

# *Tertius gaudens or pro bono publico?*

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Commentary on SN Eisenstadt's  
'Modernity and modernization' and  
a response to Volker H Schmidt

Edward A Tiryakian Duke University

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## Introduction

This commentary ties in with the central theme of 'Modernity and modernization' discussed by Eisenstadt and Schmidt by being both *pro bono* and *tertius gaudens*. I share with them an overlapping general theoretical orientation in macrosociology and comparative analysis (the *pro bono* part) but see myself as a third party interlocutor in the seeming intellectual dispute between Schmidt and Eisenstadt. My reading is that they are not that far apart, at least initially, for both seem to accept the reality of modernization, as a continuing process of social and cultural change.

## Critique

Schmidt does not object to Eisenstadt's invoking modernization as a master process of development. In his 'Critique', he gently rebukes Eisenstadt for treating 'modernity' as 'a distinct cultural program', a new civilizational form giving rise to multiple forms in contrast to the 'original' modernization theory. The latter, formulated by western intellectuals in the post-war world, saw an emergent set of structural and personality factors attending rapid industrial-urban development.

Schmidt is on firm methodological grounds in his criticism that Eisenstadt has a tendency to juxtapose 'findings generated from different analytic perspectives', with differing conceptual weights, making it difficult to falsify the theory, or to make it heuristic for research. Here I concur with Schmidt. Eisenstadt was a prodigious reader of comparative-historical materials and of the theoretical literature in a number of fields (sociology, cultural anthropology, political

science, social philosophy). He, like Parsons, synthesized materials at high levels of abstraction, but unlike Parsons, he did not have a concrete model, such as the latter's *A-G-I-L* four-systems paradigm. Consequently, the concreteness or level of applicability of his reflections is often left begging for specific time-space coordinates. Yet, Eisenstadt could on occasion demonstrate superb skills in civilizational analysis (as Weber had done for China and India), by taking on the 'enigma' of Japan's modernity (Eisenstadt, 1996).

It seems to me that the case of Japan does add to the notion of 'multiple modernities' within a broader context of a 'civilization of modernity'. Japan successfully industrialized and urbanized in the 19th century, became a naval power in the 20th, and after a disastrous spell as a military state, jumped on the bandwagon of globalization to become a leading world economy with a hard currency (as of today, harder than the US dollar or the European euro). It has emerged as a political democracy, and has retained much of its rich cultural traditions. What has enabled Japan to be resilient to continuous impingements from the West (including the horrific nuclear destruction of two cities to cap the Second World War) and to emerge modern and autonomous, while other countries with far greater natural resources are still crippled in socioeconomic and sociopolitical development? Eisenstadt did not take his theorizing to this level.

Nor did he wisely venture into the arena of prediction (recall that Weber, a model 'classical' figure for Eisenstadt, likewise eschewed prediction at the end of his monumental *Protestant Ethic* essay, a decade before the First World War). The interweaving of social

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structure, agency and personality generates different combinations, some very fruitful for creating constructive adaptations to modernity, others leading to destructive outcomes. Eisenstadt saw 'Jacobin' tendencies are recurrent possibilities of a totalitarian state that had first surfaced in the French Revolution, and he also apprehended their surfacing in the waves of fundamentalism of the past 20 years.

Eisenstadt has a section (p. 7) on 'the different periods of modernity'. It is a good summary of developments up to about 2008. But to complete this, I suggest that his own theorizing of modernity underwent a transformation. Earlier on, in the 1950s, Eisenstadt was involved in not only the enthusiasm of western (disproportionately American) sociologists seeking to find and apply patterns of successful development for 'developing' former colonial dependencies, and doing this in multidimensional, interdisciplinary 'modernization' studies. He was also an enthusiastic participant-observation actor in the creation and modernization of his own Israeli society. Later, with the maturation becoming a world-renowned and world-traveled scholar, optimism became tempered with realism, even as he noted in his pointing to 'breakdowns of modernization' as a recurrent feature of modernity.

## Conclusion

The civilization of modernity is neither static nor a straight path of rational betterment, but even more a complex dialectical process (Tiryakian, 1992). What remains elusive and theoretically, at least, under-

analyzed in both Eisenstadt and Schmidt, is the starting point for all discussions of modernity and modernization: what are we to understand by 'modern', that elusive term of the ephemeral coined in the 19th century by Baudelaire?

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**Edward A Tiryakian** is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. He is author of *For Durkheim: Essays in Comparative and Historical Sociology* (Ashgate, 2009) and co-editor, with Said Arjomand, of *Rethinking Civilizational Analysis* (Sage, 2004). [email: durkham@soc.duke.edu]

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