

S. N. Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View*  
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reviewed by David R. Loy

Those familiar with Japan know that there is something unique about it -- and enigmatic, since it has been so difficult to specify what that uniqueness consists of. Deeply conservative while very receptive to foreign influence, technologically sophisticated yet ideologically resistant, Japan does not fit into our usual distinctions between traditional and modern (or modernizing).

There have been many attempts to solve that riddle, but it is fair to say that they are unsatisfactory or at least incomplete. On the one side are ambitious (and now dated) works such as Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* and Chie Nakane's *Japanese Society*, which offer illuminating overviews that do not reach to the source of Japanese uniqueness; on the other side are the many academic studies which focus on this or that aspect without presuming to generalize and explain the whole.

In *Japanese Civilization: a comparative view*, the luxuriant foliage of contemporary scholarship receives a magisterial synthesis that reveals the geography of the entire forest. By adopting a comparative perspective -- contrasting the development of Japan with that of China, India, and especially Europe -- the distinguished sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt achieves a bird's-eye view that avoids the false dichotomy between a cultural approach and a structural/institutional one. The result is the most important book I have read on Japan.

The problem Eisenstadt sets himself arises from a remarkable similarity between Japanese and European history: their parallel evolution from semi-tribal monarchies to feudalism to more centralized states, with continuous economic development, the growth of cities, recurring peasant rebellions, and then modernization -- all of this accompanied by repeated institutional restructuring. Many of the causes of these transformations also seem to be similar, yet the institutions that formed in Japan have been very different. How is this difference-in-similarity to be understood?

The master category employed is Axial civilization (Karl Jasper's term), referring to those cultures that crystallized around 500 B.C. with new conceptions of a basic tension between this mundane world and a "higher" transcendental one, requiring the reconstruction of human personality and society. Civilizations in Israel, Greece, Iran, India and China (the last a controversial case) institutionalized those visions. Japan did not, despite a sophisticated philosophical and aesthetical discourse found elsewhere only in Axial cultures.

The main significance of this distinction is that Japan developed into a continuously evolving civilization that disregarded universalistic values rooted in such transcendental orientations. This point is repeated a hundred times, in one context after another, but necessarily so, for it illuminates Japanese society, culture and history more than any other

concept. Since Nietzsche's critique of the Greek and Judeo-Christian distinction between this world and a "higher" one, we have become sensitive to the problems with this dualism; Japan, despite its considerable virtues and charms, helps us appreciate the perhaps greater problems for a modern society that lacks such an Axial perspective.

It seems to me that that Axial transcendence involves at least three aspects: reference to another world or dimension that transcends this one, to which we are in some way responsible; the authority of a universalizable moral code (usually derived from the former); and the type of "higher" thought processes that "rises above" the given world, which creates the possibility of leverage over, of changing, that given. For Axial civilizations, the fulcrum that Archimedes sought was provided by the transcendental, whether we understand it as the realization of another (dimension of) reality or as a product of the human imagination. The fascination of Japan is that it provides us with a completely different model of how historical development, including modernization, can occur.

The point is more than that Japan is not an Axial civilization. Eisenstadt points out that its early exposure to Axial traditions in Asia (especially China) meant that Japan had to de-Axialize the Axial influences it received from these alien cultures -- most notably, Confucianism and Buddhism. Confucianism in China, Korea and north Vietnam changed their modes of political legitimization, from some type of divine kingship to a new conception of the ruler under "the mandate of heaven" and accountable to it. This never happened in Japan, where the emperor remained divine -- a direct descendent of Amaterasu -- and responsible to nothing "higher".

Buddhism became transformed from a transnational religion into a state religion, its ecclesiastical structures "de-autonomized" by becoming embedded within the indigenous social framework. This blurred the distinction between monks and laity, resulting in the modern Japanese priest, a married "technician of the sacred" purveying expensive funerals and posthumous names. In this way Buddhism's transcendental orientation became immanentized, its universalist values particularized. Japanese Buddhism came to emphasize "self-transcendence through submission to a master, lineage, tradition, community, temple, or ritual form" (238). Zen became popular in the Kamakura period because it taught the samurai how to kill and how to die -- i.e., to be one with the demands of their social nexus -- negating, however, the universalistic Buddhist precepts that Sakyamuni had taught ("do not kill", etc.). Some of the other ways in which Buddhism was immanentized are less deplorable: for example, Saigyo's sacralization of nature, which transformed its phenomenal forms from symbols of the Absolute into the essence of the Truth itself.

The absence of an Axial perspective distinguishing what is from what could be also explains the striking conflation of state and civil society. Public space and discourse were monopolized by the government representing the national community and legitimized by the emperor. The formative Japanese distinction was between the *kokutai* (the national structure, absolute and eternal, symbolized by the emperor) and the *seitai* (the contingent and profane political structure, represented by the shogun, bafuku, etc.).

Historically it may be traced back to the gradual isolation of the Heian emperors, whose powers were eventually usurped by the officials around him (usually from one family), leading to powerful shoguns. This dichotomy between authority and power continues today and seems to serve the same role as the Axial distinction between transcendental and mundane. Bellah is quoted speaking of imperial loyalism as “pseudo-universalism”, a “generalized particularism which was a functional substitute for universalism in the extension and rationalization of power” (254).

This status incongruence -- dissociation among authority, power, and also wealth -- had widespread implications, as Eisenstadt shows. The ideological discourse that developed in Europe focused on the inability of rulers to live up to universalistic conceptions grounded in transcendental visions and ideals of accountability. The Tokugawa bafuku was also found wanting, but the criteria used were rooted in particularistic moral visions of the existing community, symbolized in the figure of the restored emperor, who legitimized the community in this-worldly terms. Intellectuals and reform movements, which remained weak and uncoordinated, played no role in the actual Meiji “restoration”; the significant agents were disgruntled samurai dissatisfied with their status. The rapid technological and economic transformation that followed was and still is legitimized in terms of its contribution to the well-being of the collectivity, which is why the Japanese economy does not really fit a pure market model.

From a Western perspective such a conflation of state and civil society suggests a fascist or communist nightmare, yet Eisenstadt shows that in Japan power too is not independent of social relationships. Rather than something to be applied from above according to “objective” (e.g., legal) criteria, power is embedded in the structure of interdependent relations that operate on the basis of “soft rule”, i.e. dispersed action and hierarchical coordination, based on consensus-building and continual adaptation. Law, in particular, did not encode some higher transcendent vision (e.g., rationality), so it did not require any institutional autonomy. Instead of exerting some leverage over the state, such as protecting citizens from the state, for Japanese bureaucracy law was (and remains) “above all a supreme device to manage the state” -- no surprise to anyone who has had any extensive dealings with Japanese bureaucracy. Insofar as laws and rules transcend concrete situations, they are limited by their embeddedness in tacit understanding, so institutional arenas are not defined according to any principles that transcend them. In interpersonal relations, rules are subordinated to a concern for developing and extending trust. Such trust is understood as embedded in particular relationships, not as conditional on adhering to principles that transcend those settings.

This tends to make the relationship between self and group one-dimensional: either you are part of the group and subordinate your own wishes to its demands, or you selfishly withdraw into your own private space. A third alternative -- that one might idealistically resist some societal demands in order to work toward changing society -- scarcely exists. As Eisenstadt puts it, attempts in the direction of principled individualism are defined as egotistical, thus breeding apathy, cynicism and withdrawal -- certainly widespread among Japanese youth today. Oppositionary intellectuals still tend to retreat into private spaces, academic or literary, as Buddhist monks and scholars did earlier.

There have been many protest movements in Japanese history, from peasant rebellions to Marxist intellectual groups, but the basic problem for all of them has been the same: the weakness of civil society provided them with no public arena from which to work toward changing the center of power. Without this possibility, forms of protest have tended to be expressive rather than instrumental, emphasizing one's sincerity of commitment rather than expecting to accomplish some goal through organized action. As Handelman puts it, the ritual of rebellion reproduced the social order rather than challenged it, by appealing to "the right to benevolence" from the authorities.

In the penultimate chapter, the perspective on Japan adumbrated above -- which has been able to touch on only a few of the themes addressed in the book -- is sharpened by contrasting what happened in Europe, India and China. In Europe a plurality of centers and subcenters of hierarchy, with no clearly predominant center, allowed for the development of "private" public arenas distinguished from the state. The state and civil society engaged in a continuous ideological struggle for the center, leading to strong consciousness of the issue of legitimization and possible political discontinuity. In this fashion the Axial gap between what was and what could be was worked out. In India, however, the political arena did not constitute such a major avenue of "salvation", and there was no such ideological confrontation between state and society, for the simple reason that the state as a distinct ontological entity never coalesced to the same degree. Sovereignty emphasized the multiple rights of different groups, such as castes.

China offers a more difficult case. Eisenstadt admits that its status as an Axial civilization is controversial, and he refers to the denial of such a transcendental tension as the major error in Max Weber's study of China. According to Eisenstadt, China sanctified the political as the major, almost exclusive arena for implementing the prevalent (Confucian) transcendental vision, which meant that the tension between it and the mundane was couched in largely secular -- metaphysical and ethical, not religious -- terms. The Confucian way to implement this vision was to cultivate the social, political and cultural orders to attain harmony. Yet he admits that the effects of this Axialization were limited: all the Chinese orientations "had, in comparison with those which developed in other post-Axial Age civilizations and especially in the monotheistic traditions, relatively limited effects" (415). Unlike what happened in other Axial civilizations, there were no breakthroughs in institutional realms, and cultural ones were hemmed in by the Confucian elites. Significantly, China was the only Axial civilization in which no secondary breakthrough (e.g., Christianity and Islam for Judaism, Buddhism for Hinduism) occurred. Clearly a problematical example of Axialization.

Japanese institutional change was characterized by its comparatively low level of principled, ideological struggles. There were no criteria (such as "higher" universalistic values) beyond the given political center around which new centers or collectivities could be constructed; thus no focus developed for implementing the transcendental visions that came with Confucianism and Buddhism, and no emphasis on any principled discontinuity between regimes or stages of historical development. In the feudal era authority was more centralized than in Europe; cities and their merchant classes gained no autonomy;

and instead of formal contractual responsibilities the mutual obligations between classes were understood in familial terms. A weak extended kinship system allowed basic family units to be permeated by the center (symbolized by the emperor), and that influence legitimized in kinship terms (the father of the nation).

Intellectually, of course, Japan is far more interesting than “a low level of ideologization” suggests. The confrontation with Confucianism and especially Buddhism meant that Japanese thought did not merely retain archaic or primordial-sacred categories. What Kasulis says of Kukai, that he “philosophized in the archaic” (243), touches on its peculiarity. The encounter with these Axial religions gave rise to a highly reflexive philosophical, religious and aesthetical discourse not to be found in any other non-Axial civilization. Its self-aware focus on the archaic led, paradoxically, to a sophisticated textual tradition denying in principle its own logocentric focus: refuting the premises of Axial ideologies while constructed in terms derived from those ideologies, a self-conscious (and to that extent Axial) ideological effort to de-Axialize discourse.

What does this paradox imply about Japan’s status as a non-Axial civilization? If we also bring in China’s problematical status, questions arise about a dualistic schema that requires us to classify civilizations as either all-Axial or non-Axial. The importance of Axialization is not to be denied, but is there always such a clear distinction between them? Perhaps China is better understood as a case of “arrested” Axialization, in which an early breakthrough (Confucius, Lao-tse, etc.) was not aborted but repressed by the way that the state eventually co-opted the Confucian challenge into an orthodoxy. Despite the emphasis that Confucianism placed upon the state as locus for transcendentalization, the mandate of heaven had little effect on the conduct of emperors except to encourage and legitimize rebels. The main effects of Axialization were in more private cultural arenas. In the case of Japan, of course, this was even more true. Axialization never penetrated to restructure the sociopolitical center, but the process of de-Axializing imported influences such as Confucianism and Buddhism led to a paradoxical or “mixed” Axialization of discourse that has been important for Japan’s ability to absorb foreign influences on its own terms. Perhaps, then, in different ways China and Japan are both “semi-Axialized” civilizations, whose cultures were partly Axialized (Japan less than China) without their political centers being much affected. Their distinctive and sophisticated cultures demonstrate alternative ways of human flourishing, alternatives for which those of us from Axial Civilizations can be deeply grateful.

I cannot end on such an optimistic note, however, nor does Eisenstadt. His last chapter discusses the changes that Japan is presently experiencing. Inevitably, his concluding remarks are already dated, yet developments since them only reinforce his concerns. Eisenstadt refers to the watershed 1993 election, in which the LDP finally lost power, only to point out that the public discourse before and since then has not changed the traditional parameters of ideology. As I write, the LDP is firmly back in power, and short-lived hopes for genuine political reform have died. More and more Japanese people realize that Japan must change, but the basic problem remains that no one knows how to do it. There still seems to be no way to challenge the center, for, as Eisenstadt puts it, the search for the common good remains largely bereft of any institutional arena or direction.

Hence Japan's problem today, which may be a tragic bind: unable to change sociopolitically, without friends (unable to apologize) and perpetually awkward in its relations with other nations and cultures (because lacking the "bridge" of internalized universalistic principles). From an Axial perspective, it seems that Japan now needs a transformation greater than that effected by the Meiji restoration if it is to become truly "internationalized". But lacking the Archimedean fulcrum of Axial perspectives and arenas for them to work in, how is that to happen?

From an Axial perspective: because to write about Japan, comparing it with other civilizations, is inevitably Axial. The attempt to "rise above" a culture in order to understand its historical contingency -- that it has been constructed and therefore could be reconstructed -- is the Axial ideological act par excellence. In that sense Eisenstadt's study is not "objective" in its comparisons (nor does he claim it to be). Yet I believe his Japanese Civilization will be indispensable for all future work on the topic, because this masterful overview gets to the heart of the issues.

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