

everywhere the fall of the dictatorship led to earlier historical dynamics being brought back into play. However much the revolutions' leaders tried at first to reproduce the success of the revolutions in Egypt and especially Tunisia and even in the Levant and tried to topple dictatorships by appealing to national unity, over the course of the revolutions the societies involved became increasingly polarised into Sunni and Shiite segments, which resulted in sectarian revolts. In these places, social classes never had a chance to unite even temporarily to form a single revolutionary coalition, because class divisions overlapped with sectarian ones.

The third and final part of the book, titled "After ISIS: Disintegration and Regrouping" (pp. 231–317), is by contrast more of a disappointment. Here Kepel focuses on describing the transformation of international relations that occurred in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. According to Kepel, the basic contours of what tomorrow will bring are gradually emerging out of the chaos. In other words, the defeat of the Islamic State has been followed, especially in the Levant, by the biggest reconfiguration of Middle East politics since the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed. Even now, however, what we are witnessing is nothing less than the most visible manifestation of the birth of a new global order, this time amidst the decline of American international hegemony. The main problem with the third part of this book, however, is that Kepel is describing an anomic situation. He is presenting a detailed picture of the disintegration of the old order and the established rules, but, despite his proclamations, this order and these rules are being replaced not by the birth of new and lasting alliances but by ad hoc coalitions. What Kepel's description of international relations in the Levant most resembles is thus the war of all against all. Kepel's book can nevertheless be recommended as a reference for everyone with an interest in understanding current events in the Middle East and one that considers the historical roots of the dramatic processes that are going on today.

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**Jóhann Páll Árnason: *The Labyrinth of Modernity. Horizons, Pathways and Mutations*. Lanham – Boulder – New York – London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020, 230 pp.**

The present review focuses on a very important book, *The Labyrinth of Modernity*, through a fundamental reflection on the value and diversity of the modern world. As the title suggests, the book is about bringing together current debates on the approach to modernity, which it links to the context of civilization. Professor Árnason approaches the idea of modernity as a new civilizational specificity combined with the social imaginary, thus analysing and deepening view of civilizational features and specificities of different cultures. The social imaginary in this case is understood as targeting a strong vision of human autonomy yet remaining open to differentiation at both the ideological and institutional levels, even in changing historical contexts. The introduction of the book also introduces this perspective as a corresponding framework of social theory that focuses on the differentiation of the economic, political and cultural spheres. The chapters describing the Soviet model as an alternative conception of modernity and the issues of East Asian politics form undoubtedly essential parts of the book. The book concludes with reflections on the theory of globalization and ways of formulating it in the light of the civilizational approach.

After reading, this book seemed to me to combine theoretical arguments with case studies that aim to map the new functioning of the formation of modernity on a global scale. In this respect, it is a detailed elaboration of historical sociology that analyses the major historical variables with respect to modernity. The book is also a kind of culmination of the journal *Social Imaginaries*, which is also a project of Árnason and associated colleagues. For where the journal connects cultural and social phenomena, the book uses particular insights from the theory of civilization to clarify the use of social imaginaries in creating a new world. In the book, Árnason argues that the contemporary social era is not a given object to theorize about. Rather, it

is a set of interconnected clusters that are variable in relation to their development and possibilities. This is a new approach to social theory that overlaps with comparative sociology. At the same time, it is a lucid interpretation of 20th century history that can be used as a textbook for students, as it details the historical-sociological perspective of Soviet communism, contrasting it systematically with Western capitalism. Moreover, the author puts communism itself in the context of the historical period and does not take it out of context, which, from my point of view, is a great positive that is lacking today.

However, communism and capitalism are not the only concepts Árnason associates with modernity. A substantial part of the book is also devoted to democracy, which the author relates to modernity in its various forms. Since Árnason specializes in the civilizational analysis, it is not surprising that he provides a view of state development and ideological contestation of such a nature as to purposefully generate a new analysis of civilizational modernity.

Árnason relies on a distinction between the economic, political and cultural spheres, understood as a conceptual framework. This is a version of the tripartite paradigm now widely used in the social sciences, so widely that Gianfranco Poggi describes it as an orthodoxy. Árnason suggests specific aspects according to which the tripartite model provides an exhaustive description of differentiation in modern societies. Using this model, the author maps the differences between the three spheres to analyse the defining features of modernity as a new civilization. Right at the beginning of the book, through an analysis of the range of variation in each domain, he linked the civilizational concept of modernity to the insufficiently developed concept of multiple modernities. Árnason thus analyses the varying modern socio-cultural patterns as juxtapositions of political, cultural and economic components. At the same time he moves from plurality to unity and back again, examining the umbrella patterns of civilization in detail and subsequently focusing on case-oriented interpretations.

The book is divided into four parts, with the first part introducing the issue of modernity and

anchoring it in various aspects, in particular, the political aspect, where the author frequently returns to the theories of Max Weber, building on his approaches and practically deriving the principle of modernity from them. "In the political sphere, there is no unifying force or formative centre comparable to capitalism in economic life. Max Weber tended to portray bureaucracy as both complement and a counterpole to capitalism (...). This emphasis reflected observable trends of the times. Later authors, also responding to historical experience, became more interested in the variously interpreted relationship between more capitalism and democracy. Bureaucracy and democracy are aspects of modern statehood, and the plurality of states implies geopolitics, including empire building and warfare. It is therefore an obvious choice to begin with the problematic of the modern state. But given the general emphasis on the imaginary of autonomy, a focus on the state may seem inappropriate. A very influential ideological current, drawing one-sidedly on Weber's analyses, has portrayed the modern bureaucratic state as a threat to individual freedom" (p. 29).

Árnason distinguishes primary affinities between wealth, power and meaning on the one hand and the economic, political and cultural spheres on the other. For this reason, he adds a twist to his theory by suggesting that within each sphere there are specific manifestations of all three basic categories. According to Árnason, the modern transformation involves a turn in the history of ideological power that is so significant that it is associated with the opening up of alternative perspectives and possible rivalries.

The second part of the book focuses on the notion of modernity within the Soviet model, and hence communism. Árnason approaches this issue very cautiously. It is clear that he wants to keep as much objective distance as possible from the historical facts in order to analyse them scientifically. Therefore, there are not too many pejorative expressions in the text, nor too many subjective evaluations and assessments. The author points to the controversy surrounding the notion of periodization of history, which, although contextual and inevitable, runs the risk of being based on subjectivity. Árnason

therefore argues against a premature definition of successive modernities and, in place of outdated traditions in historical-sociological research, wants to grasp world history in a programmatically conceived global perspective. In the same way that he tries to maintain an objective distance from the notion of periodization, Árnason approaches the problem of communism. He describes communism briefly as “an extreme case among multiple modernities; in view of its total social scope, broad impact, and global aspirations, it represents the clearest example of an alternative modernity” (p. 99). He attributes the emergence of communism to a violent break with pre-existing patterns, and because of the explosion of violence that occurred, the dominant order of the then modern world was destroyed. The violence that the author is referring to is the First World War, which represents a fundamental destructive crisis of the entire social order. And it was this crisis that gave rise to new ideologies and political orders, in the arc of which, among other things, communism was born. The idea that the experience and interpretation of revolutions is central to the problem of modernity is very much in evidence in the book. However, Árnason goes further in this section and argues that the communist variation in relation to modernity, led to a more complex identification of modern and revolutionary perspectives. “A revolutionary transformation was supposed to overcome the contradictions and realize the promises inherent in existing modernity” (p. 99).

Although the book opposes subjectivism and conventional thinking on historical aspects, it does not avoid, as the author himself admits, an approach that is in line with the widespread view of the historicization of communism. In fact, the author completely refuses to reduce communism to a kind of ideological affair that had certain coercive means and was ruined by internal contradictions. According to Árnason, it is not possible to work with vague evaluations that work with very strong ideological assumptions, or, on the contrary, to exaggerate the notion of communism as a peculiar continuation of the history of the Russian empire. Therefore, the author approaches the issue with

different frames of reference in mind, developing the argument that the Soviet trajectory, and its branches in other states, are examples of the formative role of ideas in the process of history, even though they may illustrate the paradoxical situation that can sometimes occur through the interaction between ideas and power. There are two main historical constellations within communism, namely Russian communism and Chinese communism. The year 1917 brought the revolution, the murder of the Romanovs and the establishment of communism. Communism in Russia became somewhat specific because of its geographical and geopolitical location. Hence, we will not see communism as it is practiced here anywhere else in the world. It has quite special civilisational characteristics. However, its basic idea is applicable practically anywhere. It depends only on the possibilities of the magnitude of spread and the extent to which coercive means can be used. The book thus examines in detail the revolutionary year and the gradual developments that took place in Russia. It discusses Marx’s thought and looks in detail at the emergence of the Soviet Union and its place within global modernity. If we compare Russia’s communist transformation with those of other states such as China, we find that the continuities between tradition and modernity are always selective, more or less formative, and often accompanied by spectacular ruptures on yet other levels.

The third part focuses on the East Asian geopolitical situation, with an emphasis on Chinese communism, which here plays a largely comparative role to the Soviet model, concluding that while in Russia communism entered history because of a civilizational catastrophe called the First World War, in China, it occurred after a series of catastrophes spanning centuries. The book works entirely with the time-tested premise, which is both theoretically and empirically verified, that China, Korea and Japan represent an ongoing geopolitical constellation, a pattern that historically and historiographically cannot be found in any other region. It describes the interconnection and the rivalry between these three state formations, with imperial China most of the time having primacy and political

dominance and an edge over the other regions. Thus, Árnason focuses largely on modern China and its reform and revolutionary efforts that were to lead to the revival of Chinese power in the 20th century. Due to civil wars and wars with Western powers as well as Japan, China had lost its regional primacy, and the revolutionary changes were as much about restoring that primacy as about China's modernization. The author puts this issue in context with the civilizational background, not only because civilizational specifics are neglected in the literature, but as far as modernity and especially modern state formation is concerned, they are the key issue to decipher it. Árnason therefore proceeds on the theory that Chinese history reflects an extraordinary continuity of civilization that relies on key institutions, a pattern of governance and a cultural framework that, although variously modified and altered over the centuries, has never been fundamentally interrupted.

This part of the book is meant to focus on East Asia, yet it is China that "usurps" the largest portion of the text. As far as Japan is concerned, the author puts it in context with China rather than with historical events, and it serves as a supplement to the interpretation regarding China. The Chinese historical-sociological-political theme only benefits from it, but we learn less about, for example, the Japanese Meiji reforms, which are limited to a brief introduction: "The Japanese turn to imperial expansion was, on the one hand, an easily drawn consequence of the exalted dynastic sovereignty that the Meiji restoration had reinforced and perpetuated on a new basis; conquest and colonization strengthened the image of a uniquely sacred centre" (p. 161). It is somewhat unfortunate that the author does not go into a closer study of these fundamental reforms, as they were a revolutionary change

that *de facto* transformed feudal Japan into a modern industrial state based on the European model in the 19th century.

In the final section, the author discusses modernity in a global context, articulating the view that modernity as a new civilization is defined by new cultural orientations that have great global overlap. The key to understanding this globalizing modernity "is to be found in the dynamics and paradoxes of an internally contested, multidimensional and historically enmeshed cultural vision of human autonomy" (p. 184). The author places great emphasis on the distinction between global, national and regional civilisational modernity, stressing that the structural and processual interconnections between these levels must always be taken into account, and the context in which each modernity occurs is equally important.

Overall, the book covers a large range of historical questions and themes, to which it is largely able to provide convincing answers. The historical-sociological approach is a great positive of this book, as well as the focus on the civilizational specifics that are put in context with modernity in the countries in question, which I think is the greatest contribution of *The Labyrinth of Modernity*.

In conclusion, this is one of the best books on contemporary history that I have read in a very long time, as it explores lines, approaches, and variously combines historical, political, cultural, and even economic spheres and puts them in the context of modernity, which thus gains a new dimension and understanding in a little more than 200 pages. This gives the book a truly unique character.

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