Review Article

Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and the Comparative Political History of Pre-Eighteenth-Century Empires

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Abstract
This essay critically analyses the legacy of Eisenstadt's The Political Systems of Empires for the comparative political history of pre-industrial empires. It argues that Eisenstadt has given us a rich toolkit to conceptualize the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of empires by theorizing the structural relationships between social groups in large-scale polities and among such polities, and by analysing global patterns of development in the distribution of the sources of social power. The Political Systems of Empires provides an inventory of key questions and dynamics that a comparative history

of power relationships in empires cannot ignore. This essay, further-more, discusses three methodological problems in Eisenstadt's work which have had a significant impact on comparative empire studies between the 1980s and the 2000s. The essay argues that certain shared features of comparative studies of pre-industrial empires help perpetuate Eurocentric analyses: the foregrounding of select empires and periods as ideal types (typicality), the focus on macro-historical structures and dynamics without the integration of social relation-ships and actions in historical conjunctures (the lack of scalability), and the search for convergence and divergence. These features need to be overcome to make Eisenstadt's legacy viable for comparative political history.

Key words

Comparative histories of the longue durée in recent years have substantially engaged with the histories of both European polities and their Chinese and Indian counterparts. Most of these histories have been written by historians pursuing questions of the origins and causes of divergent economic development in the last few hundred years of human history. Historians interested in the comparative history of authority and power structures, social relation-ships, and politics in pre-eighteenth-century empires have to turn to an older body of work for historiographical orientation. The contributions of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt in particular continue to shape macro-analyses of imperial political structures and dynamics before the global imperialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His impact on comparative studies of empires and social power is reflected in the works of Michael Mann, Michael Doyle, and Herbert Münkler. This article reflects on the use of Eisenstadt's historical sociology for the comparative history of Chinese and Eu-ropean political structures and participation. It argues that the cri-teria for comparison set out in his work can be translated into a set of questions for the comparative exploration of social and political

power in pre-eighteenth-century history. The article also offers a critique that helps explain why Eisenstadt's methodology in answering those questions has not proved fruitful in comparative history. This argument builds on two types of critique that have been written either with direct reference to Eisenstadt's work or address Eurocentric historiography and social analysis more generally. Somers and Skocpol have pointed out that Eisenstadt's use of comparative history is determined by the goal to demonstrate the validity of a universal theory of political development. Historical evidence from countless societies have been marshalled (sometimes rather loosely and inconsistently) to substantiate in a comprehensive fashion an evolutionary and parallel history of the formation and decline of historical bureaucratic empires. The major critics of Eurocentrism in historical analysis, on the other hand, have pointed out the numerous factual errors on which the model of European superiority and progress in history has been based. I will be less concerned with the nature of Eisenstadt's theory and its factual historical errors (although these will be mentioned) but will focus instead on three methodological problems that in my view need to be overcome to make Eisenstadt's criteria viable for future comparative research: the foregrounding of select empires and periods as ideal types (typicality), the focus on macrohistorical structures and dynamics without the integration of social relationships and actions in historical conjunctures (the lack of scalability), and the search for convergence and divergence are key features of Eisenstadt's research and of other Neo-Weberian comparative studies of pre-industrial empires. The reproduction of these analytical and rhetorical structures in comparative studies and general histories not only obscures key events and structural transformations in non-European contexts but also limits the opportunities for the application of alternative methodologies in the comparative history of empires. This critique lends support to William Sewell's call for a combination of social theoretical structural thinking and the historical emphasis on agency and contingency, but whereas Sewell sees Michael Mann's work as a step forward in this direction I will argue that a far greater degree of scalability is necessary to make

room for agency and contingency in comparative histories of social and political power.

OLD AND NEW QUESTIONS IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF EMPIRES

Eisenstadt's *The Political Systems of Empires* formed part of the large body of sociological work on modernization in the post-WWII era. In contrast to his peers, Eisenstadt was primarily concerned with the questions of how the modern state emerged out of a progressive universal history of state formation and how "traditional" cultural orientations and socio-political structures in different societies facilitated or hindered the processes of modernization which affected them all and which appeared to lead to their convergence. He developed an evolutionary typology of political systems starting with "primitive political systems," "patrimonial empires," "conquest empires," "city-states," "feudal systems," and "centralized historical bureaucratic empires" and ending in "modern societies of various types (democratic, autocratic, totalitarian. . .)."[1] In this evolutionary theory historical empires constituted a stage in the development of humanity; they also formed the "traditional" background from which modern societies broke away. The key objectives of *The Political Systems of Empires* was to explain the basic characteristics of the political systems of historical empires, the social conditions under which such characteristics developed, and to account for the social and political processes that were conducive to their maintenance and to changes towards modernization.

In Eisenstadt's evolutionary typology historical bureaucratic empires were characterized by greater differentiation in social, economic, religious, and political hierarchies, the constitution of a political sphere with autonomous goals, and greater territorial cen-

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[1] Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires: The Rise and Fall of the Historical Bureaucratic Societies* (London New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963; New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 10. This article is only concerned with Eisenstadt's early work as it is this work that is most relevant to the comparative history of empires. His later work on civilizations falls outside of the scope of this article.

tralization than the political systems that preceded them. Their formation depended on the combination of conditions external and internal to the political sphere. The former referred to social differentiation: the formation of many social groups and social roles which were no longer defined by kinship or ascriptive ties alone. Social differentiation resulted in the creation of "free-floating resources" or economic, cultural, and political resources which could be manipulated by a variety of groups. It also allowed for the sharing of value systems and community membership across groups. In Eisenstadt's theory social differentiation needed to be balanced by the emergence of a strong center, the ruler, whose task was the articulation of a set of autonomous political goals. Even though Eisenstadt's model of the historical bureaucratic empire thus allows for competition amongst economic, social, political, and religious elites, it is based on the assumption that the political goals and power of rulers and elites are far apart: the ruler monopolizes power, elites are weak, and bureaucratic institutions and social organizations have no institutional autonomy. The continuation of bureaucratic empires depended on the ruler's ability to control traditional elements that might lead to the devolution towards less centralized political systems and increase the power of elites who aim to share the centralized power of the state.

Eisenstadt concluded that the limitations on the generalization of power (by which he meant its democratization) and on the autonomy of the political sphere were gradually and systematically overcome in modern political systems. "These [modern] systems are characterized by the weakening of the distinction between the goals of the rulers and the political aspirations of the ruled, and by the development of types of political institutions and processes directed toward incorporating the social and political aspirations of different groups into the goals of the polity."[2]

Eisenstadt illustrated his hypotheses about the conditions that led to the formation and continuation of the political systems of historical empires on the basis of evidence selected from thirty-

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[2] Ibid., 369, also 23-24.

two societies, twenty-seven of which he classified under "historical bureaucratic societies," the main category under investigation.[3] This evidence was based on a wide reading of mainly secondary historical works that had become available for each of these societies by the early 1960s, and, in keeping with post-war social scientific modelling, on a meticulous and systematic consideration of a large number of variables. In the analytical tables in the Appendix Eisenstadt rated each of these systems with about 150 variables.[4] Despite differences in scale, the evidence was gathered to demonstrate the overall *similarity* between historical bureaucratic empires. The forces that brought about a rapprochement between ruler and ruled in modern times were obviously derived from a Eurocentric model of development: religious universalism, feudalization, the empowerment of urban and professional groups and of military warlords, all of which had in Eisenstadt's comparison only developed in "embryonic" form in the Chinese case.[5]

The broader questions that Eisenstadt addressed, namely the emergence, disappearance, and maintenance of imperial structures need not necessarily be answered on the assumption that these developed according to a universal logic of human history. Such questions might be equally answered on the basis of a different use of comparative historical evidence including a contrast-oriented model of analysis or the macro-analytical causal model advocated by Skocpol. The criteria from which Eisenstadt set out to measure social differentiation, political autonomy, and legitimation, if liberated from their theoretical framework, provide an inventory of questions and dynamics that a comparative history of power relationships cannot ignore. This includes questions such as how different kinds of political activities are distributed across different social groups; how political activities are embedded in kinship, geographical ties, and status; what the goals of polities are and what groups or institutional spheres are part of their definition and implementation; what criteria different groups use in defining and

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[3] Ibid., 375.

[4] Ibid., Appendix, 375-471.

[5] Ibid., 195, 325-26, and passim.

evaluating political goals; and how particular groups participate in the legitimation of political systems and their agents.[6] Apart from these more general criteria Eisenstadt developed fine-grained typologies of, among other things, political organization in historical empires that similarly provide useful reference points in developing agendas for the comparative history of social power. The role of individual and collective petitioning, the power and social impact of court and bureaucratic factions, the representation of social demands, the organizational power of social and religious movements, and the negotiation and imposition of local leadership are all topics that have received little attention in subsequent comparative histories of historical empires but could be fruitfully incorporated in future comparative political histories alongside cultural historical questions.[7]

The problem with Eisenstadt's comparative project lies thus less with the nature of the criteria he developed for comparison but more with the theoretical underpinnings which defined how these criteria were implemented. The criteria that emerge throughout the chapters of *The Political Systems of Empires* include the presence or absence of autonomous organizations and classes associated with the rise of European modernity: the prestige and independence of the merchant class, Christianity and the Catholic Church, and capitalism. These latter aspects are also much in evidence in the new wave of comparative studies of pre-industrial empires that were published from the 1980s onwards.

The relative scarcity of studies on this topic in the period between the 1950s and 1970s may help account for the influence of Eisenstadt's work on subsequent research. As suggested by Julian Go's table of topical trends in *The American Journal of Sociology* between 1895 and 2005, the number of articles on empire and imperialism and the overall percentage of articles discussing these topics peaked in the early 1900s and again in the early 1940s but

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[6] Ibid., 9.
[7] Ibid., 214-19.

then dropped precipitously between the 1950s and 1970s.[8] Go's observation coincides with my findings on the development of comprehensive comparative studies of pre-eighteenth-century empires, even though his assessment is based on only one journal, and perhaps not the one favoured by historical sociologists in the last century for the publication of their articles.

Michael Doyle used Eisenstadt's model of internal and external conditions to explain the longevity and collapse of empire. He equates the Augustan threshold (the point at which imperial societies perpetuate themselves through greater reliance on political and ideological factors as opposed to economic or military ones) with governmental reorganization in the metropolitan core. Conversely, he attributes collapse to the decline of social differentiation (Eisenstadt's dominant external factor).[9] Doyle's model has in turn been further developed in Münkler's discussion of imperial domination covering the period from the Roman Empire through the early 2000s.[10]

Michael Mann is similarly indebted to Eisenstadt's work. In *The Sources of Social Power* Mann disavowed any overt attempt at comparative analysis. Nevertheless, he engaged with the comparative history of empires at great length in the discussion of early agricultural empires and implicitly through negative comparison with non-European societies in the later chapters focusing on the development of sources of power in European history.[11] Although Mann was critical of his predecessors in historical sociology and aimed to write an account of European development that focuses on historical development rather than static ideal types, he remained in many ways close to them and also acknowledged this much. He

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[8] Julian Go, "The 'New' Sociology of Empire and Colonialism," *Sociology Compass* 3 (2009): 4-5.

[9] Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 94, 99.

[10] Münkler argues that governmental reorganization and a cyclical model with upper and lower segments fit the history of empire better than the more common rise and fall paradigm. Herfried Münkler, *Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States* (Cambridge, London: Polity Press, 2007), esp. ch. 3.

[11] For a similar point of view, see also John M. Hobson, "Eurocentrism and Neorealism in the 'Fall of Mann': Will the Real Mann Please Stand Up?," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 34 (2006): 523.

credited Eisenstadt in particular, more so than other neo-Weberians like John Kautsky, for his analysis of the transformation of historical empires into modern polities.[12]

> "It reflects great credit on Eisenstadt to say that if the Lord Inca or Sargon or the Chinese or Roman emperor were to return and read his book, they would recognize his characterization of their policies and know what was meant by universalism, freefloating resources, the rationalization of the symbolic sphere, and the other pieces of Eisenstadt jargon."[13]

This reflects great credit indeed.

Eisenstadt and the social scientists who followed in his footsteps in the 1980s (John Kautsky, Michael Doyle, and Michael Mann) and early 2000s (Herfried Münkler) form the main focus of the remainder of this essay.[14] These authors occupy a wide spectrum of positions on the historical role of empires and imperialism, but they adopt similar analytical strategies in their approach to historical evidence. By analysing these approaches we gain additional insight into the means by which Eurocentric comparison has been perpetuated, and are able to open up new perspectives for comparative political history.

TYPICALITY IN THE COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF EMPIRES

The use of ideal types is a standard method in comparative research and has proved its analytical utility since Max Weber. My

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[12] Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 170-73.

[13] Ibid., 171.

[14] Publications on the history of pre-industrial empires that bring together essays on individual empires but are not explicitly comparative will not be considered here. These include Frédéric Hurlet, *Les Empires. Antiquité et Moyen Age* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008); Lin Yaofu, *Selected Essays on Court Culture in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Taibei: National Taiwan University Press, 1999); David Knechtges and Eugene Vance, *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture: China, Europe, and Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). I will also omit more focused studies of comparative early empires (Rome/China or China/Greece). For a particularly useful review of these works, see Phiroze Vasunia, "The Comparative Study of Empires," *Journal of Roman Studies* 101 (2011): 222-37.

critique is not aimed at the use of ideal types per se—indeed I will first defend the use of a type such as "empire" in comparative history. However, I will question the conversion of historical phenomena such as historical dynastic houses into ideal types. These are not based on analytical grounds and do not lend themselves to symmetric comparison. Rather, based on Eisenstadt's work it can be shown that the creation of dynastic, and on their basis, civilizational types derives from deductive Eurocentric reasoning about history.

Ideal types have had a long and prosperous history in the field of historical sociology. Max Weber developed the method of ideal types as a flexible alternative of theory building in reaction to the empiricist reliance on narrative and the neoclassicist preference for deductive logic. Ideal types were recognized as artificial constructs designed by the researcher to capture social relationships and institutions. They were concepts that allowed to compare empirical phenomena and to evaluate differences and similarities in view of explaining differential structures and processes. Such comparison would help in the development of hypotheses. Ideal types themselves, as Weber used them were also always subject to revision and proliferation.[15]

"Empire" has functioned and has been revised and elaborated upon many times as an ideal type. Historians and sociologists have defined empire as an ideal type in contrast to other types of polities and they and other writers developed hypotheses about how these polities related to others, about their expansion and their collapse, and, in some cases, their eventual extinction[16] on the basis of the characteristics they assigned to them. Eisenstadt, for example, extended the empire type into the subtypes of "patrimonial empires,"

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[15] Robert Holton, "Max Weber and the Interpretative Tradition," in *Handbook of Historical Sociology*, eds. Gerard Delanty and Engin F. Isin (London: Sage, 2003): 29-30; Susan Hekman, *Weber, the Ideal Type, and Contemporary Social Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

[16] Some authors argued that empire has come to an end and that its use in contemporary discourse detracts from more salient current political and socio-cultural trends. Philip Pomper, "The History and Theory of Empires," *History and Theory* 44, no. 4 (2005): 1-27; James N. Rosenau, "Illusions of Power and Empire," *History and Theory* 44, no. 4 (2005): 73-87.

"conquest empires," and "centralized historical bureaucratic empires." These types fit into a series of hypotheses about the differential paths to modernization of different societies. This rather evolutionary model has been effectively rejected in models that focus on differences between polities in terms of their political imaginaries and that define empire by the governance of difference and the maintenance of distinction and inequality in a universalist polity. This redefinition fits into a rewriting of the history of the relationship between empires and modern nation-states and posits the continuity of empire into the present day.[17] When construed and refined as an analytical category an ideal type can thus help reduce the burden of Eurocentric historiography. Other histories can be made relevant to the development of the theory and comparative analysis of empires. [18]

There are, however, other types in the comparative history of empires that are of less heuristic value. With reference to Chinese history, Eisenstadt and others refer to the "Chinese Empire" as a type and convert select dynasties into types of empire. The latter include the "Han Empire," "Tang Empire," and "Qing Empire"— "Mongol Empire" is used instead of Yuan Empire even when merely referring to the rule of the Mongols in the Chinese territories.

DYNASTIES ARE NOT TYPES

The use of dynasties as types is problematic for three reasons. First, unlike types dynasties are not analytical constructs. Types are con-

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[17] Krishan Kumar, "Nation-States as Empires, Empires as Nation-States: Two Principles, One Practice," *Theory and Society* 39, no. 2: 119; Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8; see also Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. A. Stoler and F. Cooper (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-56; and, Cooper, "States, Empires, and Political Imagination," in *Colonialism in Question*, ed. F. Cooper (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 153–203; and, "Provincializing France," in *Imperial Formations*, eds. A. L. Stoler, C. McGranahan, & P. C. Perdue (Sante Fe: School for Advanced Research, 2007): 341–77.

[18] Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

structs deriving from multiple and varying historical realities whose essential features they capture in the aggregate in order to allow for the analysis of similarities and differences between real cases. They are, therefore, not equivalent to historical realities. Dynasties are often and legitimately used as temporal markers, e.g., in historical writing the Tang Dynasty or even the Tang Empire often stands for the period of Chinese history spanning the seventh through the ninth century (618-907). By turning dynasties into ideal types historians turn several century-long historical periods into categories void of analytical content. In most cases the category merely represents an eclectic assemblage of random and inconsistent timeslices within the much longer period.

Shmuel Eisenstadt's work illustrates this problem. He turns the Tang Empire into a type of imperial Chinese rule: from then on "the constant interplay between them [the literati] and the rulers was a principal focus of internal Chinese history."[19] The literati were primarily playing a legitimating and mediating role by restraining the ruler's policies and checking political participation not mediated through them. In this subtype of the agrarian-bureaucratic empire cultural and ethical concerns predominate and rulers put less emphasis on collective political goals such as "territorial expansion, military aggrandizement, and economic enhancement."[20] This view of Tang socio-political relations contrasts sharply with recent interpretations and popular understandings of Tang history as a golden age: when Chinese military might was on display in Korean, Central Asian, and Tibetan lands; when Chang'an was a central node in transcultural trade; when trade in central and south China began to transform Chinese demography; when strong emperors of military background with ties to Eurasian aristocrats first ruled; and later, when military governors held sway over large parts of the Tang territories. This discrepancy between Eisenstadt's Tang dynasty type and more recent scholarship on the position of the Tang Empire within the broader Eurasian world also

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[19] Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems*, 193, and esp. ch. 12.
[20] Ibid., 228.

underscores the failure of this particular comparative approach to incorporate a global historical perspective within its analysis.[21]

THE ILLUSION OF CONTINUITY AND EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENT

The problem is not only that Eisenstadt's rendering of the Tang Empire as a type of imperial Chinese rule does not adequately capture Tang history, but also that this transhistorical type creates the illusion of linear continuity in post-Tang history. This is the second objection to the conversion of dynasties into types. For Eisenstadt the Tang Empire type is equivalent to a more encompassing type which he frames as the "Chinese Empire (Han-Qing)." At the core of the Chinese type are the roles and capacities of emperor and literati and the dynamics in their relationship which are fixed in Eisenstadt's reading of history. Eisenstadt's typification of these dynamics are clearly based on a mirror image of his interpretation of the history of European polities. With the rise of the gentry (local landed elites), which Eisenstadt prematurely attributed to the Tang, not only the aristocracy but also the merchants (both of which were to play an important role in European politics) were suppressed in Tang China and under the dynasties that followed. Politically, according to Eisenstadt, the literati (the literate and politically oriented elite) and the bureaucracy were tied to the center and lacked autonomy and "almost any independent base of resources."[22] In addition to the above characteristics this type is further associated with a larger set of negative attributes: the Chinese Empire has no civil law, is anti-aristocratic, does not turn economic development into a goal, subordinates all agents of change including urban classes and religious elites in addition to the ones already

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[21] For an impressive analysis of shared political repertoires between the Tang Empire and its Eurasian neighbors see Jonathan Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a long-term perspective on the mutual influence between imperial regimes in Eurasia, see Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kolodziejczyk eds. *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[22] Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems*, xxxiv.

mentioned above, has no intelligentsia, allows no interrelationships between professional and regional groups, weakens ideological and structural linkages amongst elites, has only limited means of communication and military technology, and is characterized by the absence of political struggle.[23]

The construction of a mirror image of features associated with European models to describe others is a standard feature of Eurocentric discourse, as has been amply illustrated in the work of other historians and sociologists.[24] In Eisenstadt's case, features indicating lack, weakness, or absence are by no means the only characteristics attributed to Chinese (or more broadly Asian) polities. Eisenstadt's emphasis on the unique role of the literati and the ability of the imperial system to accommodate change derived from a very perceptive reading of the limited number of secondary materials available on the subject at the time. Nevertheless, the predominance of negative features in the Chinese (and Japanese) case suggests that the above-mentioned broader criteria for comparison that were set up at the outset of the project were not the ones applied in the comparative analysis.

For sociologists writing twenty years after Eisenstadt's magnum opus the Chinese Empire remained a type saturated with negative features determined by models of European modernization. Michael Doyle does not discuss Chinese history in the first part of his comparative history of pre-industrial empires. In the latter half he introduces "China" in scattered references and mostly as the object of the imperial designs of Europeans. "China" in Doyle's typification of it stands for a political entity with a lifespan of over two thousand years and an unchanging massive size: "Imperial influence flowed and grew with the increase of trade in the valleys of China until by the time of the informal partition of the late 1890s

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[23] Eisenstadt made good use of the existing scholarship on imperial Chinese history at the time. On many of these subjects he was however ill informed. The point here is not to demonstrate this at length as my concern lies with methodological problems rather with factual inaccuracies.

[24] James M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (London: Guilford, 2000); John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Chinese sovereignty was shattered."[25] This sentence reduces two thousand years of history to one sentence in a series of chapters that are otherwise devoted to roughly one century of European history. Not only the time scales but also the spatial scales of Doyle's types are incommensurable. China not only stands for a homogenous Chinese landmass but for Asia more generally. "In Asia empire was a less dramatic event; it crept rather than ran."[26]

Michael Mann criticized his predecessors including Eisenstadt and Kautsky for insufficient attention to historical development, a problem he associated with the ideal type approach. *The Sources of Social Power* takes a different approach in positing broad similarities between early civilizations that developed in alluvial plains and between early empires such as "Han China" and Rome. The similarities between the latter two, for example, included a unitary and universalistic culture among the ruling class, the synchronic development of core and peripheral polities, and the combination of militarism and a civilizing mission. For Mann, however, a branching of the trajectories occurred as world religions began to spread. By 1000 CE "four recognizably different types of society existed, each with its own dynamism and development" one of which was Confucian and Chinese.[27]

At this point Mann's pursuit of historical development ends and "China" becomes a stand-in for size (extensive rather intensive power) and stagnation: "In this way, there developed the resilient gentry/scholar, bureaucrat/Confucian power configuration that took China into a quite different historical path of development - of three relatively early bursts of social development (Han, Tang, and Sung), followed by dynastic cycles, stagnation, and eventual decay."[28] These bursts appear to have accomplished little, because Doyle affirms "sinologists" agree that stagnation had set in by 1200 and attribute it to the lack of autonomous towns and long-distance trade (due to the alleged preponderance of rice cultivation), the

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[25] Doyle, *Empires*, 143.
[26] Ibid., 143.
[27] Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1, 341.
[28] Ibid., 538.

despotic state's repression of social change and free trade, the lack of multi-state competition prohibiting the import of "dynamic forces," and the Confucian emphasis on order and tradition—recent work on Song and Qing economic history suggests otherwise.[29]

Benefiting from more recent scholarship, Münkler revised some of these characterizations, noting, in contrast to Eisenstadt who saw the lack of foreign trade and interest in economic development as a feature of the Tang Empire, "Probably nowhere else was the link between imperial order and economic prosperity as directly and plainly observable as it was in China."[30] Despite the added nuance and a more consistent attempt to differentiate between the conditions of empire during different dynasties, here too, China or the Chinese Empire is predominantly imagined as a type and a continuous entity whose size remained unchanged from the Qin Dynasty onwards. Münkler's Chinese Empire is defined primarily by administrative integration, the collaboration of elites who sustain the empire through ups and downs, the lack of militarism, by its core rather than the periphery, by the assimilation of ethnic others, and by the elite's "middle-oriented consciousness" (or "China's image of itself as the 'Middle Country'").[31]

The problem associated with the assumption of continuity is best illustrated by the concept of the Augustan threshold. Originally created by Michael Doyle, this concept captured the transition in Rome from rule primarily based on military and economic extraction to stable government by political and ideological means. Münkler saw China as the prime example of such a transition, but the historical specifics of such a transition remain murky. In the Roman case, the transition and its aftermath are relatively straightforward: under Augustus political and ideological control stabilized the realm and over time external conditions led to imperial collapse. But what happened in the Chinese case? Did the Han push

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[29] See, for example, Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[30] Münkler, *Empires*, 106.

[31] Ibid., 63-64.

the Chinese Empire over the threshold once and all? Or, after the Han Empire collapsed and was subdivided into three kingdoms in the third century, did succeeding empires have to cross the threshold again? What were the long-term effects of having crossed this threshold in classical times?

Münkler does not address these questions. Judging from the emphasis placed on a shared ethos among elites, the middle-centered consciousness, and the presumed antipathy towards militarism throughout Chinese history it appears that the implied answer is that the Han accomplished the transition to political and ideological control once and for all. Münkler advocated this transition in reaction to the dominant paradigm of the rise and fall of empires, and seems to suggests, in line with Eisenstadt, that Chinese elites supported the imperial order throughout the long periods of regional fragmentation and multi-state rule that characterized Chinese history throughout the thirteenth century. This was not the case, though. The emergence of widespread literati commitment to the restoration of universal empire occurred at a specific time in history, well after the end of the Tang Dynasty.[32] Comparative political historians should inquire into the conditions that can explain the emergence, spread, and effect of shared political imaginaries rather than turn them into essential characteristics of dynastic types.

CIVILIZATIONAL TYPES VS MOMENTS OF CRISIS

The focus on a select set of dynastic periods which best exemplify a civilizational type has prevented a more inclusive and comprehensive treatment of the history of Chinese empires and other types of polities in Chinese history. This is the third problem with the conversion of dynasties into types. Eisenstadt admits that his discussion of the "Chinese Empire" is mainly based on selective readings on the Tang Empire. A slightly larger set of dynastic periods in-

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[32] De Weerdt, *Information, Territory, and Networks: The Crisis and Maintenance of Empire in Song China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015)

cluding Han, Qing, and the Mongol/Yuan empires are discussed in the other works and in more recent historical work. This implies that the periods during which the ruling dynasties occupied a smaller territory are left out of the comparative history of empire; this amounts to the omission of roughly 900 years in the last 1800 years of Chinese history. More significantly, this also implies that the structures and dynamics during these periods which should have a bearing on the recovery and maintenance of imperial traditions have not been included in comparative analyses of the formation and maintenance of empire.

One case of particular relevance is the Song Empire (960-1276). The Song founders conquered the various states which had emerged following the gradual decline of Tang control from the mid-eighth century onwards. The Song Empire lost control over its northern territories in 1126-27. The court relocated to the south and signed a series of treaties with their northern counterparts to consolidate their position in the south. Despite the apparent willingness of the court to enter into a treaty system "amongst equals,"[33] the court and, to an even greater extent, literati maintained and strengthened a commitment to universal empire during this time of geopolitical crisis. The last 150 years of Song rule became the last period of the long-term division between north and south. It stands to reason that the social and political transformations during this time should also figure in any explanation of the remarkable continuity of the Chinese empires that were created in the centuries that followed.[34]

MACROHISTORY AND THE LACK OF SCALABILITY

Dynastic and civilizational types were, as shown in the previous section, the main protagonists in *The Political Systems of Empires*.

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[33] Morris Rossabi, *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[34] The significance of Song political, economic, and cultural history in the comparative history of empires is discussed in Wim Blockmans and Hilde De Weerdt, "The Diverging Legacies of Classical Empires in China and Europe," *European Review*, forthcoming.

In order to explain how the political structures of empires were linked to social organization and cultural orientations Eisenstadt turned to an analysis of the role of social collectivities. As a sociologist, Eisenstadt was keenly interested in the social relationships and dynamics shaping the history of empires. He compared the political roles of the aristocracy, the military, religious elites, local gentries, professional elites, urban groups, the peasantry, literati, and the bureaucracy in twenty-some polities transhistorically. Due to the primacy of a theoretical model for explaining the rise and proliferation of European-style modernization globally, this comparison lacked a direct basis in the micro-level historical analyses of individual and collective political practice and organization. Below I will show that for comparative political historians *The Political Systems of Empires* therefore has very limited explanatory power. Eisenstadt's work serves as an illustration of why scalability or the construction of historical narratives that render the connection between micro- and macro-level temporal and spatial scales explicit will be central to a renewal of comparative political history.[35]

In the chapter entitled "The Social Determinants of Political Processes: A Comparative Analysis"[36] Eisenstadt developed a theory of the long-term dominance of the power of the ruler over socially differentiated collectives. Four elements were key to his analysis of *longue-durée* Chinese autocracy. First, he interpreted the history of empire as the interplay between the ruler's articulation of political aspirations and activities (the internal conditions) and the creation and control of economic, political, and cultural resources (external conditions) over which the ruler competed or negotiated with other social groups. He opposed ruler and elites and turned them into roles with fixed attributes. In the Chinese case, Eisenstadt translated all political conflict into conflict between ruler and literati. The ruler is by definition a proponent of expansionism, who aims to

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[35] For a similar emphasis on the interlinking of larger and smaller temporal and spatial scales see Pomeranz, "Histories for a Less National Age," AHA Presidential Address, Jan. 6, 2014, Washington DC, http://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/kenneth-pomeranz.

[36] Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems*, 222-72.

commit free-floating resources to his own use and so limits private property and the power of the aristocracy, suppresses autonomous cultural activity, and persecutes religious groups that acquire too much power. Eisenstadt added that, in contrast to most other polities, such policies of containment towards agents of change more or less succeeded in the Chinese case.[37]

As far as the empirical evidence is concerned one may find examples supporting this interpretation but also an abundance of cases invalidating this generalization. Some Chinese rulers match Eisenstadt's description. Emperors who have left an indelible imprint on the historical imagination like Han Wudi, Tang Taizong, Song Shenzong, or the Ming emperors Hongwu and Yongle fit the description. Yet, these were rather exceptional figures and became famous or infamous for this very reason. Furthermore, historically, conflict over policy options divided court factions, bureaucratic networks, and, by the twelfth century, literati networks that extended well beyond the bureaucracy and involved hundreds of thousands of literati. An early indication of this state of affairs is *The Salt and Iron Debates*, a text that reflected on a court debate held in 81 BCE between the scholars and the Grand Secretary on economic and foreign policy, specifically, the pros and cons of government monopolies, an offensive military stance, and territorial expansion. The sharing of letters on an extensive and empire-wide scale, governmental reports, memorials, court gazettes, treaties, archival compilations, maps, and policy questions and essays about current affairs among officials and literati, in manuscript and in print, from the twelfth century onwards also strongly suggest that the opposition between emperor and literati may have been less significant, most of the time, in policy making than the divisions among officials and literati themselves. The drive for military action and expansion is particularly relevant. Even though some emperors could at times be persuaded to take military action during the latter half of the Song Empire, the ongoing push for territorial expansion came predominantly from military governors and their

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[37] Ibid., ch. 7.

literati supporters. Imperial sovereignty and unanimity in decision making were upheld as ideals, but these were myths masking a far more complex political reality. Eisenstadt's generalization about the emperor-literati relationship thus displaces political conflicts between court officials and literati or among literati and turns them into conflicts between the ruler and "the rest" in which the ruler is by definition progressive and expansionist and "the rest" by definition conservative, interested in moral discourse rather than open political debate.

Eisenstadt ascribes a set of attributes of socio-political elites to the long-term domination of the single ruler. Three of these are highlighted here as other presumed characteristics of the Chinese autocracy in the *longue-durée*. First, Eisenstadt posits that there were "limited free interrelations" between "regional and professional groups."[38] It remains unclear what is meant by "limited" in either quantitative or comparative terms as the referent for comparison is not disclosed. If the comparison were to be made synchronically with other polities between 1000 and 1500 it might well turn out that for extensive periods of time regional interrelations in Chinese politics were relatively dense. This would apply to economic elites, religious elites, and of course the highly mobile and frequently socializing and networking literati elites. In any case, the argument is reached deductively and underscores the need for truly comparative work on communication networks in historical empires as well as other polities, a task that has not yet been undertaken.

Second, Eisenstadt attributes low levels of political activity and participation among imperial elites to geographic and technological factors including limited military and communication technology. However, as is the case with the previous argument a comparative benchmark or historical context is lacking. Here again the actual "comparative analysis" has yet to be undertaken and might be rather revealing if the analysis were to proceed from micro-historical evidence. The questions to be further investigated in-

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[38] Ibid., 230.

clude the impact of water transport, paper and print technology, and urbanization rates, all of which changed significantly in both medieval Europe and Song-Yuan China. Similarly, the dissemination of military technology and its differential impact on European and Chinese polities and local communities may be a more promising project than this chapter seems to suggest. The production of military manuals for literati audiences soared between the eleventh and thirteenth century. A manual detailing dozens of techniques for local defense was printed commercially and reprinted in commercial encyclopedias in the early thirteenth century.[39] Moreover, as shown time and again in times of crisis, local elites of varying status organized quickly and variously to step in when imperial troops did not or in insufficient numbers. More fundamentally, the presumption of low levels of political activity and participation itself needs to be bracketed for now and submitted to close comparative scrutiny.

Third, Eisenstadt attributes the presumed passivity of Chinese elites during imperial times to broad cultural orientations, more specifically, to the Confucian belief in order. Eisenstadt further correlated the ethical and cultural orientations of Chinese powerholders to their inclination towards familial self-rule and a disinterest in the open discussion of policy.[40] Mann similarly considers the bureaucratic Confucian power configuration as a cause of stagnation and decline following the fall of the first agricultural empires and the spread of world religions. The comparator here is Christianity which was in Mann's words "far superior" due in large

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[39] De Weerdt, *Information, Territory, and Networks*, ch. 4-5.

[40] The insistence on the primacy of moral discourse and neglect of political issues among literati rests on a mistaken bifurcation of these realms. In both Chinese and European history, and indeed contemporary history, moral and political discourse were mutually constitutive. The overlap has been shown to be operating in both European imperialism and in scientific discourse. As recently shown in a special issue on early modern empires in Renaissance Studies, not only was the moral discourse of virtue characteristic of more conservative critics of empire in early modern England, but it was also adopted by representatives of the East India Company in order to defend their work overseas (Philip Stern, "Corporate Virtue: The Languages of Empire in Early Modern British Asia," *Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 4 (2012): 510-530). Steven Shapin has shown how moral discourse shaped scientific discourse in early modern England (*A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

part to the fact that "[Europe's] religion and culture expressed the spirit of rational restlessness."[41]

The significance of Confucian orientations for an explanation of the history of Chinese empires has been challenged on comparative grounds in two directions. Walter Scheidel points out that ideological factors should not be weighted too highly in the Chinese case given their irrelevance in the history of other empires.[42] Moreover, East Asian history provides ample evidence of the use of Confucian orientations in legitimating polities of different kinds and sizes. Historically, there is furthermore little to support the claim that Chinese literati were disinterested "in the open discussion of policy." To the contrary, the hundreds of notebooks and even more voluminous collected writings that still remain from the period between the eleventh and thirteenth century, and the even larger numbers printed later, testify to the emergence of an information regime in the late imperial period in which the discussion of government and politics was a driving force. The institutionalization of the civil service examinations as the most prestigious route of the officialdom, the need to obtain recommendations from senior politicians for promotion in office, and the factionalized nature of politics stimulated the demand for political information and its production amongst literati.

The lack of historical texture throughout *The Political Systems of Empires* is a methodological problem with direct consequences for the analytical power of the theoretical model proposed. The focus on polities and social types/groups and on the extensive coverage of time and place in comparative histories of empire has come at the expense of narrative and of the structural analysis of individual and collective agency. In order to avoid reliance on Eurocentric models of explanation, a renewed attention to the micro scale, to the role of events in the transformation of structures, to social relationships and social networks, and to individual and collective ac-

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[41] Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1, 341, 502.

[42] Walter Scheidel, "From the 'Great Convergence' to the 'First Great Divergence': Roman and Qin-Han State Formation and Its Aftermath," in id *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21.

tions in historical conjunctures is necessary. William Sewell has similarly called for a combination of social theoretical structural thinking and the historical emphasis on agency and contingency. [43]

CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

Eisenstadt cast the dynastic and civilizational types and the dynamics between ruler and social collectivities (esp. elite groups) which were at the core of *The Political Systems of Empire* in a metanarrative of convergence. Eisenstadt originally wrote *The Political Systems of Empire* from the perspective that modernization was leading to a convergence of societies that had been at different stages of development. The focus on convergence fit in with the dominance of modernization theory in sociology during the 1950s and 1960s and contrasts with the focus on divergence in recent comparative history including the new wave of empire studies of the 1980s. These works have been devoted to explaining when and why European states began to dominate the world showing particular interest in economic and legal developments in early modern England and the Netherlands. Despite the apparent contradiction, convergence and divergence are historical concepts that derive from the same toolkit of evolutionary and teleological history. In the following I will highlight key problems in histories tracing convergence and divergence before returning to the later Eisenstadt who, more so than some of his successors, remained sensitive to the variability of local responses to shared socio-economic, political, and cultural challenges in a globalizing world, thereby pointing comparative political history in a direction that remains to be explored.

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[43] William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 114-23. Sewell turned to Michael Mann's work as an example of what an eventful comparative history at the macro scale might look like. Mann's history of the rise of civilization underscores how contingent an event that was in a global context where diverse networks of power cut across space and could be made to coincide only exceptionally. As I have suggested above, Mann abandons the project of a more eventful history in the second half of his work as a far more teleological and Eurocentric model replaces eventful history. See also Hobson, "Eurocentrism and Neorealism in the `Fall of Mann.'"

Divergence has become a keyword in comparative historical discourse, especially since the publication ten years ago of Kenneth Pomeranz' *The Great Divergence*. Despite its frequent use, the concept itself appears ill-defined and its methodological implications remain unexplored.[44] Pomeranz makes only a casual attempt to clarify the connotations of the term. A divergence differs from "differences" in comparative analysis in that it takes place on a larger scale and has lasting effects. The focus on divergence in comparative studies of Chinese and European history holds the promise that greater weight can be given in macrohistorical accounts to contingency and the effect of historically and culturally specific responses to shared problems. Have narratives of divergence delivered in this regard?

In Pomeranz' work divergence is established against a common ground, constructed by the historian, amongst the entities being compared. Specifically, the great divergence stands for European regions' deviation from patterns of economic development (productivity and consumption) that they had broadly shared with the Chinese Yangzi region during the centuries preceding the eighteenth century. Divergence is used in similar ways in other discussions of European industrialization and economic development, but in some of this work divergence acquires a different referent. European development becomes the standard by which deviation is measured leading back to a Eurocentric model of comparative analysis.

For example, in *After Tamerlane* John Darwin largely endorses Pomeranz' great divergence argument emphasizing the equilibrium among expanding states through the seventeenth century as well as similar levels of economic development until that time. But after the divergence from a shared development pattern has been established, European development becomes the standard from which the other polities diverge. Thus, compared to the legitimacy

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[44] Michael Puett delivered a comparable critique of "divergence" in "Divergence as a Category of Comparative History: The Case of China in Eurasian History," paper presented at "New Perspectives on Comparative Medieval History: China and Europe, 800-1600" Pembroke College, Oxford, Sept. 30, 2013.

of scepticism, the role of experiment, and new attitudes towards time and space amongst eighteenth-century Europeans, the author discerns no change in cultural direction, no repudiation of the cultural past, no reappraisal of China's place in the world, no intellectual challenge to the Confucian tradition, no challenge to the elite from religious devotees, no new scientific knowledge, no notion of a mathematically predictable universe, no free spaces for dissident intellectuals, no public opposition to authority or only opposition at a high risk, and no acceptance of western knowledge in the remainder of imperial Chinese history.[45]

The return to a Eurocentric and teleological mode of analysis in this last example may turn out to be a problem inherent in theories of divergence. Not only are such theories based on major differences between entire polities and societies across a trajectory spanning centuries all the way to the present, but they also tend to allow for only two outcomes from the point of divergence: the status quo at the point of divergence and a teleological endpoint. This problem can be illustrated with other theories of divergence which place the point of divergence between Chinese and European societies at different times ranging from the third century BCE to the eleventh century CE.

Michael Mann highlights broad similarities between the early civilizations and the early empires in Chinese and European history. Down to the end of the second century there were significant similarities in elite culture and imperial strategies, but "the world-religion phase saw a branching of the ways, the emergence of at least four different paths of future development" and "[more than 500 years later] one of them, Christianity, proved so far superior to the others that all had to adapt to its encroachments, thus becoming a family of societies once more." Mann dates this phase to the period between 600 BCE and 700 CE.[46] This attempt to attribute

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[45] John Darwin, *After Tamerlane*: *The Global History of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2007), ch. 4.

[46] Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1, 341. The problem of the obvious overlap between the early imperial period and "the world-religion phase" is only partially resolved by the

divergence to differences in religious belief systems is of course reminiscent of similar theories and hypotheses, especially Max Weber's work on the protestant ethic. Religious/ideological power is in Mann's work consistently historicized in the context of other sources of social power (economic, military, and political). However, his analysis of the divergent historical development of social power is thoroughly teleological and Eurocentric as it defines the dynamic course of European development as the referent from which Chinese "uniformity," "stagnation" and "decay" diverges.[47]

The teleological tendency of divergence studies is also evident in Sinocentric histories such as Victoria Tin-bor Hui's *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe.* Hui uses early Chinese history as the measure for early modern European development and argues that the Warring States trajectory from an international system to a universal empire is the more likely outcome in state formation processes determined by international competition and war. From this perspective, political institutions and practices that have come to be associated with European culture such as citizenship rights (including economic rights, access to justice, and freedom of expression) and the balance of power become the contingent outcomes of the inability of successive European rulers to dominate. Hui thus provides an important critique of the reliance upon intrinsic cultural characteristics and dynamics to explain the divergent outcomes of interstate competition in Chinese and European history. She adopts instead a historical-institutionalist approach and explains divergence through a comparison of initial conditions, timing, and path dependence. This leads to the conclusion that "Europe was ultimately saved from"[48] the logic of domination due to such factors as the lag between trade expansion and state formation and the degree and stabilization of the autonomy acquired by elites when rulers resorted to

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claim that the religious and cultural differences brought about by the spread of world religions showed themselves distinctly "by A.D. 1000."

[47] For more elaborate critiques, see Blaut, ch. 6; Hobson, "Eurocentrism and Neorealism in the 'Fall of Mann.'"

[48] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 205.

more coercive strategies. Hui concludes, "Even though China was once two thousand years ahead of Europe in the development of self-strengthening reforms and state formation, it fell into stagnation in the imperial era."[49] As this quote suggests, the teleological endpoints of divergence (unified rule in the Chinese case and checks and balances in the European case) close off centuries of historical development and ultimately bring Hui very close to the Eurocentric position from which she distances herself so emphatically.

Divergence models require a common ground, but as the substantial discrepancies in timing between these models suggest, significant similarities between organized polities can be found at many points in history. Moreover, the postulate of a common ground in divergence theories tends to lead to a search for the holy grail, the variables (whether religious beliefs and institutions, ecological fortune and the presence of New World wealth) that can best explain how divergence from the common ground has come about and lasted through to the present.

Eisenstadt was aware that convergence was a problematic concept. In the introduction to a reprint of *The Political Systems of Empires* he wrote: "Contrary to the vision implicit in the "classical" studies of modernization and of convergence of industrial society, behind which there loomed a conviction of the inevitability of progress towards modernity—be it political, industrial, or cultural—and toward the development of a universal modern civilization, there slowly developed a growing recognition of great symbolic and institutional variability and of different modes of institutional and ideological dynamics attendant on the spread of modern civilization."[50] In this rethinking of it, modernization turned out to be a world historical process very similar to earlier ones which Eisenstadt had dissected: the emergence of axial civilizations and the formation of bureaucratic empires. Eisenstadt underscored that he

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[49] Hui, 223. This paragraph is based on Hilde De Weerdt, "*War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* by Victoria Tin-bor Hui," *Bijiao: China in Comparative Perspective Book Review* vol. 1, no. 1 (2011), 26-28.

[50] Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems*, xliv.

saw modern civilization as a process that demonstrated the same dynamics as those earlier world historical processes, albeit in a more intense form. The process of convergence revealed tensions, tensions provoked by the shared challenges of modernization: industrialization, urbanization, the expansion of communication, and increased politicization. These challenges transformed the symbolic and institutional structures of societies but their traditions and historical experiences also gave rise to distinct institutional responses to common problems. Differences in cultural orientations implied that different societies developed different institutions, policy preferences, and power relationships. In later work Eisenstadt further explained that the different cultural orientations of historical empires had led to divergent models of modernization. The Middle East, for example, was modernizing but it had not developed the basic features of the industrialized modern democratic European nation-state such as a high level of social stratification, class consciousness, and the political articulation of class interests.[51] The Eurocentric bias, the impulse to measure historical development elsewhere with reference to a model of European modernization, remains implicit here. The assumption that divergent responses to shared problems are determined by broad cultural orientations inherent in civilizational types is less fitting for comparative political history than the analysis of historically specific intellectual and cultural frameworks including political-theoretical ones. Nevertheless, by insisting on the broad comparison of differing responses to common challenges Eisenstadt proposed a model of comparison that, in combination with the criteria for comparison discussed in the first section of this essay, remain in his words "still very much before us."[52] Some attempts in early modern state formation and political history have been made but much remains to be done.[53]

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[51] Eisenstadt, "Convergence and Divergence of Modern and Modernizing Societies: Indications from the Analysis of the Structuring of Social Hierarchies in Middle Eastern Societies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977): 1-27.

[52] Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems*, xlvi.

[53] For intra-European political historical comparisons, see John Watts, *The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300-1500* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For global

CONCLUSION

More than fifty years after it was first published Eisenstadt's *The Political Systems of Empires* remains an inevitable reference point for historians interested in the comparative history of political structures and participation in empires and other types of polities. It was then and remains now a frustrating work in its use of historical evidence, its methodology and its theory, not to mention its prose. Frustrating too because its contributions and ambitions cannot be dismissed. In this essay I have therefore shown how Eisenstadt's larger questions about the formation and maintenance of empires and the more detailed criteria for the comparison of political organization and participation outlined in *The Political Systems of Empires* can be translated into a set of questions for comparative political history. I have also highlighted three key methodological problems in his work which have had a continuing influence on later comprehensive comparative studies of pre-eighteenth century empires. By creating civilizational types out of dynastic periods, by turning collectivities into agents with fixed attributes and fixed positions in power relationships, and by framing comparisons in a convergence/divergence model these macrohistories have perpetuated and reinforced Eurocentric modes of comparative analysis. In order to overcome the burden of Eurocentric analysis, comparative political historians will have to turn to the comparative analysis of structural transformations rather than static civilizations, will need to connect micro-historical evidence with macro-level analyses, and, as the later Eisenstadt emphasized, will have to turn their attention systematically to the varied political

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comparisons, see Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 2009). For a similar approach focusing on the comparison of elite responses to crisis moments in European, West Asian, and Chinese societies see R. I. Moore, "The Eleventh Century in Eurasian History: Comparative Approach to the Convergence and Divergence of Medieval Civilizations," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33, no. 1 (2003): 1-21.

responses to common challenges in the history of humanity, abandoning the assumption of convergence.