

OBITUARY

IN MEMORIAM: SHMUEL NOAH (S. N.) EISENSTADT (1923-2010)*

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Shmuel Eisenstadt's oeuvre stands as *the* worthy successor to Max Weber's comparative historical sociology. Beyond his prodigious productivity—author of more than fifty books; editor or co-editor of some two dozen compilations; builder of a respected Department; University dean; mover in international associations; peripatetic lecturer; generous mentor; indefatigably cheering colleague—Eisenstadt transformed the ways in which we have come to think about civilization, modernity, and societal change.

The seeds of this achievement sprouted at Hebrew University in the early 1940s. At 12 Shmuel came to Jerusalem from his native Warsaw, whence his widowed mother rescued the family moving first to the United States then to Palestine in 1935. An intellectually curious teenager, he devoured new Penguin paperbacks and loved to discern historical patterns. In 1940 he began university studies, gaining a Master's thesis in British labor history. His primary mentor at the University was Martin Buber, under whom he received his doctorate in 1947 with a dissertation on the history of sociological thought. Since the University at that time contained no department of sociology, Buber offered Shmuel access to core texts of the discipline from his personal library along with private tutorials once a month.

This tutelage grounded a deep interest in the field and moved young Eisenstadt toward two hallmarks of his intellectual career: openness to dialogue, and engagement with the interface between particularism and universalism. When he came to publish a treatise on his doctoral project, *The Form of Sociology* (1976), Eisenstadt couched it not as a compendium of findings or doctrines but as a narrative of dialogical interactions involving vicissitudes of closures and openings.

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His relation to the discipline, moreover, involved a distinctive balance: between particularistic attachment and openness to other fields. For all his intellectual, administrative, and collegial involvement with the field of sociology, Eisenstadt felt no less at home in many other disciplines—especially history, political science, economics, and area studies. He sought to help Israeli universities maintain joint departments of anthropology and sociology. Rather than adhere to research programs that took directives from the constraints of a discipline, he championed the concept of *Problemstellung-problematique*, he later styled it—in the conviction that engagement with a problem, not disciplinary guidelines, deserved precedence in determining the boundaries of intellectual inquiry.

That distinctive balance between engagement with particular collectivities, on the one hand, and analytic and contextual breadth on the other, which was manifest in Eisenstadt's attitudes toward disciplines, appeared a fortiori in his relation to societal collectivities. Shmuel came of age in the Yishuv (Palestinian Jewry prior to the State), whereas during the year that Israel became independent he was studying in London and therefore, he recalled later, witnessed its transformation into a state from abroad. Viewing that momentous change from afar helped leaven his deep and positive understanding of Jewish history and traditions with a degree of distanced understanding that few have achieved. In time recognized as the foremost scholar of world civilizations of his day, he never forgot his Judaic origins. Rather, he made Jewry the foil for an evolution of comparative bravado. In the 1950s, he compared differences in childrearing practices between kibbutzim (communal settlements) and moshavim (co-operative settlements), and then dealt with the absorption of immigrants in Israeli society by comparing the Yishuv and the cultures of immigrant groups. Ultimately he moved, four decades later, to compare *Jewish Civilization* (1992) with other historic civilizations.

In an interview shortly before his passing, Eisenstadt emphasized—in words that serve to rebuke those who champion an inevitable Clash of Civilizations hypothesis—that *all* civilizations contain both particularistic and universalistic strands. Such understanding he associated with his teacher Buber. Thanks to the latter's capacious intellectual grasp—Shmuel liked to recall that early on his mentor had assigned the Tao Te Ching, and helped him delve into the depths of the Weberian

corpus—his growth as a scholar took an ever-expanding form. Postdoctoral work at the London School of Economics connected him with Morris Ginsberg, Edward Shils, and the trove of British social anthropologists, all reinforcing a passion for comparative historical studies which he pursued with his own analytic bite and insightful theorizing.

Eisenstadt's formative monographs embraced conceptual schemes that dominated the sociological world of the 1950s. *The Absorption of Immigrants* (1955) foregrounded prevailing typologies of social roles, schemata of deviance, and the four-function paradigm of Talcott Parsons. *From Generation to Generation* (1956) solved a long-standing puzzle about the existence of status groups based on age by invoking the particularism/universalism variable that Parsons had done so much to promote. He also followed Parsons, along with Robert Bellah and others, in a return to evolutionary thinking, this time fortified by rejection of assumptions of unilinearity and assumed normative progress. He integrated other contemporary sociological emphases, going further than Parsons even in noting the conflicts and reactionary directions inherent in modernization. He identified sources of failed attempts to modernize; analyzed varieties of reactive sectarianism—proto-fundamentalist, fundamentalist, and communal-national; and highlighted the struggle for new forms of collective identity.

The *problematique* that caught Eisenstadt's attention during the last half of his life concerned the fates of human societies in the wake of the expansive energies that led to the formation of empires. With *The Political Systems of Empires* (1973) he opened a bold new research program, one that had extended his unflagging comparativism to the broadest historical scope. A decade later, engaging Karl Jaspers's pivotal notion of "axial civilizations," he turned a corner that led to the magisterial, neo-Weberian works for which he will doubtless be most remembered. These can be said to have come to a head in *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View* (1996). That work, perhaps his finest single monograph (and most elegantly composed, thanks to exceptional editing by the University of Chicago Press), offered an unprecedentedly profound grasp of Japanese history and a breath-taking comparison with Europe, India, and China.

Eisenstadt qualified the conventional comparative focus on national societies in three respects. He prodded us to realize that those societies cannot be understood as relatively closed, self-sufficient functioning systems, but needed to be understood as interacting societal units, which never function in isolation. In thoughts for a project on societies of small scale, like Israel, Holland, Switzerland, and ancient Greece (which never reached fruition), he questioned the unspoken assumption that the size of such systems does not affect the conditions of their creativity. Above all, his turn to civilizational studies forced us to realize the larger sociocultural forms in which contemporary national societies subsisted. From that came his mature touchstone concept, Multiple Modernities, whereby organizational forms that might indeed be on their way to becoming universal would need to be seen as embedded in sociocultural frames of much broader scale of time and space.

In all his treatments of societal systems, Shmuel Eisenstadt was ever on the lookout for phenomena of creativity: protest, change, revolution, transformation. Uniquely, The Heritage of Sociology volumes he edited, on Weber and Buber, foregrounded the notions of charisma and creativity. The leitmotif of continual creativity applied reflexively to his own work style: he was, he said of himself, ever on the lookout for new intellectual problems.

It is unlikely that we shall see the likes of Weber or of Eisenstadt again, even though numerous scholars of comparative civilization continue to work those vast vineyards. Supported by his devoted wife Shulamit, Eisenstadt manifested a level of intellectual energy that literally took your breath away. It will be a formidable challenge to maintain his grand tradition of work, so demanding in breadth of knowledge and scarcely tolerated let alone supported by current academic systems. One hopes that it will come to secure the attention it deserves.