

Multiple Modernities and the Theory of Indeterminacy

On the Development and Theoretical Foundations of the Historical Sociology of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt

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From the study of agrarian empires (1963), to his later works on axiality (1986), modernity (2002a) and revolution (2006), Shmuel Eisenstadt remained equally concerned about understanding historical change and developing a sound sociological theory. In fact, he considered them to be two sides of the same coin: social theory is useless if it does not correspond to reality, and reality makes sense only through the lens of social theory. This sounds like a truism, but for Eisenstadt it became a vehicle first to correct and then to alter in a rather radical way structural functionalism, both in its historical context and in substance; I will call it the ‘theory of indeterminacy’. Based upon this theory, he developed the most radical historic-sociological model to understand modernity since the development of convergence-modernization theory in the 1960s and World System Theory in the 1970s, the theory of ‘multiple modernities’.

Structural Functionalism Updated

Starting with the *Political Systems of Empires* (1963), the focus of Eisenstadt’s analysis was the systemic character of these regimes, the distinctive social structures and institutions that characterized them, and the social processes that were developed by their rulers to maintain the systemic boundaries of their empires. To achieve his goal, Eisenstadt employed a very particular methodology; that is, configurational analysis. Simply put, configurational analysis is the analysis of the essential qualities of social structures, institutions, and patterned social actions that develop inside a social system and define it. Following this methodology, Eisenstadt first differentiated and conceptualized a social pattern (i.e. a configuration), then examined its essential characteristics, and finally interpreted its contribution to the maintenance of the systemic boundaries of the empire in question. The use of this methodology led to a very peculiar, even idiosyncratic, narration that would become the unique feature

of all Eisenstadt's works that followed: eventless historical narration. The argument could be understood and followed only by readers who had already done their history homework; as for the rest, they could abandon all hope.

What is important about agrarian empires? They stand as peculiar institutions between antiquity and modernity without necessarily leading from the one to the other; in other words, without guaranteeing social evolution. Their peculiarity lies in their main and central characteristic: the institutionalization of autonomous political power, as well as the intentional development of 'free resources' and thus the intentional 'encouragement' of social differentiation on large scale, and above ethnic and city boundaries. Since 'empires' by definition extend beyond ethnic boundaries and geographic localities, their mere existence necessitated some form of political-institutional autonomy. Thus, for the writer, empires are the first instances of various *systemic* tensions and fusions between social and institutional structures and their derivatives.

The key factor of the analysis of the agrarian bureaucratic empires is that of 'free resources'; that is, means of social power that could be detached from their possessors and potentially be used by other social actors and groups, such as the peasantry that could either be controlled by the landed aristocracy, or be 'free' and thus strengthen the autonomy of the ruler vis. the aristocracy. Using 'free resources' as a guide, Eisenstadt examines the struggles between institutional actors and social groups to control such resources, and especially so between rulers and aristocracy. Following the specific historical developments, the author concludes that the social development of the agrarian empires was limited by the limited level of free resources; and that free resources were limited because traditional and undifferentiated political activities did not match political goals that were more differentiated. To put it in structural-functional terms, even though there was a 'need' for social differentiation, the political apparatus, in spite of the development of bureaucracy, did not 'fulfill its functional role'; social and institutional development were not evolving hand in hand. Eisenstadt was questioning the cornerstone of structural functionalism.

While the conclusions of this magnum opus did not impress many as structural functionalism was becoming out of fashion when the book was first published, secondary findings of the study would lead Eisenstadt not only to a major reconstruction of structural functionalism, but to the construction of a new sociological theory and a new understanding of macro social development. First and foremost, Eisenstadt noticed that structural differentiation in the social system of the empires did not always lead to a corresponding institutional differentiation (as Parsonian structural functionalism assumed) but it was conditioned on the presence of political entrepreneurs or elites with a vision and ability to create original political institutions. Such