

IRON CITY BLUES

FUNDAMENTALISM, SECTARIANISM, AND REVOLUTION: THE JACOBIN DIMENSION OF MODERNITY. By S. N. Eisenstadt. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xiv, 280.

Pittsburgh, the Iron City, gives me the blues. Cleaner and quieter than when tall smokestacks filled its valleys with yellow-brown haze, the city now stands as a nostalgic reminder of salty politicians, tough tycoons, rough mill workers, and fixed capital. Such heavy industrial cities of another age inspired the bottom-up social history of my youth, with its reductive assignment of interests, organization, and action to whole categories of people—not only social classes, but also neighborhoods, religious affiliations, and citizens at large. That sort of categorical history by no means excluded attention to leaders, personal influence, and mobilization processes. However great its simplifications and reifications, in fact, it reeked of individual and collective agency. Whence my tempered nostalgia for the Iron City.

S. N. Eisenstadt has a very different vision of historical processes. Except for autonomous intellectuals, few efficacious individuals and categories figure in his accounts. In general, his consequential actors are civilizations and societies. Civilizations and societies react to changes besetting them from inside and outside, thus transforming the lives of people who inhabit those civilizations and societies. The trope is familiar, but its logic is not self-evident.

Anyone who proposes to make civilizations and societies major actors in human history must at a minimum provide visibly viable identifications of three elements:

- boundaries separating each such unit and its member population from other such units and their populations;
- distinctive culture—shared understandings and their representations in objects and practices, operating within those boundaries and throughout their extent;
- self-regulating processes—likewise within those boundaries and throughout their extent.

These elements need not be absolute. Boundaries may consist of interstitial zones rather than sharp lines; cultural affinities and exchanges may connect adjacent units; self-regulating processes may leave some people, places, or activities within the boundaries untouched; and so on. Nevertheless, to the extent that proposed units lack any of the three elements, describing and explaining social life in terms of civilizations and societies introduces more confusion than compre-

hension. *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution* has many virtues, but with respect to the three crucial elements it sows confusion.

Across a long career inspired by a Weberian vision of comparative history, S. N. Eisenstadt has repeatedly tried to pack large-scale social phenomena such as imperial expansion and revolution into self-contained civilizations and societies, explaining those phenomena chiefly as responses to problems and tensions originating within the same civilizations and societies. When he first attracted international attention with his magisterial *Political Systems of Empires* (1963), that line of argument belonged to a widely practiced genre. Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons, and Arnold Toynbee had all recently published widely read schematic comparative histories, translations of Max Weber's historical comparisons were proceeding apace, and Karl Marx's historical-comparative writings were likewise receiving an English-language airing. Since then, historians and social scientists have become more skeptical about the autonomy and priority of societies and civilizations. From one side, world historians have challenged the self-containment and self-regulation of such social units. From the other, proponents of microfoundations and analysts of such cross-cutting social processes as migration and technological diffusion have raised doubts about societal and civilizational explanations of social phenomena. While occasionally gesturing toward the gathering dissent, however, Eisenstadt has continued to practice large-scale comparative history on the assumption that societies and civilizations do, indeed, constitute distinct, self-regulating units.

Eisenstadt does not shrink from large topics. In addition to his work on empires, he has produced influential books on modernization, European civilization, Jewish civilization, revolutions, inequality, immigration, protest movements, and a half dozen other major subjects. He moves comfortably among philosophy, religion, intellectual history, political theory, and contemporary social processes. While drawing on an enormous range of knowledge, he refrains from daunting readers with his erudition. He never stops thinking—and writing—about important issues.

In *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution*, Eisenstadt concentrates on twentieth-century mobilizations against modernism within Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. Far from constituting atavistic affirmations of older traditions, he argues, the fundamentalist and sectarian movements in question emerge directly from tensions of modernization. Indeed, they promote a search for transcendental utopias as escapes from modernity. They adopt, furthermore, Jacobin programs characterized by

a strong emphasis on social and cultural activism; on the ability of man to reconstruct society according to some transcendental visions; with the closely connected strong tendency to the absolutization of the major dimensions of human experience as well as of the major constituents or components of social order; and with the concomitant ideologization of politics. (73)

Eisenstadt distinguishes among three varieties of reactive sectarianism: proto-fundamentalist, fundamentalist, and communal-national.

How do the three differ? *Proto-fundamentalist* reactions pursued utopian hopes to restore pristine features of their religious traditions. Arising chiefly in monotheistic civilizations before the modern era, they resembled their modern counterparts in strident rejection of established practices, but lacked the Jacobin urge to reconstruct state, society, and individual through political means. *Modern fundamentalism* adds just such political programs to utopian ideals. Fundamentalism's Jacobin programs enlist tight discipline, modern communications, and modern discourse on behalf of reactionary objectives. Social movements translate those programs into political action. *Communal-national movements*, according to Eisenstadt, differ from both proto-fundamentalist and fundamentalist mobilizations in being both particularistic and primordial; instead of declaring a universal vision available in principle to all humanity, they stress the eternal uniqueness of their own communities. They resemble fundamentalist movements, nevertheless, in combining tight discipline, efficient communications, modern discourse, and organization in the style of secular social movements.

Eisenstadt goes on at length about general features of his categories, but offers little sustained evidence in the form of case histories or specific comparisons. Only two concrete examples of movements occupy more than a page at a stretch anywhere in the book: Israeli ultra-Orthodox sects and India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Neither treatment does much more than assimilate the case to Eisenstadt's categories. Instead of offering his own descriptions and explanations of particular cases, furthermore, Eisenstadt often identifies families of movements, then relies for their characterization on extensive quotations from other people's summaries. He offers, for example, a roughly 700-word extract from Nilufer Göle's treatment of Turkish Islamic fundamentalism (104-105), followed by a 1000-word extract from the same source (143-145). Eisenstadt's own extended descriptions do not concern particular movements (or, for that matter, whole civilizations) but national histories, notably those of Japan, India, and the United States. Japan, furthermore, serves chiefly as a negative case: a modernizing country in which neither fundamentalism nor communal-national movements have had much impact. Nor does Eisenstadt support his arguments with sustained comparisons of Japan, India, and the United States. In short, the book centers on an illustrated typology and a set of general assertions concerning relations between modernization and the emergence of organized alternatives to modernity.

Eisenstadt develops his argument with hardly a reference to abundant literatures that deal concretely with his subject matter—most obviously literatures on nationalism, social movements, and ethnic conflict. His bibliography omits Benedict Anderson, Rogers Brubaker, Ted Gurr, Ernst Haas, Donald Horowitz, Sudhir Kakar, Hanspeter Kriesi, David Laitin, Gérard Noiriel, Beth Roy, Anthony Smith, and Alain Touraine. Although Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm do appear in citations, their books on nationalism do not. The bibliography does include scattered publications on contemporary social movements, but they have had little apparent impact on Eisenstadt's analysis. As represented by footnotes and bibliography, Eisenstadt's published sources concentrate on reli-

gion, revolution, national histories, and social change in general. That selective approach to relevant literature allows him to ignore the prevalent constructivist and entrepreneurial emphases of recent work on nationalism, the current dominance of political process approaches to social movements, and the anti-primordialism of most contemporary specialists in ethnic conflict.

Eisenstadt sees modernization as a creation of Western civilization, which he identifies mainly with Europe and the United States. Modernization, in his view, involved the spread of three interdependent complexes: 1) transformation of social relations by urbanization, industrialization, communications growth, structural differentiation, and other changes documented by students of social development, including Eisenstadt himself, following World War II; 2) “new institutional formations, of the modern nation-state, of modern especially national collectivities, of new and above all capitalist-political economies” (197); 3) a cultural program centering on perfection of humanity by means of knowledge applied to social arrangements. Unlike many previous analysts of modernization, Eisenstadt neither treats the cultural program as a response to the first two sets of changes nor claims that stress generated by those changes promoted reactionary movements. (At the book’s very end, he inserts those standard explanations into his summary statement, but they play almost no part in the dense discussions of the previous two hundred pages.) Instead, he locates the crucial causes within the cultural program itself.

Eisenstadt asserts two sorts of “tensions”: between the modernist cultural program and previously established traditions of the various countries that adopted it, on one side, and between contradictory elements of the program itself. Among the latter he cites

- pluralistic versus totalizing (i.e. Jacobin) approaches to transformation;
- normal versus revolutionary politics;
- reflexivity versus active construction of nature and society;
- autonomy versus control;
- reconstruction of self versus reconstruction of society;
- liberty versus equality;
- autonomy of civil society versus charismatization of state power;
- civil versus utopian components of the cultural and political program;
- freedom versus utopian emancipation;
- procedural versus charismatic legitimation. (199)

Roughly speaking, the dichotomies pit liberal against extremist programs. Fundamentalism and communal-national movements, in this perspective, reject liberalism in favor of extremism. Under what conditions, how, and why they do so set the book’s central problems.

Eisenstadt’s proposed solutions to those problems, alas, take excessively abstract forms. In general, Eisenstadt avoids causal language. Elements and processes are “closely related” or are “shaped by” some list of factors, but their causal priorities and mechanisms remain unclear. As a consequence, readers must work the cause-effect relations out for themselves. The sketchiness of

Eisenstadt's illustrative cases and the opacity of his explanatory passages make the effort risky.

Let me nevertheless try to summarize Eisenstadt's argument as a causal story, suppressing qualms and questions about the story as it unfolds. Civilizations operate as weak systems, sustaining distinctive values and beliefs but not otherwise controlling the lives of people within them. Because of cultural affinities, innovations in values, beliefs, and practices enacting those values and beliefs diffuse more easily within civilizations than across them. The spread of modernity is simply a special case of that diffusion.

Societies operate as strong systems, exerting extensive control over people, activities, and resources within their limits. At the level of societies, institutionalized values, beliefs, and practices significantly constrain social action. Modern societies create widespread commitments to transform and improve social life through centrally coordinated intervention. But mass pursuit of those commitments uncovers cultural contradictions.

When contradictions become visible, the story continues, intellectual entrepreneurs divide. Some choose one programmatic alternative, others espouse a second alternative, and still others devise new possibilities within limits set by the society's broadest commitments. Intellectual entrepreneurs vary considerably in their success, but some attract substantial followings, or social movements. Thus competing movements form around alternative cultural programs, and their followers struggle for power to implement those programs. Where the values and beliefs of modernity have spread widely, some of those alternative cultural programs take the form of fundamentalism, which shares the end of social transformation but rejects the means of existing secular institutions. Where age-old solidarities have survived the onslaught of modernity, alternative cultural programs more often take the form of communal-national movements, which reject modernity's universalism in favor of primordial particularism.

Would Eisenstadt endorse this summary? I am not sure. But it makes most of his detailed argumentation consistent, if not necessarily persuasive. Eisenstadt falls far short of providing sufficient evidence to establish such an argument. But is it plausible in the light of already available evidence? Let us divide the question in two: How well does the general explanatory strategy hold up? Whatever the general strategy, does the analysis help explain contemporary extremist mobilizations? My answer to the first part is: badly. My answer to the second: the book's descriptions and explanations do not go far enough to revise existing understandings of their subject matter, but they suggest lines of inquiry that deserve further attention.

On the general strategy, consider the essential elements of civilizational and societal explanations: boundaries, distinctive culture, and self-regulating processes. Eisenstadt identifies civilizations with cosmologies, especially those of ancient Israel, Second Commonwealth Judaism, Christianity, ancient Greece, Persian Zoroastrianism, early imperial China, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Despite deploying the language of center and periphery, he proposes no criteria whatso-

ever for bounding such civilizations. He does not even say whether he regards them as territorially continuous or organizationally connected. He thereby sidesteps the problems of diasporas and enclaves—in or out? Not a promising start.

As for societies, Eisenstadt generally accepts the geographical boundaries of states and empires. His explicitly mentioned societies include not only Japan, India, and the United States, but also Afghanistan, Algeria, Australia, Burma, Canada, China (a civilization-sized society), Egypt, England, France, Guinea, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Kenya, Korea, Malaysia, Mali, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Roman Empire, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Singapore, the Soviet Union, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, and Vietnam. Regions such as Latin America and “tribes” such as Mongols occupy uncertain positions in Eisenstadt’s taxonomy. As recognized polities, of course, these entities did or do exist. As candidates for autonomous, self-regulating systems, however, they stretch credibility. In any case, Eisenstadt makes no effort to establish their qualifications as coherent units that commit themselves collectively to cultural programs, whether modern or antimodern. Thus he lays down enormous barriers to verification or falsification of his most general arguments.

What of distinctive culture? Eisenstadt makes a deep commitment to cosmological or ontological determinism: the “basic premise” of any civilization underlies and permeates its collective life. Presumably one could support such a commitment by means of three demonstrations. First, one might show that within ostensibly unconnected segments of a given civilization or society the same understandings and practices prevail. Second, one might demonstrate that as innovations appear from inside or outside the social unit a strong selection process occurs, such that only innovations compatible with the basic premise flourish while others never take hold. Third, one might offer evidence that on those rare occasions when basic premises do change, alterations occur rapidly within each segment of the civilization or society. Eisenstadt directs no effort toward any of the three demonstrations. His failure to set out criteria for boundaries, furthermore, compounds the difficulty of verifying or falsifying his claims about the influence of ontological premises.

Nor does the book offer much help with self-regulating processes. The one program-generating mechanism Eisenstadt does specify—the formulation of new programs by dissident and autonomous intellectuals—does not look in the least like a self-regulating process. On the contrary, it harks back to Max Weber’s idea of charisma’s unpredictable irruption into history. Nor does Eisenstadt’s portrayal of governmental action bespeak much self-regulation; when governments appear in his accounts, they are almost always divided and engaged in struggle. We might try to salvage self-regulation by retrieving the old Toynbee-Sorokin idea of dominant cultural patterns whose possibilities members of a society or civilization eventually use up, whereupon the unit either collapses or renews itself. Despite beginning with ontological premises, however, Eisenstadt does not

follow that dubious path. When it comes to general explanatory strategies, *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution* has little to recommend it.

As a source of concrete insights, hypotheses, facts, and unexpected parallels, the book offers a mixed bag. Its accounts of fundamentalism and nationalism suffer from a neglect of politics. The book ignores, for example, the regularity with which Western rulers from 1789 onward imposed state-sanctioned cultural standards, including national languages, on their subject populations, thus generating resistance and rebellion in the names of culturally distinct minorities. Despite passing references to such leaders as Jerry Falwell, Ralph Reed, Mahatma Gandhi, and Ruholla Khomeini, the national studies say little about how cultural entrepreneurs actually do their work. Given the bad name François Furet and other French Revolution revisionists have bestowed on the Jacobins, Eisenstadt might have chosen a less loaded term for the programs that he rejects. Yet *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution* does rightly deconstruct the claims of fundamentalists and communal-national activists to forsake today's corruption and retrieve an earlier, purer way of life. It does correctly deny the common portrayal of fundamentalism and communal nationalism as atavism. It does shrewdly point out the extent to which successful leaders of such movements borrow the techniques and organizational forms of the very politics they deplore. Hence my advice for reading the book: blow up the ungainly conceptual apparatus, then mine the text for gems amid the rubble.

CHARLES TILLY

Columbia University