

SOCIAL THEORY  
AND  
REGIONAL STUDIES  
IN THE  
GLOBAL AGE



EDITED BY  
SAÏD AMIR ARJOMAND

Social Theory and Regional Studies  
in the Global Age

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# Social Theory and Regional Studies in the Global Age

SUNY series, Pangaea II: Global/Local Studies

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Säid Amir Arjomand and Wolf Schäfer, editors

*To the memory of Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1923–2010)*

# Foreword

## Pangaea II: Global/Local Studies

This book series of the Stony Brook Institute for Global Studies engages the global challenges confronting humankind with research, analysis, and education. It aims at empowering individuals and communities to enjoy the benefits and avoid the dangers of globalization. Without political partisanship, the Stony Brook Institute for Global Studies will form worldwide partnerships with those who appreciate the vital contribution of academic excellence to achieving these aims. In so doing, it should also contribute to the extension of human rights, security, freedom, and democracy in accord with the diversity of values and cultures throughout the world.

A civilizational project of the global age, Pangaea II is emerging on the scattered geobody that our world maps depict. Pushed forward by globalization and technoscience, Pangaea II is eclipsing the configurations of nature. For the ubiquitous images, sounds, and texts of Pangaea II, earth's current fragmentation into regions, cultures, continents, and islands has vanished. Rapidly branching communication and transportation networks are interweaving widely distributed societies. TV, telephony, and e-mail have escaped from the gravity of the geobody. Pangaea II is pulling the planet together and colonizing near-earth space. Vanquishing the geographic difference between halfway down the corridor and halfway around the globe, Pangaea II is a dense global conglomeration with physical and metaphysical features such as the routers of the Internet and the fallacious belief that global communication should be easy because it has become instant.

*Pangaea II: Global/Local Studies* is committed to interdisciplinary social science and the integration of fact and theory in a global context. As the hegemony of the Western center of the world system wanes, and with it that of metropolitan social theory, pluralistic approaches to research grow and multiple centers of learning around the globe emerge. We believe in opening the social sciences, removing old disciplinary boundaries, and exploring the

intricate dialectic of the global and the local in the production of knowledge. This series embraces the epistemic challenge of the global age; it privileges comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to illuminate the simultaneous local generalization of the global and the global constitution of the local. Understanding this dialectic at the core of globalization and globality is the goal of *Pangaea II*. Accordingly, the global/local studies published under *Pangaea II* combine comparative, universal theorizing with various approaches to local knowledge on national and regional topics.

—*Säïd Amir Arjomand and Wolf Schäfer*



## Preface

The project for integrating social theory and regional studies was an inaugural program of the Stony Brook Institute for Global Studies, and is appropriately appearing in its publication series, *Pangaea II: Global/Local Studies*. The project required a new social theory and a novel approach to regional studies, and this volume is a pioneering work in the construction of such a new social theory appropriate for the global age. Among the contributors to this volume, Wolf Schäfer and myself are co-directors of the Institute, and Edward Tiryakian and Björn Wittrock are members of its International Advisory Board, as was the late S. N. Eisenstadt (September 10, 1923–September 2, 2010). Edward Tiryakian has been particularly supportive of this project throughout, and made extensive comments on the draft introduction to this volume for which I am most grateful. Eisenstadt was to write the foreword to this volume, which is now dedicated to his memory as the founder of the study of axial civilizations and multiple modernities. We are also saddened by the untimely death of another key contributor, Willfried Spohn, on January 16, 2012, but pleased to be able to offer his contribution here as chapter 4.

An earlier version of chapter 5 appeared in the Institute's electronic journal, *Globality Studies* ([globality.cc.stonybrook.edu/?p=158](http://globality.cc.stonybrook.edu/?p=158)). An earlier version of chapter 1 was published under the same title in the *Archives européennes de sociologie* 51, no. 3 (2010): 363–99, and I am grateful for the permission of its editor to include it in this volume.

—Saïd Amir Arjomand

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# Introduction

## The Challenge of Integrating Social Theory and Regional Studies

*Saïd Amir Arjomand*

The recognition of the simultaneous emergence of the natural and then social sciences and the formation of modernity in Western Europe is the inescapable starting point for any theorist wishing to lay a claim to the understanding of modernity in whatever form, be it modernity heavy, as in Habermas's Enlightenment project of modernity that represents a sociologized version of central value-ideas of the Western Age of Reason, or modernity lite, whose variants include multiple, alternative, connected, entangled, and subaltern modernities examined in this volume. Social theory as born in Europe was the theory of "modern society," a term that is only recently being replaced by "modernity." What I call modernity heavy implies that there is no significant change beyond it in history, in effect making the concept of modernity "refer to only a single and unique experience"—that of the West. Much of the criticism it has provoked for doing so, however, "tended to discard rather than aim to rethink key concepts of the social sciences" (Wagner 2009, 248–49). The varieties of modernity lite presented in this volume are, by contrast, attempts to rethink and qualify rather than reject and discard the concept of modernity. A set of chapters on comparative analysis of civilizations goes even further, proposing to decenter modernity in social theory altogether by historicizing it as a distinct evolutionary or developmental pattern.

## I

The late Reinhard Koselleck, the German historian who did more than anyone to establish conceptual history as a discipline in the latter part of the twentieth century, saw the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Western Europe as the “saddle period” (*Sattelzeit*) in world history when the major shifts in the fundamental categories underlying the rise of social sciences as a part of the formation and cultural constitution of modernity. From the latter part of the eighteenth century onward, there emerged a new “space of experience” that gave certain key political notions such as democracy, freedom and the state “an anticipatory content they did not have before” (Koselleck 2002, 5). Alongside these were constructed in the early nineteenth century fundamental substantive concepts of the social sciences such as society, class, the people. Temporal concepts of the rising social sciences, such as progress, evolution, and development, were likewise constructed within the new, modern horizon of expectation, to use another key term of Koselleck’s.

As Björn Wittrock points out in chapter 2, social sciences were first conceived in France in the 1790s as the new kind of knowledge for understanding the modern world. Elsewhere, following Koselleck’s conceptual history of Western modernity closely, Wittrock (2005, 87–90) highlights certain key modes in the formulation of the new discourse of the social sciences. The first is the historicization of abstract reason, which generates the social sciences in the matrix of history. The second is textual and hermeneutic efforts to historicize the language and linguistic development itself, which leads to hermeneutics in the latter part of the nineteenth century and to the linguistic and conceptual contextualism, notably of Quentin Skinner, in our generation. Thirdly, there is the emergence of new collective identities within the body politic, most notably in the form of modern nationalism, alongside notions of society, state, and civil society. Classical sociology was closely tied indeed to the emergence of the European nation-states, and to the notion of civil society and social class as variously defined by Hegel and Marx. Consequently, as Alain Touraine puts it, “sociology remained absent from colonized countries as well as from those where traditional leaders continued to hold power” (Touraine 2007, 185–86, as cited in Boatcă and Costa 2010, 14). Last but not least is the theme of the nature of human agency and the motivation to social action. As Wittrock points out in chapter 2, this new categorization of agency and society entailed the autonomy of the social scientific discourse from Christian moral philosophy and thus its secularization.

Premised on these fundamental conceptual shifts, social theory can be said to have begun in nineteenth-century Europe as a theory of social evolution. Hegel, Comte, and Marx emphasized a common pattern of evolution for "society" (the new abstraction) with Europe in the lead, and were not interested in different patterns of change in other world regions. Marx was forced to deny the possibility of change for his "Asiatic mode of production" and refused to envisage an alternative evolutionary path for Russia. In the same period, as Western historical reality was exoteric, Orientalism as the study of the other became esoteric. Social theory was derived from Western experience and claimed universality, making the exotic reality of the Oriental other theoretically irrelevant. This specious dichotomy, captured in Kipling's "East is East and West is West; and never the twain shall meet," is untenable in the global age, however, and runs against the reality of the compression of the world and intensification of communication within and between the world regions.

The radical postcolonial critique of social theory as Eurocentric, whatever its value in illuminating "the geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference" (Mignolo 2002), remains a utopian epistemology so long as it cannot produce alternative conceptions of time, agency, society to those embedding social sciences during the formation of modernity. The interplay of local histories and global designs greatly illuminates the production of knowledge in the era of Western imperialist hegemony but does not involve an epistemic break in social theorizing. It is hard to see, for instance, how Mignolo's (2002, 90) proposal for an alternative to the admittedly Eurocentrist postmodernist critique, "diversity as a universal project rather than the reinscription of [any] abstract universal," can dispense with these fundamental conceptual premises of contemporary social science any more than the postmodernist theory he attacks. The constructive alternative to both these equally utopian critiques is surely to retrieve, modify, and extend basic concepts of Eurocentric social theory in the light of distinctive historical experiences of other world regions. The rich stock of concepts and theories that are mainly embedded in Western historical experience can be modified in the direction of greater universality through their dialogical engagement with concepts which are at last being formed on the basis of the vast, understudied, and analytically untapped historical and cultural experience of other regions and civilizations. Hence, the promise of comparative sociology for our generation, and of the present venture to realize this promise by integrating the findings of regional studies into social theory.

Let me illustrate my claim for the utility of retrieval of categories impaired in the production of knowledge under Western imperialist hegemony

as against their rejection in expectation of radical epistemic breakthroughs with reference to the much maligned "Orientalism." Orientalism as a discipline studying the civilizations of the East developed about the same time as social sciences, or somewhat earlier, being so designated by its European practitioners in the nineteenth century. Said (1978) redefined the concept in a much broader sense, conflating Orientalism in the narrow sense as the self-designation of a scholarly discipline with the much broader stereotypical perception of the Oriental other in the era of colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Orientalism as a scholarly discipline may well have been tainted by imperialism, as the late Edward Said charged. Nevertheless, it was epistemologically revolutionary because it was methodical. While considering many European Orientalists charlatans and pained by the blatant attempt of the French Orientalists to recruit him for propaganda against Germany during World War I, the greatest Iranian scholar of the first half of the twentieth century, Mohammad Qazvini (1999[1924]), acknowledged his immense debt to Orientalism. The Orientalists had taught him critical method, which, for him, distinguished modern critical scholarship he was pioneering in Iran from the traditional *madrasa* scholarship in which he had originally been trained in Shi'ite seminaries. The Brahmins who helped Max Müller establish as canonical the celebrated series *The Sacred Books of the East* were similarly trained in method by him and other Orientalists. Sujata Patel's postcolonial criticism of this Indological basis of the Indian sociology of G. S. Ghurye and his followers in chapter 16 is cast in epistemological terms, but if my argument is correct, it could just as well be taken as sociological rather than epistemological. As such it would primarily be a critique of the *savarna* or upper-caste view modernized through the application of critical method in the edition of texts rather than an alien view imposed by imperialism. It did not reflect the Hinduism of the excluded classes, nor the worldview of the non-Sanskritic and Muslim Indians, but it was *not* a European view of the Hindu Other.

It should further be noted that Orientalism as the discipline developed in the nineteenth century constituted an elaborate framework for civilizational analysis. Indeed, it has been cogently argued that Orientalism in India at the end of the eighteenth century led to a "Copernican-like revolution" in the shift from the unitary to the pluralist conception of civilization. "The Sanskrit-based civilization of the 'Hindus' challenged the idea that Europe was *the* world civilization" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1997, 227, 229). Consonantly with Dilthey's hermeneutics, language rather than religion was the basis and decisive marker of civilization for Orientalism (Rudolph 2010, 144). However, it took another century and a half for the rise of nationalism in the non-Western world in the era of the League of Nations



to institutionalize the shift from the singular to the plural conception of civilizations and give it some international political purchase (Duara 2001).

Although Raymond Aron (1968) included Montesquieu as a theorist of human diversity in his classic *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, the latter's influence on the subsequent development of social theory remains to be demonstrated. Nor did Herder's equally important and exceptional interest in the cultural diversity of humankind (Herder 1968; Berlin 1976) generate any theoretical development in social sciences. Both Wittrock (in chapter 2) and I (in chapter 7), therefore, consider Max Weber's comparative work on the world religions, beginning with the "intermediate reflections" of 1915, as the starting point of current civilizational analysis. In chapter 1, I survey three generations of comparative sociologies that have flourished in the twentieth century, albeit with abrupt discontinuities. As I show, the Durkheimians in France made an honorable start at about the same time as Max Weber. When the United States became the center of social sciences after World War II, the mainstream developed the putatively universal theory of social evolution as modernization. However, there was also an alternative project for bringing the East and West together without imposing the latter's developmental pattern on the former, as the modernization theory tended to do. This alternative project was the work of the second generation of comparative sociologists who thus sought to make social theory less parochially Eurocentric and, at the same time, Oriental studies less esoteric. It was an ambitious attempt at integrating social theory and regional studies that has not received the attention it deserves. Be that as it may, the second generation, too, failed to fulfill the promise of comparative sociology because social sciences and regional studies in the United States drifted apart and developed in divergent paths.

In view of these false starts, Max Weber, or perhaps the later of the two Webers—the Weber who proposed the seminal idea of the world religions of salvation as the core around which civilizations grow, seems the most promising starting point of the study of differences among cultures and civilizations and thus the starting point of the genuine comparative sociology needed for the understanding of the different and yet tightly integrated worlds of the global age. Puchala (2003, 51–72, 119–42), it is true, has developed a concept of civilization through Toynbee rather than Weber that is not based on world religions but instead offers a gradation of civilizations at various stages of maturity and uses it to determine of their type of interaction—assimilation, dialogue, or clash. Though very ambitious in its intent, Puchala's conceptualization seems methodologically problematic in that it blends the outcome of encounters between civilizations with their putative