

# THE MOVER OF CHANGE: IN MEMORY OF SHMUEL EISENSTADT

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In the beginning of September, the scientific community was stricken by the news of another enormous loss, with the death of Shmuel Eisenstadt, a scientist whose name is associated with an entire epoch of twentieth century social science. He is credited with the creation of comparative culture studies, something which occupied a great deal of his time and energy right up to his death, and something that remains an immensely popular and pertinent field of study today. Eisenstadt was born in Warsaw in 1923, and emigrated with his family to Palestine in the 1930's. It is anyone's guess what the young scientist's life would have been like had his mother not been able to take him away to the Middle East and remain relatively safe before and during WWII. It was here in the 1940s that the young Shmuel enrolled at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem – an institution that he would remain associated with throughout his life. Eisenstadt's biography is perhaps not quite as eventful as those of his contemporaries; however, the paucity of this external eventfulness was no doubt compensated by the tempests that would rage through his academic career.

Eisenstadt's entire life as a scientist was spent locked in a struggle against a Eurocentric mindset that was, and to an extent still is, so common for the Western scientific community. His crucial work came from an idea given to him by Karl Jaspers regarding the existence of a so-called '**axial age**' – a certain moment in human history when a number of ideas, conceptions, theories, values, and practices, as varied as they were important in and of themselves, all evolved simulta-



neously in different regions of the world and determined the further evolution of the given nations as well as humanity in general.

Eisenstadt used Jaspers' 'axial age' as the basis for his revolutionary assumption that culture, apart from being the most important factor of social evolution, was also an autonomous factor. This statement sounds perfectly innocuous today, but one must remember that the dominant social theories of the 1960's were Marxism and structural functionalism, neither of which regarded culture as an independent or valuable phenomenon – it was conceived of as secondary in nature: Marxism treated it as dependent on the economic system, whereas structural functionalism treated it as a derivative of a given societal subsystem.

Nevertheless, Eisenstadt argued in his books that it was precisely cultural differences that determined the differences in the evolution of individual societies. Culture, Eisenstadt argued, is the driving force behind the key instigators of change – the autonomous intellectual elite – since it fundamentally defines

their creative activity. Correspondingly, the differences between cultures and the chronology of their respective 'axial times' define their different evolutionary paths.

This interpretation of 'axial age,' made it possible for Eisenstadt to attack a belief at the heart of Eurocentric science, that the values of one culture can always be received by another. This very interpretation gave sufficient cause to develop a theory of '**alternative contemporaneity**' – with separate subsets not just for the East and West (both of which were regarded as different cultural meta-identities), but also a specific 'contemporaneity' theory for France, another one for the USA, and so on.

The principal impossibility of cultural uniformity does not imply mutual hostility, as the 'civilisation conflict' theorists would like us to believe. Nations are capable of cooperation, which is of course necessary in order for them to grow together. Eisenstadt was utterly devoted to encouraging this cooperation and open dialogue between the East and the West, and he spent the last years of his life working toward this goal. He tried to make the Russians see that there was nothing hostile about the West, and that it was always ready to lend a helping hand. He also tried to prove to the West that Russia was unlikely to deviate from a democratic course having chosen it already in the past. The local interpretation may differ from the West, but it nevertheless follows the same democratic principles. Having assumed this role, it is fitting that Eisenstadt became a true instigator of change like the ones he wrote about in his theoretical works. ■

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