

# ON MULTIPLE MODERNITIES, CIVILIZATIONS AND ANCIENT JUDAISM

An interview with Prof. S. N. Eisenstadt<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, the author discusses with the great sociologist of civilizations the intellectual influences on his writings, and his progress since his early works on Israeli society. Eisenstadt analyzes multiple ‘modernities’ in the context of European society and the salience of solidarity and trust. One of the Axial Age civilizations that continues to fascinate Eisenstadt is India, the largest democracy in the world. Eisenstadt points out that Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and other civilizations and empires are both universalistic, and particularistic and exclusive. Following his relatively recent analysis of Weber’s *Ancient Judaism*, he prefers to relate to Judaism as a civilization rather than an ethnic group, nation, religion or people, and finds it useful to understand the development of modern Israeli society. He foresees both a constructive and destructive global future, and reiterates his belief in sociology as a powerful tool to present an analysis which can enrich public discussion.

**Key words:** multiple modernities; Axial Age civilizations; democracy; universalism; particularism

### 1. The interview frame

This exclusive interview took place in Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt’s Jerusalem home on 23 June 2010. I have known S. N. Eisenstadt and his wife Shulamith for many years, but had not been in touch for at least a decade. The interview focus was on Europe, formations of

1. This interview took place before Prof. S. N. Eisenstadt passed away on 2 September 2010.

modernity, and the role of sociology today.<sup>2</sup> Possibly for the first time, Eisenstadt admitted some of the limitations of his earlier works on Israeli society, while confessing to his continued fascination with the study of India.

## 2. S.N. Eisenstadt: the man and his theories

S. N. Eisenstadt, the ‘father of Israeli sociology’, the ‘sociologist of youth’, the ‘sociologist of empires and civilizations’ is a pioneer of the comparative method, and a sociologist of civilizations and modernity. He was born in Warsaw in 1923, and received his PhD in sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under Martin Buber in 1947. The following year, Eisenstadt carried out post-doctoral studies at the London School of Economics. Today, he is Professor Emeritus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a Senior Research Fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, as well as being a member of many academies. He has held guest professorships at the Universities of Chicago, Harvard, Zurich, Vienna, Bern, Stanford, Heidelberg, and many other distinguished universities, and has been the recipient of honorary doctoral degrees from the Universities of Tel Aviv, Warsaw, Helsinki, Harvard and Duke, to name but a few. He is the recipient of the International Balzan Prize, McIver Award of the American Sociological Association, Israel Prize, Rothschild Prize in Social Sciences, Max Planck Research Award, Amalfi Prize for Sociology and Social Sciences, EMET Prize for Sociology, Holberg International Memorial Prize for scholarly work in social sciences, and more.

Besides the outstanding list of books that he has authored, some in collaboration with the Weberian scholar Wolfgang Schluchter, 10 books have been written in the past decade and three books have been written in his honor (Cohen *et al.* 1985; Plake and Schultz 1993; Ben-Rafael and Sternberg 2005). On the occasion of his 80th birthday, the conference ‘Comparing Modern Civilizations’ was organized by the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Jerusalem and the International Institute of Sociology, and the conference ‘Empires, Globalization, Hegemony’ took place in Budapest. Recently, the proceedings of the symposium organized in Jerusalem in honor of the Holberg Prize have been published (Gazit and Yair 2010). In addition, a special volume on Eisenstadt’s work written by

2. A version of the first part of this interview was published in Weil (2010). The second part of the interview is due to appear in *European Sociologist* 30, 2011.

Prof. Gerhard Preyer of Frankfurt is due to be published in Germany later this year (Preyer forthcoming). Prof. Eisenstadt himself has published countless scientific articles in sociology journals the world over, and edited volumes with colleagues and pupils.

### 3. Early influences: Max Weber and Martin Buber

**Shalva Weil (SW):** Prof. Eisenstadt, you've been influenced by many scholars: Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, Robert Merton, Morris Ginsberg and T.H. Marshall, to name but a few, yet it appears that there are two dominant intellectual giants who influenced you the most: Max Weber (1864–1920), on the one hand, and Martin Buber (1878–1965), your mentor, on the other. Would you agree with this, and if so, do you think that these two scholars represent two parts of your psyche: Shmuel Noah, the universalist parallel to Weber (Eisenstadt 1968, 1969), and Shmuel Noah, the particularist parallel to Buber (e.g. Buber 1960, 1973)?

**S. N. Eisenstadt (SNE):** Yes, it would be fair to say that these two personalities have been the major influences on my work (Eisenstadt 1969). However, I can't agree with the premise about the differences between them. I certainly would not say that Buber was a particularist. It was from Buber that I got the great encouragement for a universalist comparative view. For instance, literally the first class I had with him in Jerusalem in 1940, we read a Chinese text from Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, and it was with him that we studied classical Greek texts like *Antigone*. Buber was a very broad universalist, with a very strong emphasis on comparative things, and it was in this sense that he was very close, though different, from Max Weber.

Although I knew, of course, about Weber before I met Buber, it was through Buber's influence that I really understood and studied Weber much better. I collected some of Buber's papers bearing on social and cultural creativity in a special volume published in the 'Heritage of Sociology' series (Eisenstadt 1992a). Also, it is important to know that it was through Buber that I was introduced to most modern anthropological theorists of the time like Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and others, and also to the great classicists of German sociology – not only Max Weber but also Georg Simmel and others. So I would agree that Buber and Weber were the two most influential intellectuals in my life, but they did not represent different viewpoints, but were mutually complementary.

#### 4. Absorption and multiple modernities

**SW:** Let us turn to one of your earliest books, *The Absorption of Immigrants* (Eisenstein 1954), which was published quite soon after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This book dealt with the integration of immigrants, which you called ‘absorption’. Two decades later, you were criticized, often by Israeli scholars (e.g. Smooha 1978; Bernstein 1980; and others) for dictating a paternalistic attitude towards immigrants. Many years later, you coined the phrase ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt *et al.* 2002; Eisenstadt 2003), a marvelous heuristic tool to overcome the problems of post-modernity. Do you think today that ‘multiple modernities’ would have been useful then to explain the integration of different people from different backgrounds into the host society?

**SNE:** Let me put it this way: there is in Israel, as there is in many other modern societies, a great pluralism of experience of life and in the interpretation of the premises of the society. Not all of them are fully-fledged patterns of multiple modernities, but rather continuously changing patterns. So there is no doubt that on the one hand Israel represents one, or maybe a few, illustrations of multiple modernities; but at the same time it is different from the multiple modernities of, say, India, or of Europe, and so on.

**SW:** You’re saying that on the one hand Israel represents a model, or an illustration, of a society with multiple modernities – pluralistic frameworks to work out different, continuously changing patterns; on the other hand . . .

**SNE:** On the other hand, it develops its own distinctive patterns, which are different from the multiple modernities of India, of Europe... One has to be very careful about how one uses this term. It’s a very nice expression, a very useful term, but it has to be used very carefully, not to become just a residual category.

**SW:** If you had invented this expression earlier, and developed the idea earlier, would this have overcome the criticism that people had of your original book?

**SNE:** I agree that in my original book I did pay attention to, but certainly did not take into account sufficiently, the traditions of different groups. I emphasized it, but certainly not enough. Also, I did not study enough – some of my younger colleagues did later on how these traditions were continuously being reconstructed in Israel, just as they are being reconstructed the world over. If you look at Europe today and

the situation of the Muslims within these societies, you see that they do not constitute traditional societies, but rather modern frameworks in the various traditional components continuously being reconstructed.

**SW:** This model of multiple modernities rings true for many immigrants, for example those integrated into Europe. But when we have immigrants in Israel who hail from a rural setting in Ethiopia, and do not come from a civilization which was exactly an Axial Age civilization, to use your phrase (Eisenstadt *et al.* 2005) and that of Karl Jaspers (1949), and didn't show manifestations of *moderna* in the sense that we know it; does the multiple modernity model fit those realities?

**SNE:** It does. The Ethiopian Jews, and others, are now working in a modern society in a modern framework and they accept some of the basic premises thereof, such as legitimate, open political activism, the possibility of political participation,<sup>3</sup> political criticism, and challenging official authority in a legitimate way. So, in many ways they already accept many of the premises of modernity, but interpret them in different ways. But they are modern.

**SW:** Aren't these patterns, like political activism and challenging authorities, continuations of previous traditional patterns?

**SNE:** Well, such patterns are partially a continuation of old ones, but it is also a continual reconstruction thereof. Let us take the Moroccan Jews' Mimouna festival as an example (cf. Goldberg 1978). In North Africa, Mimouna entailed the cooperation of local Muslims who sold the Jews wheat, and invited them to picnic on their land. From the mid-1960s, Moroccan Jews in Israel began celebrating the Mimouna as family picnics in mass gatherings, with as many as 150,000 attending. Mimouna is now an official holiday in the Israeli calendar. This festival is one they knew from Morocco, but it's also obviously something new, since it did not exist in this way in the past, and it's not just a continuation.

**SW:** Therefore, from your perspective, it's not an 'invention of tradition', as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) call it, but a reconstruction of a new modernity.

**SNE:** It isn't a continuation of a traditional pattern. It's a reconstitution of new modern patterns which reconstructs many traditional components. This is one of the most fascinating facets of modern society, indeed in principle of any society.

<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian Jews have one Member of Parliament in Israel.

## 5. On fundamentalism in Europe

**SW:** In contrast to other people, you've written that fundamentalism is essentially a modern phenomenon. This strikes me as a very contemporary thing to write. In a situation in which you write, elsewhere, that solidarity and trust are the ingredients for those prone to adjust to social change (Eisenstadt 1999), can you comment on the integration of Muslims, particularly in Europe?

**SNE:** The problem with solidarity and trust is that you cannot have continuous social relations without them, but at the same time they can be very limiting. They can limit the extent, and the scope, of your relations. There is tension between the particularist elements of trust and solidarity, and the possibility of its extension. This is one of the great challenges today of Muslims in Europe and in many other places, indeed all over the world. Sometimes it's successful, sometimes it fails. But it's always full of tension. Any extension, any attempt at extending solidarity and trust, starting with the family and fanning outwards, is full of tension. I am thinking of the theories developed by the great psycho-analyst John Bowlby (1907–1990) who wrote a book about the crucial role of material attachment (1999[1969]), and another book on the psychological effects of separation, anxiety and loss of the original attachment (1973). The tension between concrete attachments is a given pattern of life and relations and the necessity of going beyond the continual components of social life.

**SW:** I am concerned about in-group solidarity, and trust of the out-group, or relations with its members; in other words, what about the tension between the immigrants and the host society?

**SNE:** The *problematique* is, can you build new patterns of solidarity (cf. Eisenstadt 1995)? For instance, the very interesting controversy in the United States championed by an important scholar, Wilson (1987), shows through a structural and cultural analysis how mixed neighborhoods destroy trust. However, there is a response to him, saying: 'Yes, for some time they may destroy trust, but they may also slowly extend the range of trust, so as to continuously build it up'. One of the interesting examples from Israel in the 1950s was the problem of settlement of different ethnic groups in the newly established State in the Lachish area. Here we said: 'If you make mixed agricultural settlements, if every *moshav* is mixed, it will destroy itself. If you make each *moshav* relatively homogenous, but make the *moshav*'s district heterogeneous, you will create trust'.

**SW:** This relates, on a higher level, to the fact that modernization doesn't necessarily lead to homogeneity. So, aren't we therefore witnessing the fragmentation of Europe today?

**SNE:** We are witnessing a transformation of Europe, which includes a fragmentation of the old, and attempts at establishing new institutional and communal patterns and networks. These are new modes. Some of these are successful; others are failures.

**SW:** What do you think of the concept of ‘hybridity’ in this context? Is it useful?

**SNE:** Yes and no. On the one hand, it’s a useful concept. But it’s not a new concept. Hybridity means multiplicity of contents, but it does not tell you about the constitutional borders, or boundaries. Hybridity does not in itself create firm boundaries. It may, it may not. In Israel, the ultra-Orthodox are very hybrid. Some use the Internet and watch television, others don’t. Some are dressed quite ‘modern’. But this doesn’t tell you if they are open in their constitutional boundaries.

**SW:** You yourself have a wider view: of empires, of civilization (cf. Eisenstadt 1996, 2003).

**SNE:** Boundaries are constantly changing and being reconstituted. There can be no social formations without borders and the concept of hybridity doesn’t account for this. Boundaries are very important. They change, they are continually reconstituted. I have not yet seen any social formation without boundaries. Maybe it will appear one day.

**SW:** Will a new modernity emerge?

**SNE:** Yes, a new modernity will be reconstituted, which reconstructs many traditional components. One of the most fascinating societies, which I’m studying now from this point of view, is India.

## **6. India as an Axial Age civilization**

**SW:** As you know, I’ve studied a tiny microcosm of India (Weil 2006) so I would be delighted to hear more. When you write about Axial Age civilizations, India is included, but you didn’t include Japan in your scheme. In fact, you wrote a whole book explaining why Japan is not an Axial Age civilization and why its development is more similar to Western Europe than China (Eisenstadt 1996). Why is that?

**SNE:** Axial Age civilizations was a term used by Karl Jaspers to describe all those civilizations that developed during the first millennium before Christianity, in China, in Hinduism and Buddhism and, later, in Islam. Using a Weberian-style analysis, I showed how Japan has been a non-Axial society with an absence of clear concepts of state and law with only very

weak tendencies to heterodoxy, and few utopian intellectuals. It took me seven years to write that book (Eisenstadt 1996). But when we come to India, it is definitely an Axial Age civilization.

**SW:** How is it that the ancient caste system actually produced the largest democracy in the world?

**SNE:** The classical pre-modern Indian caste system is seemingly the extreme counter-example of public spheres and civil society that crystallized in Europe, above all in its emphasis on the group and hierarchical premises as against the individualistic, potentially egalitarian ones that crystallized in Western Europe in the eighteenth century. However, in a recent article (Eisenstadt 2009a), I discuss the problem of the applicability of the term 'civil society' to non-Western communities. I demonstrate how the traditional Indian caste system produced a society that had many of the characteristics of a civil society.

**SW:** I still remain confused . . .

**SNE:** You see, the major aspects of civil societies – autonomy of the group, autonomy of access to the state, or to the authorities, and publicity, open public discussion thereof – developed in Europe on the basis of the conception of individual rights. In India these characteristics developed on the basis of conceptions of collective duties. So, we have similar structural effects but different cultural premises, which means that the dynamics are different. Indian democracy is a different democracy from France, but it is a very vibrant democratic system, maybe one of the most vibrant contemporary democratic systems (cf. Eisenstadt 1999). There are changes of government, criticism of a dominant power structure and important attempts to maintain the rule of law. That's why I'm so fascinated with India. Before this, I was very fascinated with Japan.

**SW:** I think you've really laid your case with Japan, but India . . . I understand you are still grappling with it. Do I intuitively understand correctly?

**SNE:** I agree with you. Indeed, I am still more puzzled by India.

**SW:** I'm not sure that we've come to the end of the line, the understanding of the social dynamics.

**SNE:** Probably not yet, probably not enough. But it's very important.

**SW:** For example, in India the individual is often negated. This is true both of the caste system and even of transnational loan associations based



on the joint family which operate today in a globalized world. So, if human agency is denied, how can progress and, indeed, democracy be achieved?

**SNE:** We have to remember that the caste system was one of the most mobile systems in the world, such that mobility was indeed effected by human agents, and we also have to remember that *moksha*, which is a sort of equivalent of salvation, is carried by individuals. When we talk about caste, we think that there are four castes in the *varna* system, but in practice there are thousands of little caste-groups or *jatis*. Now let's say that you are a member of a third-rate legal caste in some province, and you want to become a member of a second-rate one. Today, paradoxically, it's difficult to do it directly in such a way because everything is computerized and every piece of information is available. But a few hundred years ago, I could migrate to a new place, and make a pact with a new ruler, who would recognize me. So, it was one of the most mobile of systems. The usual view of the old caste system was that it was a fossilized system, but in practice it was one of the most dynamic, mobile systems in the world, and much more dynamic and mobile than Japan or Imperial China. But, as indicated above, today, with access to the Internet, people are less free to migrate and start over again without others knowing a person's past history, such that the caste system may be becoming less, not more, dynamic. The result of the accommodative tendencies in Indian society, which certainly in the past were also reinforced by the fact that the boundaries of different political formations were somewhat flexible, gave rise to strong inclusivist tendencies with respect to different territorial groups and transnational networks. But they created a type of civil society with numerous relatively autonomous social sectors, associations, organizations and movements that develop in modern societies. And of course, civil society constitutes an arena of contestation about different conceptions of social order and different interests with a strong emphasis on affirmative group action.

**SW:** You write more about other Axial Age civilizations, and about different types of universalism: in Christianity, in Islam, in Confucianism, and in other civilizations and empires (e.g. Eisenstadt 1996). However, all of these civilizations are also particularistic and exclusive.

**SNE:** They're exclusive . . . They're universalistic and exclusive. Islam is not particularistic. Even Judaism is not definitely so.

## **7. Judaism: ancient and modern**

**SW:** How does the concept of the 'Chosen People' in Judaism fit into this framework?

**SNE:** Each of these groups or civilizations looks on itself as the ‘Chosen People’, but in universalistic terms. So, there’s always this tension between emphasizing the universalistic element, but also the special place of the group in this universalistic view. What is important is that the concept of ‘Chosen People’ is a very open, but also a very exclusivist concept. Everyone can become a Muslim, if he or she accepts Islam. If he or she doesn’t accept Islam, then they can’t. So universalism can also be very illiberal. Universalism and liberalism are not the same. That’s one of our illusions: that universalism and liberalism are identical, but they are not. On the contrary, the great Italian classical scholar Arnaldo Momigliano argued that polytheism is good for empires because it’s not so exclusive; it allows greater variability (Momigliano 1987).

**SW:** For many years, in all your writings on Max Weber, you avoided – flirted with, but avoided – *Ancient Judaism* (1952 [1920]). Only in more recent years have you analyzed the text in a book entitled *Explorations in Jewish Historical Experience: The Civilizational Dimension* (Eisenstadt 2004). I was very glad that you brought my attention to it because I knew an earlier version of the book on Jewish civilization, which does not contain an analysis of *Ancient Judaism* (Eisenstadt 1992b), and I was very happy to read this now. Here, in your analysis of *Ancient Judaism*, you point to the limitations of Weber and clearly mention his more successful treatises in relation to other civilizations. So, while it took you many years to delve into *Ancient Judaism*, why do you think it was worthwhile?

**SNE:** It got to me; that’s it. It finally got to me. I saw it as a very important component to understand Israeli society and contemporary Jewish society.

**SW:** But it’s limited theoretically – it doesn’t ring true theoretically like other things that Weber wrote, all that we know, with which we are familiar, like *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1930 [1905]). *Ancient Judaism* is like ‘the best of Weber’?

**SNE:** It’s still very important. Except that, as Momigliano (1980) showed, he is wrong on one basic problem, and that is the conception of the Jews as a ‘pariah people’, which indicated Weber’s oscillation between a recognition of the distinct type of creativity of the Jewish people and the feeling that this creativity was stifled mostly by the experience both of exile and by a choice; Max Weber indeed was ambivalent to these trends of Jewish history. This understanding I also inherited from the great philosopher Martin Buber, who taught me at the Hebrew University. Recently, I worked out some of the *problematique* of Jewish civilization in an article entitled ‘Tensions as resources in

Jewish historical civilizational experience' (Eisenstadt 2009b). There I maintain that the term *civilization* – and not other terms often used in the literature, such as people, nation, ethnic group or religion – is best suited to define the nature of Jewish collectivity and historical experience and that it provides at least a clue to Jewish survival. This is based on the fact that while all these terms touch on some very important aspects of this experience, not only do they not exhaust it – they do not address its most distinctive characteristics.

**SW:** You are known as the 'father of Israeli sociology' ever since the publication of your scholarly work *Israeli Society* (Eisenstadt 1967). Israel has come under heavy criticism lately. Could you tell us what your view of Israel is today? Is this a society that will survive or continue to replicate itself with tensions?

**SNE:** I think that Israel is facing very difficult times. The hostile relations between Israel and her neighbors are seemingly of a new nature, as not only between nation-states and movements, but still bearing many of the seeds of the historical ambivalence to the Jewish people and civilization. Another problem of Israeli society is, of course, that of the potential contestations between different social groups. However, Israel is in a difficult position, not so much because of the tensions between different groups, but because it has, in a sense, weakened very much because its basic institutional formats have become weakened. But at the same time there is a lot of continual creativity in the cultural arenas, in literature, in the arts, in technology and in economic entrepreneurship, and then there is a continual tension or discrepancy between such creativity and the erosion of many central institutional frameworks.

**SW:** What do you mean by 'the end of its institutional formations'? Societal institutions like the labor union, the Histadrut?

**SNE:** Not only the Histadrut. Just pick up the paper in the morning. There is greater distrust in the government – in many institutions thereof.

**SW:** – which leads us back to solidarity and trust.

**SNE:** Exactly. One cannot have continuous social relations without solidarity and trust. There has always been a tension between the particularist elements of trust and solidarity, and the possibility of extension. Any extension, any attempt at extending solidarity and trust, starting with the family and moving to broader settings is full of tension. In Israel, solidarity and trust in the institutional formations are declining, and this is worrying.

## 8. The past and the future

**SW:** At the age of 86, I want you to look back, and let me know how you view the trends over the past decades, both in sociology and in the world; I want to ask if the world has acted rationally, according to you, since the Second World War?

**SNE:** Sociology has become very diversified and certainly very strong to the world, but it lacks the strong intellectual impact which it seems to have had under the influence of its founding fathers. With respect to different modern rational activities, there developed different modes of rationalities, not just one mode of rationality. These rationalities are very often competing; not everything that I don't like is irrational.

**SW:** And when it comes to morality, are there still competing moralities, or is there one absolute morality?

**SNE:** Let me put it this way: there is a tension between putting emphasis on seemingly one over-arching universal morality, on the one hand, and different interpretations of such a universal morality. So Muslims will tell you, they have a universal morality; but it is different from Christian morality, be it secular morality, or whatever. There is more and more dialogue between moralities, but there is no one over-arching morality.

**SW:** And what is the role of the sociologist in all this?

**SNE:** To make sense of it all, to analyze, to understand, to present an analysis so that it can enrich the public discussion. Sociology will not solve the problem, but it can enrich the discussion.

**SW:** I also want to look forwards; I know that sociologists aren't prophets, but I want to know if you foresee whether one particular empire, one particular civilization, like China, say, is likely to overtake other Axial Age civilizations rooted in the Protestant ethic?

**SNE:** No, I think there will be more common frameworks, and greater global competition within these frameworks. Some constructive competition, some very destructive.

**SW:** When you say constructive, you're talking about global cooperation, on the one hand, and when you say destructive, can we talk about a clash of civilizations?

**SNE:** Not only civilizations. I don't think we face here clashes of civilizations. We could talk about clashes of different states, movements, and above all of different interpretations of modernity.

**SW:** Where is Iran in this scheme?

SNE: It's a fascinating case of a modern, Jacobean fundamentalist society.

SW: But not a member of the great Axial civilizations?

SNE: Oh, yes. It's a member of the Islamic world, one interpretation of it.

SW: As a final question, you foresee both a constructive and destructive future, as was in the past, but do you remain, at your age, optimistic?

SNE: This is probably connected with my own biological clock. In the morning I am mostly a pessimist. In the afternoon and evening, I'm an optimist!

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