Introduction on Shmuel N. Eisenstadt’s Sociology: The Path to Multiple Modernities

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General Introduction

Since the 1950s, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt was a leading figure in sociology. There is no other sociologist whose research and theorizing spanned nearly 60 years. At the beginning of his career, he contributed significantly to the formation of sociological theory. From the mid-1970s onwards, he established the ‘Research Program of Comparative Civilisations’. In fact, this shift in the context of sociological theory – away from the ‘Comparative Analysis of Institutions’ to the ‘Research Program of Comparative Civilisations’ – was a defining characteristic of his sociological work and his intellectual career (Eisenstadt 1995a: 1–40, 2003a: 1–28, Preyer 2011: 13–57). This new approach contributed to Eisenstadt’s critique of the classical theory of modernization and, ultimately, to the establishment of the ‘Research Program of Multiple Modernities’ (as a result of the ‘Research Program 1986’) – a viewpoint that changed the way we view the modern world.

In introducing this volume, we explore three interrelated topics: (1) the evolution of Eisenstadt’s scholarship leading to the notion of multiple modernities; (2) the relevance of the theory of multiple modernities to our understanding of the modern era; and (3) the impact multiple modernities has on our approach to understanding sociology as well as the world we live in.

We begin our analysis with a sketch of Eisenstadt’s intellectual path to ‘multiple modernities’. We examine the major axioms, theories, and approaches that dominated sociology from the 1950s and look at how these changed over time. This transformation led to Eisenstadt’s critique of Talcott Parsons’ widely held conception of structuralism; namely, identifying structural differentiation as the main impact of the socio-structural evolution, the ‘Research Program of Comparative Civilization’ and, consequently, the shift to multiple modernity. It should be noted here that Eisenstadt’s primary theoretical interest is the analysis of a general theoretical framework for the analysis of the structural evolution of societies. Second, we describe the subject of this contribution with respect to the extrapolation of the ‘Research Program of Multiple Modernities after 1986’ in the emergent domain of global modernities as a new theory of modernization. Thirdly, as a consequence of the theorizing
and research that emerged from the ‘First Research Program 1986’ and the ‘Second Research Program 2003’, we conclude the design of a ‘Third Research Program 2015’ (Multiple Modernities Membership Research Program), which continues the ‘Research Program of Multiple Modernities’ in general. Sociology is a discipline that deals with contemporary societies. Yet, this domain is not intelligible without a framework of structural evolution and an analysis of the setting of social systems in their environment, their elites, the social exchange, membership and communication. This goes along with the recognition of the borderlines, which are structured in social intercourse.

Eisenstadt’s Path to Multiple Modernities

The history of Eisenstadt’s scholarship begins in a period spanning the late 1940s through to the 1960s. Speculative development theories as well as analytical, theoretical and comparative approaches were predominant in sociology during this period. Yet, these main approaches failed to consider the processes of institutionalization. One principal reason for this is that our understanding of sociology was dominated by the School of Functional Analysis of the British social anthropologists Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown as well as the structural-functional theory of Parsons, Shils and Merton. Moreover, the comparative research was cross disciplinary and primarily undertaken by the disciplines of anthropology, history and sociology and conducted by worldwide researchers who applied sociological, political science and economic analyses to social structures.

During this time, the research projects were classified in accordance to different types of societies: primitive, historical, European, and American societies as well as the post-colonial states, which, more or less, recognized a convergence of those societies. The main impulses were given in the publications of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1950) and also of Radcliffe-Brown and Forde (1950). The structure-functional theory turned at the same time to comparative analysis, which built the analysis of institutionalization as a new focus (Murdock 1949; Spiro 1961: 459–93). The analysis of institutions was transformed into the research of institution-building.

This theoretical background motivated Eisenstadt’s research, between the end of the 1940s and 1965, on the change and extension of trust in societal communication, demonstrating that he is not limited to the solidarity of the kinship system. Eisenstadt’s research was systematic in its intent towards sociological theory. He researched immigrants, age groups, the comparative analysis of institutions, the function of bureaucracy and its function in cases of