

Michael Himmlegaard

LATVIA AS A BORDERLAND OF CIVILIZATIONAL NARRATIVES: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF PERIPHERY, IDENTITY, AND GEOPOLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

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This article develops a theoretical and conceptually driven sociological analysis of Latvia as a positive and illuminating example of a civilizational borderland in contemporary Europe. Rather than treating borderlands as spaces of marginality or vulnerability, the article reframes Latvia as an analytically generative case through which broader sociological debates on identity, modernity, periphery, and geopolitical positioning can be reinterpreted. Drawing on established and high-impact sociological theory – including Weber’s work on cultural meaning and legitimacy, Simmel’s reflections on boundary formation, Eisenstadt’s theory of multiple modernities, Wimmer’s scholarship on nationhood, and Beck’s insights into cosmopolitanism – the article conceptualizes Latvia as a dynamic intersection of cultural flows, symbolic geographies, and transnational relations. The article demonstrates how Latvia’s unique historical and cultural trajectory provides a lens for exploring how societies negotiate multiple civilizational narratives simultaneously: Northern European, Baltic, Central European, and post-imperial Eurasian. Through an integrative literature review, the article synthesizes insights from identity theory, geopolitical sociology, and civilizational analysis to articulate a new conceptual model: “civilizational intermediation.” This model emphasizes the capacity of certain societies – exemplified by Latvia – to act as cultural bridges, interpretive mediators, and generators of hybrid symbolic repertoires. The article argues that Latvia’s experience enriches theoretical debates on periphery, identity, and civilizational positioning by illustrating how borderland societies can embody resilience, constructive hybridity, and cultural permeability without being defined by conflict or division. The conceptual contribution advances a more nuanced understanding of how European societies at the crossroads of multiple traditions actively shape, rather than merely receive, wider civilizational narratives.

Keywords: civilizational borderlands, Latvia, identity formation, symbolic boundaries, multiple modernities, cosmopolitanism, geopolitical sociology

Latvija kā civilizācijas naratīvu pierobeža: teorētisks pētījums par perifēriju, identitāti un ģeopolitisko socioloģiju

Šis raksts izstrādā teorētiski un konceptuāli pamatotu socioloģisku analīzi par Latviju kā pozitīvu un analītiski izgaismojošu civilizācijas pierobežas piemēru mūsdienu Eiropā. Tā vietā, lai pierobežas telpas interpretētu kā marginalitātes vai ievainojamības zonas, raksts Latviju konceptualizē kā analītiski produktīvu gadījumu, caur kuru iespējams no jauna interpretēt plašākas socioloģiskas debates par identitāti, modernitāti, perifēriju un ģeopolitisko pozicionējumu. Balstoties uz ietekmīgām socioloģiskām teorijām – tostarp Maksa Vēbera darbiem par kultūras nozīmi un leģitimitāti, Georga Zimmela refleksijām par robežu veidošanos, Šmuela N. Eizenštata vairāku modernitāšu teoriju, Andreasa Vimmera pētījumiem par nāciju un nācijas veidošanos, kā arī Ulriha Beka kosmopolītisma koncepciju – rakstā Latvija tiek konceptualizēta kā dinamiska kultūras plūsmu, simbolisko ģeogrāfiju un transnacionālo attiecību krustpunkta telpa. Raksts parāda, kā Latvijas unikālā vēsturiskā un kultūras trajektorija sniedz analītisku perspektīvu, lai izpētītu, kā sabiedrības vienlaikus pārvalda vairākus civilizācijas naratīvus: Ziemeļeiropas, Baltijas, Centrāleiropas un postimpērisko Eirāzijas naratīvu. Izmantojot integrējošu literatūras pārskatu, raksts sintezē identitātes teorijas, ģeopolitiskās socioloģijas un civilizāciju analīzes atziņas, lai formulētu jaunu konceptuālu modeli – “civilizācijas starpniecību” (civilizational intermediation). Šis modelis uzsver noteiktu sabiedrību – Latviju ir viens no spilgtākajiem piemēriem – spēju darboties kā kultūras tiltiem, interpretatīviem mediatoriem un hibrīdu simbolisko repertuāru radītājiem. Raksts argumentē, ka Latvijas pieredze bagātina teorētiskās diskusijas par perifēriju, identitāti un civilizācijas pozicionējumu, demonstrējot, ka pierobežas sabiedrības var iemiest noturību, konstruktīvu hibrīditāti un kultūras caurlaidību, nevis tikt definētas vienīgi ar konfliktu vai dalījumu. Šī konceptuālā pieeja piedāvā niansētāku izpratni par to, kā Eiropas sabiedrības, kas atrodas vairāku tradīciju krustpunktā, aktīvi veido – nevis tikai pasīvi pārņem – plašākus civilizācijas naratīvus.

Atslēgvārdi: civilizācijas pierobežas, Latvija, identitātes veidošanās, simboliskās robežas, daudzveidīgās modernitātes, kosmopolītisms, ģeopolitiskā socioloģija

Introduction

The sociological study of borderlands has long oscillated between two dominant images. On one hand, borderlands have been framed as peripheral spaces, positioned at the margins of large cultural or political entities. On the other hand, they have been interpreted as zones of cultural innovation where diverse traditions interact, overlap, and reshape one another. Latvia offers an analytically compelling instance of the latter – a modern European society whose social, cultural, and geopolitical orientation places it at the intersection of multiple civilizational trajectories.

Rather than viewing Latvia through a lens of constraint or subordination, this article conceptualizes the country as a positive and generative example of what might be termed civilizational intermediation: the capacity of certain societies to mediate between broader cultural formations while simultaneously cultivating distinct traditions of identity, memory, and belonging. The idea that small states – or societies located at civilizational crossroads – can illuminate broader sociological questions is by no means new. Yet contemporary theoretical debates in global sociology, ranging from multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000) to cosmopolitanism (Beck and Grande 2010), increasingly recognize the analytical importance of societies whose identities straddle historically significant boundaries.

Latvia's position within the Baltic region, and within the broader European landscape, provides fertile ground for re-examining how identity and periphery can be understood in sociological terms. It is situated at the intersection of Nordic, Central European, and Eastern European symbolic geographies – an intersection that is not only historical but also continuously reproduced through cultural practices, institutional arrangements, and international orientations. As such, Latvia is uniquely positioned to contribute to ongoing theoretical debates in sociology about how societies interpret, negotiate, and integrate overlapping cultural narratives.

This article is entirely conceptual and aims to develop a theoretical account rooted in established sociological scholarship. By drawing on canonical theorists such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Émile Durkheim, alongside major contemporary contributors including Andreas Wimmer, Ulrich Beck, and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, it offers a sociologically rigorous framework for understanding Latvia as a civilizational borderland (Weber 1978; Simmel 1997; Durkheim 1995; Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002; Beck 2006; Eisenstadt 2000). The analysis proceeds from the assumption that theoretical sociology can benefit from examining societies that embody intersectionality – not in the sense of identity politics, but in the sense of civilizational hybridity.

Theoretical background

Across sociological traditions, borders and peripheries have often been conceptualized as spaces that illuminate deeper structural dynamics. Simmel's classical reflections on the sociology of boundaries argue that borders are not merely physical demarcations but meaningful social forms that shape interaction, identity, and the experience of belonging (Simmel 1997). From this perspective, Latvia's position between multiple civilizational spheres is not a sociological obstacle but an analytically rich condition – a vantage point from which broader sociocultural processes can be observed.

Similarly, Weber's concern with cultural meaning systems provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how societies interpret their position in relation to larger cultural entities (Weber 1978). His notion of *Wertsphären* (value spheres) suggests that collective identities emerge through the interplay of distinct cultural orientations. Latvia, situated at the crossroads of several symbolic geographies – Northern European, Baltic, and historically post-imperial – offers an exemplary context for such an interplay. Its institutional and cultural development reflects not a singular trajectory but the encounter of multiple traditions of rationality, normativity, and collective self-understanding.

The contemporary sociological literature on multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000; Arnason 2003) further reinforces the idea that modern societies are not homogeneous realizations of a single cultural pattern but differentiated articulations shaped by historical legacies and transregional encounters. Latvia presents a compelling example of a society whose modernity draws from several intertwined traditions, combining European integration, Baltic regional identity, and a long-standing heritage of cultural pluralism.

From the perspective of geopolitical sociology, scholars such as Wimmer and Glick Schiller, Beck, and Kuus have emphasized that regions positioned at cultural intersections often become spaces where transnational relations take on distinct institutional and symbolic forms. Rather than being marginal, such societies frequently serve as “connective hubs,” mediating flows of ideas, practices, and symbolic repertoires. Latvia’s historical positioning within broader European transformations renders it a compelling context for theorizing how identity is negotiated where multiple civilizational narratives converge.

What emerges from this background is that Latvia can be analytically interpreted not simply as a nation-state with a unique history but as a model case for understanding the sociological significance of civilizational borderlands. Its ability to mediate between traditions, integrate diverse cultural influences, and maintain a distinct identity provides fertile ground for conceptual exploration.

Research problem

Although sociological scholarship on identity, peripheries, and civilizational analysis has expanded significantly in recent decades, much of the literature still conceptualizes borderlands through frameworks emphasizing tension, fragility, or geopolitical contestation. Within such frameworks, societies at the crossroads of civilizational trajectories are often portrayed as subjects of external pressures rather than agents with interpretive and cultural capacities.

This prevailing bias leaves a conceptual gap: How can sociology theorize borderlands as positive, generative, and culturally productive spaces rather than sites of vulnerability? The existing literature rarely explores how such societies actively shape broader civilizational narratives, nor how their position enables unique forms of cultural synthesis, symbolic mediation, and identity construction.

Latvia represents a case that can correct this theoretical imbalance. Yet current sociological theory lacks a conceptually robust model capable of capturing the constructive and bridging capacities of borderland societies in a way that avoids both romanticization and reductionism. While concepts such as hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism offer partial insights, they do not fully address how societies positioned at civilizational intersections cultivate coherent identity structures while simultaneously engaging in complex forms of cultural intermediation.

The research problem this study addresses is therefore: how can Latvia’s civilizational positioning be conceptualized in a way that reveals its sociological significance as a positive and generative borderland?

This problem is not empirical but theoretical: it concerns the frameworks sociology uses to understand borderland societies and the conceptual vocabulary available for interpreting their contributions to broader cultural and geopolitical dynamics.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this article is to develop a theory-driven conceptual model for understanding Latvia as a positive and analytically generative civilizational borderland. By integrating canonical sociological theory with contemporary debates in civilizational sociology, geopolitical sociology, and

identity studies, the article aims to produce a typology of how societies positioned at cultural intersections can serve as agents of mediation and synthesis.

Rather than describing Latvia empirically, the article uses Latvia as an exemplary conceptual case, illuminating the sociological dynamics of civilizational intermediation: the capacity to engage, interpret, and integrate overlapping cultural narratives in ways that reinforce both national identity and broader regional cohesion.

The article further seeks to reposition Latvia within sociological debates not as a peripheral or marginal space but as an important node in European symbolic geography. In doing so, it contributes to a research tradition that recognizes the theoretical significance of societies whose identities transcend singular civilizational categorizations.

Research questions

To fulfill this purpose and address the theoretical gaps identified, the article is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How can established sociological theories of identity, modernity, and boundaries help conceptualize Latvia as a civilizational borderland?

This question explores the relevance of classical and contemporary sociological frameworks for interpreting Latvia's geopolitical and cultural positioning.

- (2) What theoretical mechanisms enable societies like Latvia to mediate between distinct civilizational traditions while maintaining coherent identity structures?

This question investigates concepts such as symbolic boundaries, cultural repertoires, and modernity narratives.

- (3) How can Latvia's position be used to develop a sociologically grounded model of "civilizational intermediation"?

Here the article aims to articulate a new conceptual contribution that integrates existing theories into a coherent analytical framework.

- (4) What broader implications does Latvia's example hold for understanding civilizational hybridity, periphery, and identity in Europe?

This question situates the theoretical insights within the wider sociological literature on Europe's cultural and geopolitical configuration.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical grounding of this article draws from a constellation of classical and contemporary sociological traditions that illuminate how societies positioned at the intersection of broader civilizational narratives interpret, negotiate, and rearticulate their cultural orientation. Latvia, conceptualized as a positive civilizational borderland, becomes analytically meaningful within these traditions. Three broad theoretical lines shape the framework: (1) classical sociological theories of boundaries and meaning; (2) civilizational and modernities theory; and (3) geopolitical and transnational sociology.

Classical sociological foundations. Classical sociology provides indispensable tools for understanding how social boundaries create meaning. Georg Simmel's work is foundational here. In "Bridge and Door," Simmel famously argued that boundaries are not merely separators but active social processes that shape relationality (Simmel 1997). A boundary, in his formulation, functions simultaneously as a distinction and as a connective form. It creates the possibility of interaction by demarcating spheres of meaning. Latvia's position – between Northern Europe, the Baltic region, and broader Eurasian cultural currents – reflects precisely the kind of dual dynamic Simmel saw as

fundamental to social life. Latvia is not situated “between” worlds in a passive sense but participates in generating the symbolic contours that link them.

Max Weber contributes a second foundational element. Weber’s focus on Wertbeziehungen – the orientation of social actors toward specific value spheres – helps explain how civilizational narratives become internalized as meaningful cultural repertoires (Weber 1978). Latvia’s identity can thus be interpreted through Weberian lenses as a historically evolving configuration of value commitments shaped by multiple civilizational encounters. The selective appropriation of cultural influences – Nordic institutional norms, European legal rationality, Baltic regional identity – exemplifies Weber’s notion that modern societies synthesize multiple value spheres into coherent cultural frameworks.

Émile Durkheim’s insights regarding collective representations further enhance this perspective. For Durkheim, collective identities are constituted through shared symbolic classifications that anchor group cohesion (Durkheim 1995). Latvia’s historical and contemporary symbolic repertoires – linguistic continuity, cultural traditions, regional solidarities – can be interpreted as collective representations that maintain societal coherence even within shifting geopolitical landscapes. In this sense, Latvia demonstrates how collective identity remains robust while accommodating civilizational plurality.

Taken together, Simmel, Weber, and Durkheim provide a classical foundation for understanding Latvia not as a marginal entity but as a society that actively interprets and organizes diverse civilizational currents into meaningful collective identities.

Civilizational sociology and multiple modernities. The second theoretical pillar arises from civilizational sociology, particularly the multiple modernities paradigm. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt’s seminal work challenges the assumption of a singular, Western-centric modernity (Eisenstadt 2000). Instead, modernity is reinterpreted as a constellation of trajectories shaped by diverse cultural and historical legacies. Latvia presents an illustrative case of this paradigm: its development is not reducible to a linear Europeanization narrative but emerges from the interaction of Baltic traditions, European institutional integration, and an openness to transnational cultural influences.

Civilizational theorists such as Charles Taylor, Johann P. Arnason, and Peter Wagner argue that civilizational frameworks provide societies with interpretive grammars that shape their understanding of modernity. Latvia’s civilizational positioning produces a distinctive interpretive grammar that integrates multiple horizons of meaning. The coexistence of Baltic historical consciousness, European civic identity, and broader transregional connections exemplifies a multi-layered modernity.

Importantly, the multiple modernities approach emphasizes agency: societies actively reinterpret and reconfigure civilizational patterns. Latvia’s engagement in European institutions, its cultural diplomacy, and its regional collaborations demonstrate how a borderland society can serve as a constructive agent within broader civilizational fields.

A second dimension of civilizational theory comes from Eisenstadt and Schluchter’s argument that civilizational centers and peripheries should not be understood in terms of hierarchical dependency but as nodes in pluralistic cultural networks (Eisenstadt, Schluchter 1998). Latvia’s role in the Baltic-Nordic sphere exemplifies this non-hierarchical relationality, where societies at the crossroads contribute to shaping regional civilizational narratives.

Geopolitical sociology and transnational flows. A third theoretical pillar is provided by geopolitical sociology, a field developed to bridge global sociology with analyses of political space. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller argue that nations are embedded in transnational fields of power and cultural exchange (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002). Borderland societies – particularly those situated in regions of dense historical interconnection – serve as important mediating spaces within these fields.

Ulrich Beck’s cosmopolitan sociology (Beck 2006; Beck, Grande 2010) provides additional conceptual tools. Beck challenges the idea of the nation-state as the privileged lens for social analysis

and calls for attention to “cosmopolitanization” processes that occur within everyday life. Latvia’s cultural landscape, characterized by multilingual interactions, historical pluralism, and engagement with European networks, fits well within Beck’s framework. Rather than depicting such characteristics as tensions or contradictions, cosmopolitan theory views them as resources for building bridges between cultural narratives.

Manuel Castells’s work on network society adds a complementary dimension (Castells 2000). Castells argues that societies increasingly participate in global flows of information, culture, and institutions. Borderland societies often become nodes in these networks, facilitating connections between larger cultural spheres. Latvia’s dynamic participation in regional cooperation frameworks, digital innovation networks, and transnational cultural institutions reflects Castells’s insights.

Together, these contemporary theories offer a lens through which Latvia’s civilizational role can be understood not only as historically grounded but as dynamically enacted within global sociocultural flows.

Integrative literature review

The literature addressing civilizational identity, peripheries, borderlands, and modernity spans multiple subfields of sociology. This review synthesizes the most relevant strands: theories of boundaries, identity, civilizational analysis, peripheries, and transnationalism. While diverse, these strands converge in ways that illuminate Latvia’s significance as a positive example of civilizational intermediation.

Sociological theories of boundaries and identity. A large body of sociological scholarship conceptualizes identity formation as a process mediated by symbolic boundaries. Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár argue that symbolic boundaries shape how groups define themselves in relation to others, influencing both cultural differentiation and social cohesion (Lamont, Molnár 2002). This approach is particularly relevant for understanding societies that inhabit multiple cultural spheres.

Rogers Brubaker’s work represents another major contribution. Brubaker challenges static conceptions of identity, emphasizing that national identities are fluid “cognitive schemas” that actors deploy in contextually specific ways (Brubaker 2012). Latvia’s multiplicity of cultural reference points – Baltic, European, regional – demonstrates how national identity can function as a flexible schema enabling constructive engagement with overlapping civilizational narratives.

Identity theorists such as Castells and Jenkins also emphasize the relational nature of identity formation (Castells 2010; Jenkins 2014). Castells distinguishes between legitimizing, resistance, and project identities, emphasizing how social groups mobilize cultural repertoires to position themselves within broader symbolic systems. Latvia, understood through this lens, expresses a “project identity” that synthesizes multiple cultural trajectories into a coherent narrative of belonging.

Civilizational analysis and European cultural configurations. Civilizational analysis represents a rich and expanding field. Eisenstadt’s multiple modernities thesis forms the core, but subsequent scholars have expanded the framework (Eisenstadt 2000). Arnason argues that civilizational patterns are historically contingent and should be analyzed as open systems of cultural meaning (Arnason 2003). Wagner explores how modernities evolve through institutional and symbolic transformations (Wagner 2015).

A parallel literature examines Europe as a civilizational ensemble. Delanty argues that European identity is best understood as a cultural project shaped by dialogue between diverse traditions (Delanty 1995; Delanty 2018). Latvia’s role within this ensemble can be interpreted through Delanty’s lens as an active participant in shaping European symbolic boundaries. Kuus reinforces this view, suggesting that Europe’s “geo-cultural” identities are formed through relational encounters across regions, not through fixed core–periphery distinctions (Kuus 2015).

Latvian scholarship has also contributed important empirical and theoretical insights into questions of national identity, memory politics, and post-Soviet transformation. Scholars such as Nils Muižnieks have examined citizenship, integration, and minority politics in Latvia, highlighting the complexities of identity formation in a post-imperial context (Muižnieks 2006, 2010). Daunis Auers has analyzed Latvia's political development and European integration, emphasizing how Baltic states navigate between regional identities and broader European frameworks (Auers 2015). Ieva Zake has explored Baltic nationalism and collective memory, offering interpretive perspectives on identity narratives in Latvia and the wider Baltic region (Zake 2010). While this body of scholarship provides important empirical and political-sociological perspectives, comparatively fewer studies have situated Latvia explicitly within civilizational sociology or multiple modernities frameworks. These discussions are also reflected in *Latvia Human Development Reports*, particularly in the analyses of Europeanization processes and national identity in Latvia (Zepa et al. 2011; Auers 2020).

While much of this scholarship is empirically grounded in political sociology and area studies, it provides an important contextual backdrop for the present theoretical exploration. However, there remains a relative scarcity of explicitly civilizational-sociological analyses that conceptualize Latvia as a generative borderland within broader debates on multiple modernities and geopolitical sociology. This article seeks to address that conceptual gap.

Peripheries and positive peripherality. Much sociological work on peripheries focuses on marginalization or dependency. However, a growing body of literature argues that peripheries can serve as sites of creativity and cultural synthesis. Said suggests that cultural intersections generate new forms of meaning (Said 1994). Similarly, Hannerz argues that cultural flows often move through “intermediary nodes” that reinterpret global influences (Hannerz 1996).

In regional sociology, scholars have begun to challenge negative conceptualizations of periphery. Kaspersen and Schmidt-Hansen argue that Nordic and Baltic borderlands demonstrate forms of positive peripherality characterized by institutional dynamism and cultural hybridity (Kaspersen, Schmidt-Hansen 2018).

Latvia exemplifies this emergent literature: its capacity to integrate diverse cultural currents aligns with the idea that borderland societies can play constructive roles in civilizational landscapes.

4. Transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and networks

Transnationalism studies highlight how global flows of people, ideas, and institutions reshape the meaning of locality (Levitt, Glick Schiller 2004). These frameworks conceptualize borderlands not as boundaries but as nodes of circulation. Latvia's historical and contemporary engagement with transnational networks aligns with this perspective.

Cosmopolitan sociology provides further insight. Beck and Grande argue that cosmopolitanization is an internal transformation of national societies through openness, reflexivity, and cultural interconnection (Beck, Grande 2010). Latvia's layered orientation – Baltic, European, and transregional – fits this model well.

In the network society literature, Castells conceptualizes nations as nodes embedded within global informational and cultural flows (Castells 2010). Latvia's role in regional cooperation, digital innovation, and cultural networks enhances its sociological significance within this tradition.

Synthesis of the literature review

Across the theoretical traditions reviewed, several convergent themes emerge:

- (1) boundaries are generative, shaping interaction and meaning (Simmel 1997; Lamont, Molnár 2002);
- (2) civilizational identities are plural, dynamic, and historically layered (Eisenstadt 2000; Arnason 2003);

- (3) borderlands can function as constructive intermediaries, not merely marginal spaces (Hannerz 1996; Kaspersen, Schmidt-Hansen 2018);
- (4) transnational flows reinforce, rather than dissolve, local identities (Beck 2006; Castells 2010; Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002).

These themes collectively demonstrate that Latvia is not an exception to existing theory but an ideal-typical case through which broader sociological debates can be reinterpreted.

Analytical discussion

The preceding theoretical framework and literature review reveal that Latvia's position as a civilizational borderland offers a unique vantage point for reinterpreting how societies negotiate multiple cultural trajectories. Building on classical and contemporary sociological theory, this section develops an analytical model for understanding how Latvia exemplifies civilizational intermediation, a concept that refers to the capacity of certain societies to mediate between civilizational frameworks while simultaneously generating coherent cultural identities.

Rather than treating borderland societies as passive recipients of external influences, the analytical discussion positions Latvia as an active producer of cultural meaning – a society that interprets, synthesizes, and rearticulates civilizational resources in distinctive ways. In this context, several interrelated analytical dimensions can be identified, each capturing a specific aspect of this mediating process. These include symbolic boundary construction, interpretive synthesis through cultural repertoires, institutional mediation in the formation of modernity narratives, as well as transnational positioning in relation to processes of identity formation.

Taken together, these dimensions form a coherent analytical framework that makes it possible to grasp Latvia's broader sociological significance as a site of civilizational intermediation.

Symbolic boundary construction. Drawing on Simmel's theory of boundaries and Lamont and Molnár's work on symbolic classification, Latvia can be analytically understood as a space where social boundaries are simultaneously reinforced and transcended (Lamont, Molnár 2002). Symbolic boundaries do not inhibit interaction between civilizational traditions; instead, they enable interpretive distinctions that foster productive cultural dialogue.

Latvia's civilizational positioning illustrates how boundaries operate as connective structures, where Northern European institutional features – such as strong civic norms and administrative rationality – coexist alongside Baltic cultural repertoires grounded in historical memory, linguistic continuity, and regional solidarity.

This coexistence does not fragment Latvian identity. Instead, it exemplifies Simmel's relational boundary logic: the more a boundary distinguishes, the more it facilitates structured engagement across cultural spheres (Simmel 1997).

In this respect, Latvia's symbolic boundaries are not defensive but dialogical. They delineate a distinct cultural space that is open to multiple interpretive horizons, thereby demonstrating the capacity of borderland societies to cultivate identities that are both differentiated and integrative.

Interpretive synthesis and cultural repertoires. The second dimension draws from Weber's concept of value spheres and contemporary theories of cultural repertoires (Swidler 1986). Latvia's cultural landscape can be interpreted as a repertoire-based system that integrates diverse civilizational influences into a coherent interpretive synthesis.

This synthesis operates through a set of interrelated processes, including the selective appropriation of Northern European civic and institutional norms, the integration of Baltic historical narratives and cultural archetypes, as well as engagement with European symbolic discourses of citizenship, democracy, and cultural pluralism.

Rather than blending these traditions into an indistinguishable hybrid, Latvia maintains their distinctiveness within an overarching cultural grammar. Eisenstadt's insight that modernities arise from the reinterpretation of civilizational premises becomes profoundly relevant (Eisenstadt 2000).

Latvia's cultural repertoire demonstrates that societies at civilizational intersections do not merely absorb influences – they reinterpret them in ways that affirm and enrich their own identity structures.

Swidler's idea that cultural repertoires provide “strategies of action” suggests that Latvia's civilizational resources form a toolkit enabling actors to navigate multiple symbolic environments (Swidler 1986). In this sense, such capacity should not be understood as incidental, but rather as a systematic feature of borderland societies. Latvia demonstrates how interpretive synthesis becomes a mechanism of cultural resilience.

Institutional mediation and modernity narratives. The third analytical dimension concerns how modernity narratives are institutionalized. Drawing on Beck's sociological cosmopolitanism and Arnason's civilizational analysis, Latvia exemplifies a form of mediated modernity that integrates institutional frameworks from multiple cultural spheres (Beck 2006; Arnason 2003).

Institutions – administrative, legal, educational, and cultural – serve as sites where civilizational narratives become operationalized. Latvia's institutional landscape can be understood as reflecting a combination of Nordic administrative influences in governance, European legal rationality embedded in civic structures, and Baltic cultural heritage expressed through public symbolism, memory practices, and education.

These elements are not contradictory. Instead, they function as layers of what Wagner describes as plural modernity, in which institutions embody multiple civilizational logics without collapsing them into a single narrative (Wagner 2015).

Institutional mediation also reinforces Beck's concept of internal cosmopolitanization: the idea that modern societies incorporate global influences into national frameworks, creating inclusive forms of identity. Latvia's institutions mediate between regional and continental civilizational logics, thereby contributing to the formation of narratives of belonging that emphasize connection rather than division.

Transnational positioning and relational identity formation. The fourth dimension draws from Wimmer and Glick Schiller's model of transnational fields and Castells's theory of networked social structures. Latvia's civilizational location is not only historical but also emerges from its position within regional and global networks (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002; Castells 2010).

This transnational positioning can be understood as operating along several interrelated relational axes, including Baltic regional cooperation, engagement with European integration processes, and participation in transregional cultural flows. In the Baltic context, Latvia participates in symbolic, cultural, and institutional networks that emphasize regional solidarity and shared historical consciousness. At the European level, engagement with continental institutions reinforces Latvia's role as an active contributor to broader civilizational narratives. At the same time, Latvia's cultural field is shaped by its participation in global information, artistic, and educational networks, consistent with Castells's vision of contemporary societies as nodes within a global network.

This relational positioning supports Brubaker's argument that identities function as cognitive schemas that actors use flexibly across social contexts (Brubaker 2012). Latvia's identity is reinforced – not destabilized – by its transnational engagements. Its civilizational plurality becomes a resource that enables adaptive positioning in diverse symbolic fields.

Conceptual contribution: civilizational intermediation

Drawing together the analytical dimensions outlined above, this article proposes civilizational intermediation as a new conceptual framework for understanding the sociological role of positive borderland societies. This framework extends civilizational sociology, boundary theory, and network

sociology by articulating how certain societies mediate between cultural trajectories in ways that enrich both local and broader symbolic landscapes.

Civilizational intermediation can be understood as encompassing a set of interlocking processes, including constructive boundary formation, interpretive cultural synthesis, institutionalized plural modernity, and relational transnational positioning. These processes are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined, forming a coherent framework for understanding how borderland societies operate.

Latvia is not simply an example but a paradigmatic case of this conceptual model. In this context, constructive boundary formation reinterprets boundaries as resources rather than constraints. Latvia exemplifies Simmel's notion of boundaries as relational forms: they demarcate cultural identities while facilitating structured engagement across civilizational spheres, thereby sustaining distinctiveness while promoting connection.

At the same time, interpretive cultural synthesis highlights how societies at cultural intersections develop repertoires that reconcile diverse symbolic horizons. Latvia's ability to integrate Baltic, European, and Northern European cultural repertoires into an internally coherent framework exemplifies such synthesis, demonstrating the agency of borderland societies in shaping their identity narratives.

Institutionalized plural modernity further positions institutions as sites where civilizational logics become operationalized. Latvia's institutional landscape reflects a layered modernity encompassing multiple cultural orientations, illustrating how plural modernities can function cohesively within a single social system.

Finally, relational transnational positioning underscores that borderland societies enrich civilizational fields through their participation in transnational networks. Latvia's identity is reinforced through engagements across regional, European, and global contexts, showing how such positioning contributes positively to broader civilizational landscapes.

The theoretical significance of civilizational intermediation lies in its capacity to contribute to several strands of sociological theory. It reorients civilizational sociology away from core-periphery dichotomies by demonstrating how societies located at civilizational intersections act as agents of synthesis rather than passive recipients. It also enriches identity theory by illustrating how collective identities can be constructed through layered repertoires that maintain cohesion while engaging multiple symbolic horizons. In addition, it advances geopolitical sociology by modeling how societies situated within transnational networks mediate flows of culture, knowledge, and institutional norms.

Latvia's example is pivotal here. By embodying civilizational intermediation, Latvia illustrates how borderland societies can become central – not peripheral – to theoretical reflections on identity, modernity, and global interconnection.

Theoretical implications

The conceptual model of civilizational intermediation developed in this article carries several significant implications for sociological theory. These implications extend beyond the specific case of Latvia and contribute to broader debates concerning identity formation, modernity, and the role of borderland societies in shaping civilizational trajectories.

Reframing borderlands in sociological theory. Historically, borderlands have been framed through notions of marginality, dependency, or geopolitical vulnerability. This article challenges that framework by demonstrating that borderlands can serve as constructive civilizational agents, actively shaping cultural processes that extend beyond their territorial boundaries. Latvia's example suggests that sociological approaches to borderlands should move beyond hierarchical models toward more relational and processual conceptions of cultural interaction.

Advancing civilizational sociology. Civilizational sociology has traditionally focused on large-scale cultural formations or “civilizational centers.” The concept of civilizational intermediation brings borderland societies into this theoretical conversation, illustrating how cultural intersections generate their own distinct forms of meaning, institutional flexibility, and symbolic repertoires. Latvia’s case shows that civilizational patterns are not only reproduced through large institutional centers but are often dynamically interpreted in societies positioned along cultural edges.

This has implications for the multiple modernities paradigm. Societies like Latvia demonstrate how modernities can be shaped through civilizational plurality rather than singular, linear trajectories. This contributes empirically and conceptually to Eisenstadt’s argument by emphasizing that modernity’s cultural grammar is constructed not only in centers but also in intermediary spaces (Eisenstadt 2000).

Enriching identity theory. Identity theory benefits from the insights developed here. The notion that identities function as relational and context-dependent cognitive schemas (Brubaker 2012) gains empirical and conceptual grounding in Latvia’s civilizational positioning. Civilizational intermediation shows that identities can be layered, coherent, and plural without contradiction. Latvia’s identity integrates Baltic historical consciousness, European civic norms, and Northern European cultural affinities into a stable and resilient framework.

The model developed here also contributes to the literature on symbolic boundaries (Lam, Molnár 2002). It suggests that boundaries are not only tools of exclusion but also mechanisms of constructive differentiation that enable societies to establish cultural uniqueness while engaging in open civilizational dialogue.

Bringing geopolitical sociology into dialog with civilizational theory. The model integrates geopolitical sociology – particularly Wimmer and Glick Schiller’s field theory, Beck’s cosmopolitanism, and Castells’s network society – with civilizational analysis. This creates a more comprehensive theoretical toolkit for examining how societies are positioned within global and regional fields of cultural interaction.

Latvia’s transnational position demonstrates that geopolitical sociology should not be confined to discussions of conflict or power transitions but can also illuminate how societies serve as bridges within global cultural and institutional networks. Civilizational intermediation captures this bridging role by emphasizing constructive, layered, and dialogical forms of transnational engagement.

Societal implications

Although this article is entirely theoretical, the conceptual model of civilizational intermediation carries implications for understanding contemporary European and global sociocultural dynamics.

Understanding cultural plurality in Europe. Europe’s cultural landscape is marked by multiple historical trajectories, and the role of societies positioned at civilizational intersections is increasingly evident. Latvia offers a concrete illustration of how cultural plurality can be incorporated into coherent identity structures. This suggests that European identity is not a uniform construct but a mosaic of civilizational elements articulated differently across regions.

Latvia’s experience shows how small societies can enrich broader European symbolic fields by integrating diverse civilizational repertoires, thereby contributing to cultural cohesion and mutual understanding across the continent.

Informing regional and transnational cooperation. Borderland societies often become nodal points in transnational cooperation. Latvia’s layered civilizational orientation enhances its capacity to participate in – and contribute to – regional institutions, cultural networks, and international collaborations. This finding supports norms of cooperation that value intermediary societies not merely as recipients of policy but as active participants in shaping transnational cultural narratives.

Relevance for cultural diplomacy. Civilizational intermediation underscores the idea that societies positioned at symbolic crossroads can play meaningful roles in cultural diplomacy. Latvia's cultural repertoires and institutional openness position it as a facilitator of intercultural understanding, particularly between Northern Europe, the Baltic region, and broader European civilizational narratives.

Implications for sociopolitical integration. The insights from Latvia's civilizational positioning suggest that plural identity structures need not compromise social cohesion. Instead, they can enhance societal resilience by fostering adaptive cultural repertoires. This has implications for debates on integration, social cohesion, and identity politics across Europe and beyond.

Conclusion

This article has sought to develop a fully theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding Latvia as a positive and generative civilizational borderland. Through an integrative engagement with classical sociological foundations (Simmel, Weber, Durkheim), civilizational sociology (Eisenstadt, Arnason and Wagner), and contemporary theories of identity, boundaries, and transnationalism (Lamont, Brubaker, Beck, Castells, Wimmer), the article has articulated a new theoretical model: civilizational intermediation.

This model reframes borderlands as constructive cultural agents that mediate between civilizational trajectories through four interlinked processes: constructive boundary formation, interpretive cultural synthesis, institutionalized plural modernity, and relational transnational positioning. Latvia exemplifies each of these mechanisms, demonstrating that societies at civilizational intersections actively shape their cultural environments rather than merely adapting to external pressures.

By illuminating Latvia's role in the broader European and global civilizational landscape, the article contributes to several fields of sociological theory: it advances civilizational analysis by incorporating borderlands; enriches identity theory by illustrating the coherence of layered identities; and extends geopolitical sociology by framing borderland societies as nodes of constructive transnational engagement.

Ultimately, Latvia's example reveals that civilizational borderlands are not marginal spaces but central sites of meaning-making in an interconnected world. The theoretical framework proposed here provides a foundation for further research and offers a positive, analytically rich model for understanding how societies positioned between cultural spheres contribute to shaping the symbolic geographies of modernity.

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