The Civilizations of the Americas: The Crystallization of Distinct Modernities

S.N. Eisenstadt

I

The purpose of this article is to analyze the development of the distinct institutional and cultural patterns in the Americas as crystallization of distinct modern civilizations. The major assumption of this article is that in the Americas there developed not just local variations of the European model or models, but radically new institutional and ideological patterns. These patterns were derived and in many ways brought over from Europe, but they became not just changed through adaptation to local conditions but radically transformed. In all or at least most of the settings of the Americas we can trace the crystallization of new civilizations, and not just, as Louis Hartz claimed, of “fragments” of Europe.1 It is quite possible that this has been the first case of the crystallization of new civilizations since that of the Great “Axial” Civilizations and also the last to date. At the same time the crystallization of modernity in the Americas attests to the fact that even within the broad framework of modern Western civilization — however defined — there developed not just one but multiple cultural programs and institutional patterns of modernity.

It was indeed in the Americas — in the English colonies in the North which later crystallized into the U.S.; in Canada where French and English settlements became interwoven; and in the Latin Americas in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires as well as in the Caribbean — that such distinct clear patterns of modernity which differed not only from one another but also from Europe, first crystallized.

Alexis de Tocqueville, of course, clearly saw this: it was indeed the thrust of his analysis of Democracy in America.2 Latin America did not have a De Tocqueville, but Alexander von Humboldt3 in the nineteenth century, and such literary figures and scholars as Octavio Paz, Richard Morse, Howard

Comparative Sociology, Volume 1, issue 1
© 2002 Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden
Wiarda, Tulio Halperin Donghi, Roberto de Matta and others in the twentieth century, have provided many important indications concerning such a crystallization of new civilizations in Latin America. Similarly, the work of Harold Innis in his studies of staple and communication, of Seymour Lipset on the Continental Divide and the contributions of Canadian historians and political scientists clearly attest to the singularity of the English Canadian and the Quebecois cases. Finally, some of the Caribbean cases provide further indication of the development of societies and cultures which became set apart both from the European metropolitan model and from the other American modernities.

In this paper I shall explore, in a tentative way, and in a comparative historical perspective, how there developed, in the Americas and especially in the U.S., and in a different way in what would be called or designated as Latin America, especially in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires, through specific institutional processes, distinct interpretations of modernity, of modern premises of social and political order, of conceptions of collective identity, and in close relation to these distinct modern institutional patterns and dynamics.

II

Despite the fact that there developed far-reaching differences between these different American civilizations (especially the U.S. and the Latin American ones which in some ways indeed constitute mirror images of one another), they shared also some common characteristics rooted in the processes of European settlement and colonization and in the encounter with the various native populations and the populations of Black slaves translocated from Africa.

One of the most important differences which distinguish the American civilizations from both the European and later the Asian societies was the relative weakness of primordial criteria in the definition of their collective identities. In initial phases of European settlement and colonization in the Americas, the ancestral attachments of the settlers were rooted in the European countries of origin and to a much lesser extent in the new environment. With the passing of time and the consolidation of the new colonies, strong attachments developed to the new territory, but these attachments were defined in different terms from those that had crystallized progressively in Europe. There developed a comparatively weaker combination of territorial, historical and linguistic elements as components of collective identity. By sharing the respective languages with their countries of origin and among themselves, the very definition of primordial distinctiveness was unrelated to it in both North America and most of Spanish America (less so in Paraguay and of course in Brazil).