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Modernity and civilization in Johann Arnason's social theory of Japan

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Abstract

Johann Arnason's exploration of the historical constellation of East Asia has helped reproblematicize the conceptual framework of modernity and civilization. This article outlines Arnason's innovations in civilizational analysis and social theory in the field of comparative studies of Japan. It sets out the terms on which a nuanced elaboration of Arnason's framework could occur. Two areas warrant closer attention: state formation and the institution of capitalism. It is argued that there are signs of what might be termed a 'tertiary' phase of state formation, implicit in Arnason's discussion of advanced modernity. Moreover, this phase brought Japan into close contact with the newly unfolding context of the West's civilizational imaginary, particularly in its ideological expressions of evolutionism. The article ends on the problematic of capitalism, raising questions about further potential theoretical developments based on Arnason's conclusions and other inventive studies of Japanese capitalism.

Keywords

Arnason, capitalism, civilization, Japan, modernity, region

Johann Arnason's social theory of Japan is truly one of the most comprehensive enterprises in the study of Asian modernities. An evaluation could start with his perspectives on Orientalism, on state formation in archaic and feudal Japan, the place that the Japanese example takes in a post-Weberian comparative analysis, or a general consideration of the relevance and applicability of Western social theories in other civilizational contexts. His deep investigation and core statements are contained in *Social Theory and*

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Japanese Experience (1997, henceforth *Social Theory*) and *The Peripheral Centre* (2002). A short account of how he came to have an interest in Japan may help explain the choice of theme that this article opts for: modernity and civilization. From earlier work on Marxism, phenomenology and Eliasian and Weberian legacies, Arnason began to elaborate a multidimensional conception of modernity. In the Japanese context, this was expressed as a sharp critique of the metanarrative of modernization (1987). A framework of post-Weberianism provided an initial springboard for his major work, namely *Social Theory*. This was a hermeneutical project critically drawing on Weber, Castoriadis, Merleau-Ponty, Benjamin Nelson and Elias, and secondarily from Mann, Marx, Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss. Furthermore, it has been nourished by critical dialogue with Eisenstadt's landmark work in the comparative sociology of Japan.¹ With *Social Theory*, Arnason began to declare a series of positions on questions of debate in the emerging paradigm of civilizational sociology, not the least of which is a post-colonial critique of Orientalism. Arnason's response to post-colonial critics is to develop a perspective that privileges the contexts of intercivilizational encounters. However, Arnason's writings on Japan go beyond simply another study of another non-Western figuration. It works from the clarification of concepts and aims for further theoretical elaboration. Moreover, it is part of an emerging conceptual apparatus that is still a work-in-progress.

This article centers on Arnason's rethinking of the concept of modernity in respect to Japanese civilization in order to establish the groundwork upon which his achievements can be expanded. It takes up six problems: regionalism and civilization in East Asia, the categories of culture and power, Japan's distinctive modernity, sequences of state formation, and a hermeneutics of intercivilizational encounters. A final section hones in on debates around capitalism to see where future research could develop.

Culture and power re-made: thinking about civilization in context

Japan is the first case in which Arnason applies two of his main theoretical innovations in order to further a civilizational paradigm: his insistence that civilizations be studied in context and the reformulation of notions of culture and power. Each is discussed in turn in this section.

Context is all important in thinking about how modernity and civilization can be related to one another. Where Eisenstadt posits the 'civilization of modernity' as one approach to this problem, Arnason sees civilizations as both less than and greater than modernity. In short, this means that modernity always coalesces around civilizational legacies which contextualize it and to which it is responsive. At the same time, modernity's spread is, in every sense, 'trans-civilizational'. It has the capacity to transform those legacies. Setting modernity in civilizational context in this manner helps make much better sense of the dialectic of universality and particularity. On one hand, it overcomes the pitfalls of universalism that are frequently highlighted in critiques of conventional theories of modernity, such as those of Habermas and Giddens. On the other hand, it does not lapse into a decontextualized notion of plurality as a response to the critics of

Eurocentrism. It aims, rather, to set the institution of modernity in civilizational perspective.

This also produces a position on Eisenstadt's problematic of 'multiple modernities'. The phrase itself is only used reluctantly by Arnason in a few places. Even so, the idea of multiplicity is expressly accepted. There are 'trajectories' and 'configurations' of and 'paths to' modernity (2002: 132–57). There are delineable non-Western modernities and an acknowledgement of a common 'colonial modernity' (2003: 324–5). Moreover, Eisenstadt's program does set out the dimensions of modernity's pluralization (2003: 40–2). However, distinct caution remains about how the notion of multiple modernities is conceptualized, especially as it is defined by the proposition that modernity itself is a civilization. Eisenstadt puts at risk the valuable pluralism that he is seeking for civilizational sociology as the critical point of departure from the meta-narrative of modernization. In conclusion, the research agenda of multiple modernities at this stage falls short of the 'more complex image of modernity' (2007: 22) that it needs. Thus, for Arnason, vital questions of this sort can be only systematically addressed through a focused examination of civilizations and modernities in context. This is less his 'answer' to Eisenstadt and more a theoretical direction to follow.

He follows this subsequent course by singling out Japan's historical experience from the background of East Asia. Japan's exceptionality can be established only in the context of the more limited zone of historical China and Korea (2002: 45–53). A larger geographical model provides less of a guide to the *longue durée* because it includes different kinds of intercivilizational encounters and diverging experiences of Western colonialism (1997: 3, 43–7). Following Mauss' notion of the 'singularization of societies', he sets out how Japan is a paradigmatic instance of self-particularization (1997; 2003: 299–301). Its transforming relationship with the larger cultural exemplar enabled constant renovation of its own traditions, some of which proved lasting. It demarcated itself as a civilization, which only became completely evident with the nineteenth-century engagement with the West. But the processes of self-distinction which saw its emergence as a vibrant and expanding power had their origins in longer-term dynamic interaction with the rest of the Sinic zone.

One vital aspect of the discussion illustrates this point well. Japan's relationship to the world has been marked by a calculated calibration of openness and closure (1997: 368–70, 408–10). A feature of Japanese modernity is the sharp distinction between makeovers of Japanese identity and the adoption of aspects of outside models. It seems a paradox to many sociologists that the sharpening of native identity can combine with a disposition to learning. But this comes as no surprise to Arnason. It was a pattern acquired in the ambivalent interstices of Japan's long relationship to China. What marks it as a feature of early modernity in the Tokugawa era is the shift from a regional to a worldwide orientation, which began during the longest period of withdrawal. Thus, while the dramatic relationship with the West opened more completely with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, it is during the Tokugawa dynasty that interest began to develop. This was a modernizing orientation, which confronted different exemplars of development. As it transpired, the collision with the West induced Japan's imperial project and later developmental models. Both the empire and the postwar outgrowth of Japanese capitalism were reminiscent of prior engagements with China and were set in motion in East Asia, albeit with Japan established as the region's premier state and not its periphery.

The above discussion of modernity alludes to another of Arnason's innovations. It is a commonplace in the social sciences that culture is never completely isolated from power. However, power is worked out in isolation from culture more often than many think. Bringing the two dimensions together avoids the danger of reifying power present in, for instance, Giddens' and Elias' theories (Arnason, 1989); that is, the neglect of an interpretive dimension varying the structuring of power. In the place of historical sociologies of the quantitative variation of centralized resources of power, Arnason sees figurations of power as mutually shaped by cultural visions and potential resources. They have an 'ambiguous relationship' (1997: 9) in the development of modern Japanese civilization and in the institution of industrial capitalism. His work finds real originality in the treatment of this ambiguity. As highlighted above, external relationships often influence state formation. He goes further than Nelson's notion of 'intercivilizational encounters' in setting out how culture and power form in mutually modifying patterns in the context of Japan's regional and global relationships (1997: 61–2, 195–201, 290–312).

Pinpointing those patterns sheds light on the turning points of Japan's state formation. Its formative seventh century involved the exercise of a locally developed vision of rule stimulated by a wide-ranging pattern of learning from the example of China. This altered the process of accumulation of power which was already underway and set a new course, also initiating a first round of civilizational tradition-making. No center of authority could be sustained, however. Disintegrative forces dissembled the *ritsuryo* state in a secondary process of state formation, dividing state power between the warrior government and the imperial household. The inspiration of the imperial order endured although it underwent a good deal of change in the twelfth century. A different synthesis of power and culture is evident in the Tokugawa state (1997: 257–337). Crisis had led to containment in which achieving general stability became a priority. It was pursued through a strategy of cooptation of elites rather than an out-and-out accumulation of resources. Power was thereby consolidated in an arrangement quite different from that of Western Europe. It occurred through a project of achieving a high standing and authority for Tokugawa rule. The regime also adopted a cultural strategy of distant observation of the world that was inseparable from this internal order. That stance towards the outside world remained a defining one until the Meiji era when a different combination of culture and power emerged. I return to this subject in the section below after a short consideration of the problematic of modernity made in the wake of these remarks on culture and power in the Tokugawa era.

The problematization of modernity

Two essential revisions are visible in Arnason's notion of Japanese modernity. Modernity's sequential development is reconsidered and its multidimensional form reconceived. This amounts to a re-periodization of modernity which brings in earlier patterns of institutional formation, allied political strategy-making and interpretive realignments. Several subsidiary *a priori* arguments are linked with both revisions.

Modernity's discrete trends were therefore well developed before the nineteenth-century encounter with the West. The seventh-century formation of the *ritsuryo* state was a watershed in this respect. However, Arnason is at pains to emphasize that this is an

overarching cultural pattern open to many ideological interpretations.² His approach is unmistakably hermeneutical and is not seriously susceptible to accusations that it is a thinly disguised kind of trans-historical culturalism. To sharpen his distinction between cultural and interpretive patterns, he finely lays the groundwork for a hermeneutical understanding of Japanese tradition through a lengthy consideration of Eisenstadt's theory of Axial breakthroughs across the span of Eurasia (1997: 61–74; 2002: 151–4). Eisenstadt's argument, in a few words, is that Japan as a non-Axial civilization did not experience a sharp civilizational differentiation of the transcendental and the mundane conceptions of existence. Consequently, its ontological orientation is radically this-worldly and capable of immobilizing the universalistic tendencies of outside cultural influences. This archaic core is a case of de-axialization. He argues this out in a way that weakens the Sinic context so plainly influential in Japan's entire historical background. The result is an emphasis on cultural continuity rather than the vibrant reforming of collective identity which is brought out in Arnason's comparative analysis. Paradoxically, the denial of recurring Chinese influence conceals what was a more indefinite relationship to Axial traditions (1997: 131–4). If this is so, then the relationship to external traditions must be one of intermittent reinterpretation throughout history (as Arnason suggests) rather than continuity of ontological orientations established in Ancient Japan (as in Eisenstadt's account).³ On this basis, Japan's partition from the Axial civilizations looks less clear-cut, as the connection to regional Axial examples is an abiding part of its own past.

This returns us to the common metatheoretical theme of Arnason's work singled out in this section: the redefinition of modernity. In Arnason's wider thinking, only a multidimensional conception of modernity can provide support for his contextualized notion of civilization and his incisive reformulations of the problem of culture and power. Furthermore, for Arnason, there are dimensions that should not be avoided: capitalism, revolution, nationalism and totalitarianism, and democracy. Social theory's legacy of isolating over-determinants (rationalization, differentiation, the spread of capitalism) mars its results too greatly for Arnason's liking (Knöbl, 2000: 13–18). Addressing the problem of causality is not Arnason's main purpose, however, as it cannot satisfy questions about civilizational traditions and how social actors interpret them and thereby build social worlds, institutions and states. The dimensions of comparative analysis weighed up by sociologists act for Arnason primarily to stimulate questions about endogenous developments and intercivilizational encounters and this is what characteristically sets Arnason's multidimensional conception of modernity apart.

In the case of Japan, three aspects of its relationship to the outside world shaped its pattern of advanced multidimensional modernity (2002: 139–48). First of all, it exhibits a self-conscious search for technical knowledge which is elaborated as a strategy of reflexive modernization. This involves cultural realignment neatly exemplified in the Meiji-era slogan *bunmei kaika* ('civilization and enlightenment'). The intercivilizational exploration of other cultures that Japan's leaders embarked upon in the early 1870s is unmatched for the pace and depth of its exploration of the world around Japan. How Arnason handles this episode is a showcase of his meta-theoretical *modus operandi*. Social and political studies of Japanese modernization have a track record of privileging learning-from-the-West as a cognitive force of modernizing. But expressing this as a

modern Japanese search for world knowledge (based on pre-existing meta-cognitive patterns), taken in a civilizational context, avoids the flaws of uncritically universalistic analyses. While functionalist sociology, systems theory and comparative history all shed light on Japan's modernization, none give full due to the guiding civilizational pattern of Japanese acquisition of knowledge and the dynamics of reinterpretation it contained. To put this more pithily: Japan's 'historicity of modernity is irreducible to general models and theories' (2002: 141).

A second component is the remarkable construction of Meiji state power. Little can better sway the observer to the proposition that Japan was a counter-paradigm of Western modernity more than a full appreciation of its modern state formation. In the next section, I argue that this is an area in which Arnason's analysis can be realigned and extended. A succinct précis of his comments on the institutionalization of state power prefaces the position I take. The creation of a constitutional-bureaucratic state with a developmental relationship to capital and industry is a time-honored topic in Japanese Studies. Even reading this historical episode as a revolution-from-above serves to underline the individuality of Meiji Japan (1997: 412–22, 440–4). There is an abiding ideological side of its structure that warrants more attention: its particularistic nationalism. When the interconnection of culture and power is set in full view, some aspects of a nationalist imaginary come into prominence. From the civilizational background of its relationship to China, the Meiji nation derived a forcefully self-particularizing ethnic identity. It was resistant to the superseding impulses of Western influences. However, it was also remarkably adaptable and internally differentiated. The nationalist imaginary was open to different ideological interpretations, some ideologically dominant, others oppositional. The latter have not been given their due in the scholarship of Japanese nationalism. Arnason's main insight comes in at this point. Different modernities configure integrative and contestatory versions of nationalism in varying ways. The underlying modern relationship between the Japanese nation and state established a distinctly integrative pattern, which sits atop social and political divisions and at the same time has acted to suppress them (1997: 446–9, 461–7).

Third, Japan's civilizational background provided the pre-conditions of its exceptional modernity. The arrival of the Western powers in force in the nineteenth century showed that East Asia was a region of variable patterns of self-transformation in circumstances of growing outside influence. Japan stood out as the most effective power in the region, a situation that has unquestionably lasted until the 1980s. It also instituted patterns of engagement with the outside world which have successfully established more autonomy for Japan than the region's other main states. Its historical relationship entailed a creative adaptation of Chinese culture that reinforced native Japanese traditions. Foreign relations with Western powers were innovatively directed to purposes developed by state elites in a manner that re-enacted important aspects of the long-term relationship to the region, except this time on a worldwide scale and with a newly renovated ('restored') imperial sovereignty.

Japan's advanced modernity

The great encounter with the West inaugurated an age of advanced modernity. Historians have labeled this epoch as *kindai* (modern) to mark it out from the Tokugawa era, or

kinsei (recent). Arnason rights this distinction, moderating its contrast by bringing two earlier eras into full view. To do this, he tempers conventional emphases on the Meiji upheaval and the twentieth century. This qualification is important to Arnason's sense of the *longue durée*, but it comes at a cost. Questions about contemporary Japan (*gendai* to its historians) are raised and treated inconclusively. Moreover, their treatment is detached to some degree from the main thrust of his civilizational sociology. Three dimensions of Japan's advanced modernity merit further elaboration: the third historic phase of state formation, its confrontation with Western imperialism's civilizational imaginary and the character of its capitalism.

Arnason's thinking about the long-term impulses of Japanese state formation includes a compelling distinction between primary and secondary processes (1996). In comparative analysis, this refers to the initial materialization of large-scale states (as primary) and re-institution of state structures against standing cultural traditions following a long phase of disintegration (as secondary). Application of these categories to Japan requires a number of revisions that reveal the startling complexity of developments. The subsequent Meiji era is deemed a major breakthrough (1997: 412–45, 449–53). I propose going one step further and set out some reasons why it can be classed as a *tertiary* process of state formation. In doing so, I am not claiming that Arnason has overlooked the detail of the transformation or mistaken its novelty. It is clear that he fully appreciates, for example, that there was no notable historical lag between the seizure of government and subsequent social changes as there is in nearly all cases of Western revolutions (1997: 249–51). The issue is that it can be classified differently and the discussions around primary and secondary types of state formation suggest an inviting means of doing just that.

Arnason's consideration of the general question of continuities from the commencement of Meiji rule, through the Taisho interlude and the rise of ultra-nationalism and then the postwar revival of Showa rule is instructive for what it includes and for what is undervalued (1997: 404–7). It notes the watershed achievements of the Meiji emperorship. These breakthroughs defined the horizon of possibilities, though the new regime did not decisively pre-ordain particular outcomes. The most stable aspects need to be drawn out, however. Continuity after the 1868 Restoration lies with the state's overall institutional order. While the 1870s represented a factionalized struggle for authority and a period of some uncertainty, by the 1880s, a new polity was taking shape. It had created the chief institutions of government with breathtaking speed. Despite its myth of archaic and sacred connection to the Japanese world, the condensation of imperial sovereignty in the Meiji polity was new. The figuration was subtly authoritarian and is often classed as an oligarchic form of rule. Special constitutional veto powers were granted to the military, giving it a privileged place in the polity. It was some decades before they were exercised, but by the end of Meiji rule the potential for military ascendancy was clear. In the 1890s, there was an immediate consequence: *de facto* decision-making fell to coalescing political elites. This was a pattern that would persist, albeit under challenge, through the partial democratization of parliamentary politics that occurred during the Taisho era.

No long-term breakdown in the state preceded the post-1868 upheaval of Japanese society, as occurred in cases of secondary state formation. Nonetheless, there was a significant crisis accelerated by the looming foreign presence. The sweeping creation of a new state and the reconstruction of society (in both the institutions and minds of the

Japanese) can be categorized as tertiary when one considers how widespread the perception of crisis and change was among the population. The threat of more direct and sustained foreign intervention had been rare in the Japanese experience and hastened reunification. The brevity of this juncture and the drama of its political and social changes justify characterizing it as a revolutionary process without any identifiable revolutionary subject, or a radically novel mode of legitimation. Phenomenologically it can be seen in those terms also; the onset of advanced modernity was experienced by the Japanese as a colossal upheaval. In the 1870s, it opened up the question of broader popular participation in society and in the political community in the form of organic political programs developed outside of the major urban centers. Certainly, these were only short-lived. However, they briefly brought into focus a range of fundamental questions about the character of Japanese society. In doing so, they played an important part in cultivating a sense of modernity and historicity beyond the circles of reforming samurai leaders and city-based intelligentsia. Any nascent political modernity was closed off soon enough by the consolidation of political elites around the emperorship. But brief episodes of involvement primed a number of communities for further institutional changes.

The result was a ground-breaking polity which was conspicuously solid in its fundamentals and distinct from previous regimes. Of course, this might only be a new phase of institutional formation that resulted from the fusion of the imperial institution with domainal government. However, when it is linked with a second dimension of Japan's expanding modernity, additional reasons for demarcating a notion of tertiary formation can be found. Orienting to this larger context of the world of empires exposed Japan to the West's civilizational imaginary and the evolutionist ideology of nations and races derived from it. This involved more than adjustment to a newly revealed worldwide interstate system with its own ground rules. The conceptual apparatus of civilizational thinking included a hierarchy of regions and cultures, which imagined Japan at a level unacceptably low to the Japanese. The Western empires' strategies for different regions were closely linked to this civilizational world-view. Japan's urge for equality of its nation and empire was no mere reactive strategy to increase power and influence in the region, as Arnason indeed points out (1997: 482–3). It was also a general response to the West's own civilizational projections of a world re-ordered according to its image. Japan's visualization of the outside world was consequently magnified to encompass other civilizations, states and regions. It was an imaginary reorientation of the *soto-uchi* (outside/inside) ontological pattern which contextualized the institution of the imperial state.⁴ Confrontation with the West's civilizational imaginary thereby precipitated a wide-ranging adjustment of perceptions of the relationship between domestic and foreign worlds at the heart of the Meiji transformation.

Stepping back momentarily to look at the trajectories of modern Western and Japanese state formation will help illustrate how this warrants the designation of a 'tertiary' process of power formation. While the dichotomy of primary and secondary state formation suits the profile of long-term European patterns, there are several features of Meiji Japan's international relations which do not correlate as well. In this regard, the impact of deep confrontation with pre-existing forms of Western imperialism and their shared civilizational imaginary outlined above deserve more attention. For the West's chief

powers, the connection between secondary processes of state formation and the outgrowth of their empires was closer. It was cemented in the long sixteenth century in which the proto-oceanic states of Western Europe opened the Atlantic sphere while simultaneously securing central authority in a so-called absolutist pattern. In Japan, there is more distance between the Tokugawa regime's struggles for unification around the shogunate (which were taking effect at the start of this period) and the later Meiji-era reflexive engagement with modern imperialism (both in its Western varieties and the later brief phase of self-reflection on its own project). The encounter with the West included involvement in an international arena increasingly dominated by its expanding world empires. For the Japanese, the ordering of the entire world in the Western imperial imagination and the empowered seaborne states that went with it had no exact precedent. Japan's rulers could observe institutional conglomerations that were both national and imperial in their composition and logic and which held territories on each continent and exerted influence beyond their colonial holdings. They provided not only the models but also the impetus for a potential Japanese counterpart. From their origins, the institutional structures of the Meiji state were therefore readily adaptable to expansion, conquest and export as well as nation-building.

Capitalism in the civilizational nation

This Meiji state also launched the most rapid and complete process of industrialization in world history. Arnason has a distinct view of these developments and indeed a discrete position in debates on historical capitalism (2001). His work re-develops Weber's central metaphor of a 'spirit' of capitalism through critical assessments of Braudel, Marx, Deutschman, Elias, Polanyi, Boltanski and Chiapello (2003: 206–9, 274–81; 2005). Although a significant debt to Castoriadis is noted, it is the relationship of civilizational heritages and capitalism (not a pressing concern for Castoriadis) which Arnason is interested in.

When it comes to Japan two essayistic chapters work with three additional themes (1997: 475–502; 2003: 158–202). The first is Chalmers Johnson's well-known analysis of the capitalist developmental state, which is embraced and broadened in Arnason's work. In Arnason's view, debates about Confucian traditions and capitalism reveal the exceptionality of Japan's ontological combinations, often against some of the claims that are made in those debates. Third is the construction of rationality in economic life; its imaginary appears as its eternal immanence – its laws as analogies of nature. This has force for Japan as it did for Western modernity and rests on the longer-term impulses of commercialization in the realm of material life.

Such comparison folds neatly into Arnason's identification of the 'elemental' features of the spirit of capitalism. Japan and the Western powers share the drive to accumulate wealth through expansion and institutional consolidation. In one way, this is the imagination of inexhaustible human potential exemplified by the spread of long-distance transoceanic commerce by Europe's empires. It is also found on a different path in Japan's state formation. Both are part of the abstracted 'spirit' of capitalism which is adaptable to a variety of cultural environments.

A secondary ('composite') spirit is more particular and follows different sequences of development. A Western sequence began with mercantilism, generated a model of entrepreneurialism in the liberal nineteenth century, and then another of Fordism in the twentieth. Post-Fordist flexibilization has been in vogue since the 1980s. Japan's progression followed an alternative path. The Meiji state inaugurated a developmentalist regime that linked an orientation of technological growth and innovation to national goals. The turn to imperial expansion geographically reconfigured the organization of production and trade. Economic nationalism was common to this period and to postwar reconstruction, a 'successor spirit' built up on the residue of previous early modern conceptualizations of development.

No approach in Japanese Studies resembles this perspective. We have learnt from Braudel, Baechler, Wallerstein and others to look further back if we really want to see capitalism's beginnings. Arnason does that in the case of Japan. Further research taking this framework as a starting point could pick up neglected features. The ambivalent relationship with the United States should be treated as an intercivilizational encounter in its own right. Mass industrialism and development of discipline in work contrast with the predominance of small-scale organizations in the economy. Finally, patterns of consumption reflect a phantasm of unlimited needs, which are in turn partly restrained by other civilizational elements. The work of three scholars contributes much to a consideration of research in each respective area: Walter LaFeber (1997), Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1994) and John Clammer (1997).

Following LaFeber's history, the mutually defining connection with the United States can be characterized as a complex 'clash' that entailed an abiding mutual admiration. It involved intercultural exchange and learning. Japan's past experiences of world watching have been repeated in their constant observation of North American civilization; likewise, the US has proved a keen Japan watcher. However, this was also a competition of 'models' of capitalist development. It is in the realm of economic relations that the adversarial and competitive side of their intercivilizational engagement is at its fiercest. Its multifaceted relationships with Asian countries are relevant here. The rise of distinct patterns of capitalist formation in Asia has occurred in the context of Japan's ascendance without necessarily following its developmental path. The consequence has been a stand-off with the US in the 1990s. Neo-liberal remedies to financial systems that failed in 1997 are frequently juxtaposed to the region's institutional orders, which were previously touted as the basis for initial waves of miraculous growth but recently disparaged as 'crony capitalism'. This is an instance of a tense trans-Pacific liaison altered by three decades of underlying transformations that could be the subject of a civilizational-sociological commentary.

The other problematics – the disciplinization of economic life and ongoing growth driven by unrestrained consumption – continue what Castoriadis describes as capitalism's imaginary signification of the rational mastery of infinite progress (2007). It should be borne in mind that they are operative in specific institutional environments. In this regard, some ontological aspects of Japanese experience limit incessant growth in production and consumption and indeed set barriers to the commodification of life. These stand as a corrective to Castoriadis' image of capitalism. Therefore, further study of Japanese capitalism in this vein should move with and against Castoriadis' approach.

The mass form of industry and the disciplinization of work drew on the meta-cognitive dimension of Japanese experience, activated as its creative ‘vision of technology’ (Morris-Suzuki, 1994). After the Pacific War, the country lay in a state of utter ruin. Its national goal of immediate revival was declared: the imagination of technological take-off. The postwar model embodied technological development coupled with state coordination of the acquisition of essential licenses from the US. It entrenched invention and inventiveness as core disciplines of industrial organization and governmental goal-setting. Although the benefits of the ‘asymmetrical trade’ in US patents and licenses dried up long ago, the pattern of internal invention developed during that period continues in the activity of Japanese firms in Asia (Katzenstein, 2003). Its high position in world science should leave little doubt that there is substantial faculty for originality. However, the other side to the ‘vision of technology’ has been the institutional contexts in which it is embedded. The coupling of national aspiration with constant economic renewal points to the vitality of public institutions at all levels in Japan’s networks of innovation (Morris-Suzuki, 1994: 209–44).

The vision of technological takeoff is a concrete form of the capitalist imaginary. It evidently ran up against internal limits in the 1990s. A second form emerged later in postwar success. Prosperity meant that more and more areas of human experience could be rendered as products and services. At first sight, Castoriadis’ proposition that capitalism produces unlimited needs as desires – just as it generates its own drive to infinite accumulation – would seem applicable here. It has an integrating effect under the pressures of massification, which enhances a sense of material security. This has certainly been the case in postwar Japan. But since the 1970s, something else has happened. Where a relative egalitarianism emerged in the workforce, consumption has been the sphere in which the pattern is reversed. Citizens differentiate themselves by status and taste. The range of consumer activities has spread out dramatically on the back of postwar growth. The phase of greatest consumptive power (or ‘affluence’, if you will) coincided with explosive growth of the so-called bubble economy in the 1980s. At this time a mania for leisure engulfed Japanese consumers, who had previously denied themselves during the boom years to serve the cause of national growth.

The prosperity of postwar Japan cultivated a sense of self-assurance in the 1980s. There was an unprecedented growth in leisure. John Clammer’s anthropology of consumption (1997) sheds light on this. However, it also sets it in perspective, while exploring problems not considered in Arnason’s work. Patterns of consumption in Japan reveal a growing world of leisure. But they also contain limits and spill over into spheres through which the Japanese build social worlds alongside of the commodity form, but also partly against it. Consumption is one means through which contemporary Japanese now live out intensely inter-personal lives. In a society where work relentlessly demands exertion, consumption acts as an outlet for phenomenal renewal. Gift-giving is a closely related set of traditions and form of sociability. It regulates the everyday rhythms of reciprocity and expresses formal obligation or friendship. Thus, it is ‘almost an index of morality’ (Clammer, 1997: 165) that grows on a base of pre-existing emotional structures, which in a different framework might be called a profoundly this-worldly orientation. Performance and presentation are esteemed in this environment. Consumption and the rituals Japanese associate with it bring traditions of civility into conflict with the

excesses generated by consumer capitalism. In such vectors of exchange, long-standing aesthetics may reshape the commodity form in unexpected ways, even though they do not countermand it.

In light of Clammer's anthropology of consumption, some moderation of Castoriadis' theory of the capitalist imaginary is called for. Civilizational patterns can temper the imagination of endless consumption. Japanese consumers take part in a lively sociality that has prominent precedents. To be sure, its patterns vary by age and gender. Important to the current perspective, it includes limits and brings in the most abstracted conceptions that emerge from Japanese experience, its ontology, if you will. A pertinent example is the emergence of a mode of environmental consciousness, even if the connection of contemporary conservationism to background conceptions is not direct. The latter has been mainly expressed in large consumer cooperative movements and through effective and well-known local residents' campaigns against pollution. These simultaneously seek a livable environment and a higher quality of life. This kind of environmentalism springs from the mundane sociality that Clammer's anthropology describes. However, this may not be its only source. The sacralization of nature is a common feature of Japan's various versions of Buddhism and was foremost in early modernity (Eisenstadt, 1996: 384–94). It valorized the immanent world and the immediate environment. Its ethical expression materializes in the ecological goals of consumer movements. They actively organize cooperative networks that produce and distribute organic, low impact and unpolluted goods. In doing so, they step outside of large-scale Japanese industrialism while mobilizing a latent aesthetics of nature. Returning to Clammer's sociology of consumption, we can say that such temperaments are a kind of civility, a civilization of desires in the service of an ontological comprehension of the world. Further research on this promises a fascinating and productive prospect that could build on Arnason's balance of traditions and contingency.

Conclusion

Broadly, this article sets out potential elaboration of Arnason's work on Japan in three areas. Arnason's account of modern state formation after the historic appearance of the Western presence in East Asia is adjusted and augmented in order to categorize a third phase. The terms on which the Japanese negotiated modernity are recast in this manner to underline the early indeterminacy of internal changes (followed by institutional consolidation) and, as a second area, confrontation with the looming horizon of the West's pre-existing civilizational imaginary. A third area of enhanced research is Japan's unmatched experience of industrialization involving its regional and Pacific relationships, as well as the civilizational conditions and delimitations in which Japan's 'spirit of capitalism' has coalesced. Arnason's regional contextualization of Japanese modernity and civilization, with some adaptation, provides an excellent framework for expanded sociological work on these three areas. Its re-theorization of aspects of the core conceptual apparatus of civilizational sociology and the paradigm of multiple modernities paves the way for further research on understated aspects of modern and contemporary Japan. Above all, it reveals a dimension that runs contrary to the received wisdom of modernization studies, which is implicitly reproduced in the globalization paradigm:

that Japan's far-reaching closure came to an end with assimilation of the outside world, which continued to power its renovation. Instead, Japan's historical experience is shown to be one of intense and self-transforming engagement with East Asian and then global currents. Its diversified modernity has exhibited careful deliberation on internal and foreign worlds and the relationships between them, as well as homogenizing counter-tendencies, a diversity whose maximal appreciation is found in Arnason's social theory of Japan.

Notes

1. This is a relationship examined in Smith (2002).
2. As a more general point, the elaboration in Arnason's work of the distinctions between the social imaginary, ideologies etched out of it, and the social actors involved responds well to concerns about theories of modernity raised by Ibrahim Kaya (2004). Kaya's notion of open-ended modernity searches for greater explication of the many modes of interpretation: 'it needs to be shown that autonomy and mastery can be interpreted in multiple ways by different subjects' (2004: 44). I take this to be consistent with calls for sociological applications of these two basic institutions of modernity discussed by Castoriadis. Kaya's answer to this is a model of multiple interpretations of both modernity (resting on civilizational traditions) and its cultural worlds (which are distinct from civilizations). Arnason's is a model of multidimensional modernities set against conditions of inter-civilizational engagement (which varies by degree, frequency, character and results).
3. Note, however, that Eisenstadt's analysis has other merits. His description of Japanese ontology is highly perceptive and could flourish in a more nuanced theoretical framework. Also, while his proposition that outside influences are 'de-axialized' in the process of absorption is open to substantial criticism, it has the value of identifying process and transformation. Eisenstadt himself does not take the proposition too far and his comparative approach to Japan from within a theory of Axial civilizations does not depend on it.
4. Cullen's imaginative recounting of Japan's long modernity (2003) emphasizes the interplay of processes of national unification and interaction with outside powers. For him, it is the Tokugawa era which has been misjudged by historians. He presents a strong case for realigning perceptions of Japan's past. However, reevaluation on the basis of internal and external impulses to change can and should also situate the Meiji era as a turning point in Japan's relations with the rest of the world.

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