

Professor Johann Pall Arnason and his Czech Journey*

Professor Johann Pall Arnason celebrated his seventy fifth birthday this year. Johann Arnason is a founding member of the editorial board of *Historical Sociology: A Journal of Historical Social Sciences* and for many years has also been a leading member of the Department of Historical Sociology at the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague. So, we would like to wish professor Arnason a very happy birthday and good health. We also hope to carry on in the future with a mutually fruitful collaboration on numerous research, publication and educational projects in the broad field of historical sociology. We would also like to take this opportunity to describe Johann Arnason's long and rather adventurous journey into Czech academia in the context of his very rich academic career.

Johann Arnason was born in Iceland in 1940. However he works and lectures mostly in mainland Europe, particularly in the Czech Republic these days. He likes to go back to his home in northern Iceland regularly every summer. Initially, Johann Arnason studied philosophy and history in Prague and Frankfurt in the 1960s. Later he also focused on sociological theory and other social sciences, so today his research approach is very much interdisciplinary. Johann Arnason taught sociology in Heidelberg and Bielefeld from 1972 to 1975, and at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, from 1975 to 2003. He has been a visiting professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, and at the University of Leipzig. He has been also a research fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, the Swedish Institute of Advanced Studies, the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (Essen), the Lichtenberg-Kolleg in Göttingen and the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt. Furthermore Professor Arnason carried out ground-breaking research on Japanese

modernity during his stay in Japan (1991–1992). Professor Arnason has also been the editor of a journal *Thesis Eleven* for many years. He is now emeritus professor of sociology at La Trobe University in Melbourne and from 2007 to 2015 he has been teaching every winter semester at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague.

Professor Arnason's research interests centre on social theory and historical sociology, with particular emphasis on the comparative analysis of civilizations. His most important monographs and publications so far include: *Praxis and Interpretation – Sozialphilosophische Studien* (1988), *The Future that Failed: Origins and Destinies of the Soviet Model* (1993), *Social Theory and Japanese Experience: The Dual Civilization* (1997), *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (2003), *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: Crystallizations, Divergences, Renaissance* (2004, co-edited with Björn Wittrock), *Axial Civilizations and World History* (2005, co-edited with S. N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock), *Domains and Divisions of European History* (2010, co-edited with Natalie Doyle), *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (2011, co-edited with Kurt Raaflaub), *Nordic Paths to Modernity* (2012, co-edited with Björn Wittrock) or *Religion and Politics* (2014, co-edited with Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski). Among the many forthcoming volumes are: *Collapses in the Context: Historical-Sociological Perspectives* (2015, co-edited with Karel Černý) or *Religion and Politics* (2016, co-edited with Milan Hanyš).

Johann Arnason's scholarly work and his large body of written material is renowned internationally, in particular his theory of modernity. For example, Wolfgang Knöbl summed up the "long but successful" development of Arnason's research on modernity in the Thesis Eleven article "In Praise of Philosophy: Johann P. Arnason's Long but Successful Journey Towards a Theory of Modernity" (May 2000, vol. 61, no. 1, pages 1–23) as follows: "There is a clearly discernible thread running through Johann P. Arnason's whole work. Starting with a highly sophisticated discussion of the Marxian

* This issue of the Historical Sociology journal coincides with the 75th birthday of one its editors, Johann Pall Arnason. For this reason the other editor, Nicolas Maslowski, together with the editorial team decided to include in this issue his profile.

term 'praxis' in the 1970s he was increasingly able to link his insights to macro-sociological questions. In the 1980s, focusing particularly on the notions of 'power' and 'culture', he formulated a theory of modernity which challenges the diagnoses of other major contemporary social theorists such as Habermas, Giddens, Castoriadis and others." Another of Wolfgang Knöbl's articles "Contingency and modernity in the thought of J. P. Arnason" published in the *European Journal of Social Theory* (February 2011 vol. 14, no. 1, pages 9–22) stresses the fact that Johann Arnason's approach to modernity takes contingency into consideration in contrast to other scholars dealing with civilizational analysis: "Arnason's writings succeed in pushing civilizational analysis – most prominently developed by the late Shmuel N. Eisenstadt – in a much-needed direction. Coming from an action-theoretical background in which the creativity of actors is strongly emphasized, Arnason is critical of approaches within civilizational analysis that tend to downplay contingency within historical processes. Especially by focusing on the role of political power and imperial encounters, Arnason demonstrates how civilizational analysis can be further developed in ways that do not automatically assume the linearity and long-term persistence of civilizational paths." One of Arnason's most acclaimed and inventive researches is on Japanese modernity. This has strongly contributed to the development of a more general theory of "multiple modernities" (together with S. N. Eisenstadt). Recently, Jeremy C. A. Smith summed it up in his article "Modernity and civilization in Johann Arnason's social theory of Japan" published in the *European Journal of Social Theory* (February 2011 vol. 14, no. 1, pages 41–54) as follows: "Johann Arnason's exploration of the historical constellation of East Asia has helped reproblematicize the conceptual framework of modernity and civilization. (...) Two areas warrant closer attention: state formation and the institution of capitalism."

However, there has always been an important and highly influential "Czech dimension" in Johann Arnason's literally global journey. The story began in 1959, when the nineteen year

old youth from Iceland came to a small spa town called Mariánské Lázně to study an "exotic" Czech language, that he speaks fluently and almost without accent today. Even though Iceland was at that time a strategic member state of NATO during the ongoing Cold war, the then communist Czechoslovakia had a vital student and cultural exchange with that Western island until the late 1960s. At that time Johann Arnason's interest to explore the Eastern block country was motivated mainly by ideology rather than the quest for academic knowledge, that only came some time later. He was a leftist and a young member of the Iceland communist party which was considered to be moderate, since it was often part of many government coalitions in Iceland. While in Czechoslovakia disenchantment with the reality of the communist country had existed for some time. During his studies of philosophy and history at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts at Charles University in Prague (1960–1966), he was witness to the so called de-stalinization, that had started just after the 22nd Soviet Communist Party congress in 1961. Johann Arnason was also a witness to the officially declared decline of industrial output and the economic crisis in 1962. This was followed by the so called Prague Spring which led to the dramatic events of August 1968 and the ensuing Soviet military invasion. As professor Arnason says today: "Politically, it was a very complicated and complex time. But it was completely awesome and extremely stimulating studying in Prague at that time, especially liberal arts and social sciences."

During his studies in Czechoslovakia, Johann Arnason was strongly influenced by the philosopher Karel Kosík and the phenomenologist Marxist philosopher Jiří Pešek. Johann Arnason recently commented on these influences: "That was a decisive point for my conversion towards a phenomenological reading of Marxism." Besides this, Johann Arnason has also been strongly influenced by the leading Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, who had been prohibited from lecturing by the Czechoslovakian communists in the 1950s. Later he became an official speaker for the dissident group Charter 77 and died after a police interrogation

as a consequence of that activity. In 1963 Jan Patočka was officially allowed to lecture at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts again but only to the faculty members, not students. Johann Arnason considers Patočka's essay "Super-civilization and its internal conflicts" dealing with the topic of modernity in an innovative way to be his best work. Finally, a very important Czech influence has been his Moravian wife, Marie, whom he married in 1963. Unfortunately, the young couple did not come back from abroad, because their flight to Czechoslovakia was cancelled on the 23rd August 1968 due to the Soviet military invasion to Czechoslovakia. The full-scale collaboration between Johann Arnason and his many Czech colleagues from a huge variety of disciplines could only be resumed

following the Velvet revolution (1989). In this regard, we cannot avoid asking the question about how important, or even necessary, such an experience with so many different cultures and societies is for being able to carry out successful research in the fields of historical comparative sociology. As professor Arnason himself says: "Interactions with different social worlds are important, my long-term stay in an Eastern block country influenced me greatly." We hope that Johann Arnason will stay and work with us in the post-communist Czech republic as much as possible in the forthcoming years so that we can benefit from his rich knowledge of the different social worlds.

Karel Černý