at least in the more significant cases, empires expand beyond their original civilizational settings and develop their own modes of integration.

Modern transformations enhance the internal dynamics of the economic as well as the political sphere. Interconnected processes of state formation and capitalist development unfold at new levels of complexity and innovative capacity. At the same time, the long-term global growth of capitalism is accompanied by imperial expansion of a new type, beginning with the early modern invention of transoceanic empires. But these developments belong to an epoch which raises further questions about the aims and limits of civilizational analysis, and are therefore beyond the scope of the present article.

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