East, West, and Home Again[1]

Sociologist and philosopher Jóhann Páll Árnason, professor emeritus at La Trobe University in Melbourne, is one of Iceland's most important academics and theorists ever in the humanities and social science. Árnason has left a deep mark on the international academic stage, and most notable in this regard is his re-conceptualization[2] of Karl Jaspers'[3] theory of the Axial Age (500–300 BCE) and Árnason's theory of multiple modernities.[4] Árnason is still active and productive in academia despite turning 85 this year.

Árnason's works are predominantly written in English, German, and Czech; only a few have been published in Icelandic. Thus, it is a cause for celebration that just before last Christmas, the book *Austur, vestur og aftur heim* (English: East, West, and Home Again) was published, containing a cross-section of Árnason's research in the fields of sociology, civilizational analysis, and philosophy.[5] In addition to the curated collection of articles, Árnason contributes a memoir chapter briefly documenting his colourful life and career. The book was edited by the late Ágúst Þór Árnason, adjunct professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Akureyri, and Geir Sigurðsson, professor of Chinese studies and cross-cultural philosophy at the University of Iceland. As reported in the foreword, the book was a long time in the making. The initiative for the book came from the firebrand Ágúst Þór Árnason, who passed away before his time in 2019, but Geir Sigurðsson completed the work.

In this review, I will touch on some of the highlights of this highly engaging and informative book. Still, first, I will briefly overview Árnason's academic career, who was born and raised in the fishing village of Dalvík in Northeast Iceland. Árnason completed upper secondary school at the Akureyri Junior College in 1958 after enrolling there two years earlier than usual. After completing upper secondary school, Árnason went to Prague, where he studied philosophy and history at Charles University from 1960 to 1966. He taught at Akureyri Junior College from 1967 to 1968 and studied philosophy and sociology at Frankfurt University from 1968 to 1970. There, he earned a PhD in philosophy in 1970, and his dissertation adviser was the world-renowned social philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Árnason was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Institute from 1970 to 1972 and taught sociology at Heidelberg University from 1972 to 1975. Moreover, he taught for a summer semester at Bielefeld University in 1975 and simultaneously completed his *Habilitation*.[6]

From 1975 to 2003, Árnason held a position in the Faculty of Social Science at La Trobe University in Melbourne. From 2007 to 2014, Árnason taught in the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague. Since 2006, Árnason and his wife, María Jansdóttir, have lived in Akureyri in Northeast Iceland, where he has, among other things, taught in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Akureyri. Árnason has also been a visiting professor at various universities and research institutions in Germany, France, Japan, Sweden, and Italy. He was given a special research award (German: *Forschungspreis*) from the Alexander von Humboldt Institute in 2008 and was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Iceland in 2011. Lastly, Árnason will receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Akureyri this summer.

Over the course of an academic journey spanning 65 years, the cosmopolitan scholar Árnason has traversed the borders of sociology, philosophy, and history. He has published numerous books and articles that centre on social theory and historical sociology, emphasizing the comparative analysis of culture and social change. Moreover, as mentioned before, Árnason's theorization has greatly influenced international academia, evidenced by the edited volume *Civilization, Modernity, and Critique: Engaging Jóhann P. Árnason's Macro-Social Theory,* published by Routledge to mark Árnason's 80th birthday.[7]

Despite his deep and wide-ranging academic influence abroad, Árnason's name is not as well known in Icelandic academia as it should be. Likely explanations include Árnason working nearly exclusively outside Iceland (especially in Australia and Central Europe), his *longue durée* and multi-country research emphasis rather than focusing specifically on Iceland, his writing in many languages (seldom in Icelandic), and the fact that his topics, analysis, and texts are often quite challenging.[8] Moreover, in recent decades, Árnason has not featured much in public or academic debates in Iceland. At the same time, few Icelandic social scientists share Árnason's research foci on civilizational analysis and multiple modernities.

East, West, and Home Again contains nine articles by Árnason of varied origins. Five articles have been previously published in other languages and were specially translated into Icelandic for this volume. Árnason has updated all the older articles, and some include recent epilogues. Moreover, the book contains an exhaustive list of Árnason's writings.

It speaks for itself that the distinguished German social philosopher Axel Honneth writes an introduction to the book, in which he contends, among other things, that Árnason has few, if any, equals when it comes to contemporary comparative sociologists:

"Viewed on the whole, his books and articles on the Japanese path to modernization, on the outlier that was Russian development, on the significance of the Greek legacy in Europe, on the developmental dynamics of nation-states, and finally on the specific structure of Western modernity, form the cornerstone of a comparative historical sociology whose quality and ambition is matched among contemporary scholars perhaps only by Shmuel Eisenstadt" (p. 11).

East, West, and Home Again reflects this academic ambition, unparalleled precision, and comprehensive knowledge.

In the book's first article, "The Twentieth Century in Retrospect," Árnason analyzes several themes from Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes* in light of a longer time frame.[9] Hobsbawm is undoubtedly one of the most influential historians of the 20th century, and *The Age of Extremes* is a masterpiece relevant to our time. The article has many strands, but Árnason's overall conclusions about the short 20th century (1914-1991) or long (1914-2010) can be summed up in the words of German sociologist Norbert Elias: "All kinds of progress take place, but no overall progress."[10] In terms of negative developments, it suffices to reference the horrors brought upon humanity by WWI and WWII, the current environmental crisis, weapons of mass destruction in the hands and at the whim of misguided leaders, and the intensification of struggles between current and aspiring superpowers that currently grip the world. Considering heightened uncertainty and growing fears of a new war between superpowers now that a quarter of the 21st century has passed, Árnason sees many similarities with the situation in 1914. Moreover, he concludes that the current course of global geopolitics is still best understood in light of the chain reactions set in motion by WWI.

The second article, "Images of Society and Visions of Democracy," was translated unchanged from its original form, but with a new epilogue, to shed light on Árnason's thoughts on the state of democracy following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, which marked the end of the Cold War. In particular, Árnason

discusses the difficulty of fitting definitions of democracy with core sociological concepts and the parochialism inherent to the dominant conception of society. The article's topic is very timely considering Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and at a time when extremist political movements spearheaded by power-hungry tycoons encroach on democracy in various countries, most notably in the supposed "beacon of democracy" the United States. Related to this, Árnason claims that the concept of "populism" is insufficient to explain the rise of Donald Trump. Instead, the Trump phenomenon, he argues, is more akin to "religious awakenings of the kind previously known in the United States and have not been easily interpretable on European terms."[11]

In the third article, "Culture and Imaginary Significations," Árnason examines another fundamental concept: culture. More specifically, he explores how Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis' concept of "imaginary significations" sheds new light on the concept of culture. In an epilogue, Árnason briefly overviews Castoriadis' life and academic career, as he is one of the thinkers who has had the most profound influence on Árnason as a scholar. Like Árnason, Castoriadis was primarily influenced by Marxist analysis early in his career but deepened and broadened his theoretical perspective as time passed. What influenced Árnason the most in this respect were the phenomenological writings of Czech philosophers Karel Kosík and Jan Patočka and the works of classical sociologists such as Émile Durkheim and, in particular, Max Weber's comparative sociology.

The fourth article, "The Other of Reason and the Reason of the Other," centers on the concept of reason and its radical implementation characterizing modernity. Arguably, this is the book's most challenging reading, which can mainly be explained by the obscure nature of the subject matter but partly because the article was translated from French. Árnason thinks along with many scholars in said article and, understandably, uses as a springboard the philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, whose intellectual projects engaged the limits of human reason and metaphysics. Moreover, Hegel was the first philosopher to take modernity as his subject and focused explicitly on reason. As a side note, there is reason to draw readers' attention to newly published Icelandic translations of Kant's[12] and Hegel's works.[13]

In the fifth article, "The Soviet Model as a Mode of Globalization," Árnason continues to take on challenging tasks and examines the Soviet model as failed globalization. He

critiques the determinism inherent to narrow and economic definitions of globalization. In contrast, he draws on a more multifaceted concept to analyze, on one hand, the interaction of global and local factors related to the fall of communism and, on the other hand, the significance of the Soviet Union, as a form of globalization, for the conceptualization of globalization in general. Árnason concludes: "The Soviet model was a strategy of modernization, grounded in a synthesis of imperial and revolutionary traditions, but it was also a global phenomenon: its formation, expansion and decomposition cannot be explained without reference to international connections, and its history was a crucial part of the twentieth-century phase of the globalizing process" (p. 167).

The sixth article, "The Revolutions' Revolution," engages with the Russian Revolution as both a turning point and a long-term process that brings the significance of the change and the accompanying conflict to a conclusion. Árnason defines a revolution, in short, as a rapid and intertwined change in the political and social power structure. As such, a revolution involves a structural change in state power, where legitimacy, institutions, and the composition of the ruling elite change. Concurrently, the balance of power between social groups changes. No one doubts that the February Revolution and the October Revolution of 1917 were turning points. However, there is disagreement on how to demarcate the long-term process. Árnason himself identifies the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 as the endpoint. Moreover, considering what has transpired since 1991, he argues it is more accurate to talk about three paths out of the Soviet predicament rather than its total collapse. Árnason identifies these paths with Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin and the institutional changes they knowingly and unknowingly implemented.

Árnason's comparative sociology and historical perspective are on full display in the book's seventh and eighth articles, which deal, on one hand, with state formation in Japan and the West and, on the other hand, with the modernization of Japan. Árnason builds on Norbert Elias' work and elaborates on ways to integrate research on civilization processes and comparative analysis with special reference to Japan. Japan is an exciting comparative case for Western countries, considering that it is the only country outside Europe where fully fledged feudalism emerged and because "modern Japan is indisputably the most outstanding case of capitalism in a non-Western setting, and it seems plausible to assume that the first fact has something to do with the second" (p. 204). Despite being the world's fourth largest economy, Japan has been somewhat overshadowed by China's economic and geopolitical

resurgence in recent decades, which, nonetheless, only represents a return to a traditional pattern as China was the world's largest economy for almost two millennia until Britain overtook it in the 19th century.[14] To quote Árnason: "Everything now suggests that the restoration of China as a superpower, according to adapted Bolshevik specifications, marks a greater world-historical turning point than the Soviet version of the Russian one."[15]

The book's *pièce de resistance* is undoubtedly the ninth article, "Christianity in the North: Historical Connections and the Reformation," in which Árnason applies civilizational analysis to Iceland's Commonwealth period, which lasted from the establishment of *Alþingi* in 930 and until Icelanders pledged fealty to the King of Norway in 1262. The article in question is brand new, long (108 pages), and, in my opinion, could have stood alone as an independent book. It is a fantastic read where Árnason thinks along with authors such as Halldór Laxness, Arnold Joseph Toynbee, Gunnar Karlsson, and Sigurður Nordal. At the outset, Árnason briefly explains civilizations analysis, and the book's earlier chapters underpin the following analysis.

The memoir chapter at the end is enjoyable to read but too short. I would have preferred a longer and more detailed elaboration on the factors shaping Árnason's intellectual trajectory. Nonetheless, I found Árnason's account of his student years in what was then Czechoslovakia and his strong ties to the Czech Republic ever since to be most informative. Tellingly, Árnason considers himself "of two nations," as he puts it. I also enjoyed Árnason's speculations about the United Socialist Party, which ran its course in Iceland from 1938 to 1968. This discussion reflects themes addressed in recent books by Kjartan Ólafsson[16] and Skafti Ingimarsson[17] on communist and socialist movements in Iceland.

Overall, I believe that with *East, West, and Home Again*, the editors and the author have certainly succeeded in their mission to give Icelandic readers a good insight into Árnason's *oeuvre* and his erudite contributions to the academic community. They deserve much praise. Árnason's comprehensive and profound knowledge comes through clearly in the book, and it helps that explanations and translations of key concepts are thorough and well thought out. It is safe to say that no stone has been left unturned in this volume, as Árnason is particularly sensitive to the nuances of theoretical concepts, theories, and languages. Although Árnason's text is articulate and clear, one must have one's thinking cap on while reading it. However, taking time and reflecting on the text is more than worth it. I

encourage Icelandic humanities and social science scholars to purchase this book. The book deserves a wide readership and will hopefully contribute to the recognition that Árnason deserves in Iceland.

Endnotes

[1] This is a slightly revised translation of a review in Icelandic published in *Vísbending* 43:8 (February 28, 2025): 1-3.

[2] Árnason, Jóhann Páll. 2013. "Rehistoricizing the Axial Age." In Bellah, R. and Joas, H. (eds.) *The Axial Age and its Consequences.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 366–407.

[3] Jaspers, Karl. 1953. *The Origin and Goal of History.* New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

[4] Árnason, Jóhann Páll. 2003. *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions.* Leiden: Brill.

Árnason, Jóhann Páll. 2020. *The Labyrinth of Modernity: Horizons, Pathways and Mutations*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

[5] Árnason, Jóhann Páll. 2024. *Austur, vestur og aftur heim: Greinar um samfélagsheimspeki og siðmenningargreiningu.* Árnason, Ágúst, Þ. and Sigurðsson, G. (eds.). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag.

[6] Árnason, Jóhann Páll. 1976. *Zwischen Natur und Gesellschaft – Studien zu einer kritischen Theorie des Subjekts* [Between Nature and Society – Studies in the critical theory of the subject]. Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt.

[7] Dunaj, Ľubomír, Jeremy Smith, and Kurt Mertel (eds.). 2023. *Civilization, Modernity, and Critique: Engaging Jóhann P. Árnason's Macro-Social Theory.* Abingdon/London: Routledge.

[8] Oddsson, Guðmundur. 2024. Book review of *Civilization, Modernity, and Critique:*

Engaging Jóhann P. Árnason's Macro-Social Theory, by Ľubomír Dunaj, Jeremy Smith and Kurt Mertel (eds.). *Acta Sociologica* 67(4), 565-567.

[9] Hobsbawm, Eric. [1994] 1999. *Öld öfganna: Saga heimsins 1914–1991*, transl. Óskarsson, Á. Reykjavík: Mál og menning.

[10] Árnason. 2024, p. 68 [Oddsson's translation].

[11] Árnason. 2024, p. 65 [Oddsson's translation].

[12] Kant, Immanuel. 2024. *Fyrir eilífum friði,* transl. Arnarsson, E., Lærdómsrit Bókmenntafélagsins, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag.

[13] Hegel, Georg. 2023. *Skynsemin í sögunni,* transl. Bollason, A. B. and Ásmundsson, Þ., Lærdómsrit Bókmenntafélagsins. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag.

[14] Maddison, Angus. 2007. *Contours of the World Economy, 1-2030 AD: Essays in Macro-economic History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[15] Árnason. 2024, p. 45 [Oddsson's translation].

[16] Ólafsson, Kjartan. 2020. *Draumar og veruleiki: stjórnmál í endursýn. Um Kommúnistaflokkinn og Sósíalistaflokkinn.* Reykjavík: Mál og menning.

[17] Ingimarsson, Skafti. 2024. *Nú blakta rauðir fánar. Saga kommúnista- og sósíalistahreyfingarinnar á Íslandi 1918–1968.* Reykjavík: Sögufélag.