



4-1-1994

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Stephen K. Sanderson

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### Recommended Citation

Sanderson, Stephen K. (1994) "Civilizations and World Systems: An Introduction," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 30 : No. 30 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol30/iss30/2>

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# **CIVILIZATIONS AND WORLD SYSTEMS: AN INTRODUCTION**

**Stephen K. Sanderson**

At the annual meetings of the ISCSA held in Scranton, Pennsylvania in June 1993, the idea arose of devoting a special issue of this journal to a dialogue between civilizationists and world-system theorists. I am not sure who originated the idea, but it was suggested to me by the editor of this journal, Wayne Bledsoe, and I passed it along to Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall. We were all enthusiastic about having such an issue. After considerable discussion, it was decided that I would serve as a guest editor for this special issue. I asked for contributions from Matthew Melko, Roger Wescott, Andre Gunder Frank, Thomas Hall, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Albert Bergesen, Immanuel Wallerstein, and David Wilkinson, and I had an idea for an article that I myself would write. I am pleased to be able to say that all of the nine invited contributors have submitted articles.

The basic idea behind this special issue was to publish some "think pieces" in which both civilizationists and world-system theorists would criticize each other's paradigms but at the same time try to see what might be of value in each other's views. The article that set this whole process of debate in motion was Matthew Melko's "World Systems Theory: A Faustian Delusion?" which was originally published in the Spring/Summer 1992 issue of the ISCSA Newsletter. That article is reprinted here as the first article. Melko is concerned that the ISCSA may be in the throes of invasion by the "virus" of world-systems theory, and that a great deal will be lost as a result. He worries that world-systems theory is too materialist in theoretical orientation, and that it insufficiently appreciates values and inner experience. It has, he says, no place for culture. He also suggests that world-systems theory is insufficiently comparative, being too focused on the modern West. In a second article, prepared especially for this issue, Melko repeats his point that world-systems theory does not take culture seriously, as well as his point that it seems insufficiently comparative. He doesn't like its evolutionary view of world history, noting that civilizationists are more concerned with decline and fall than with linear or cumulative patterns. Melko is not convinced that we live today in a world so different from the past that it needs its own name or category. In the end, though, Melko agrees that there are important points of convergence between world-systems theory and civilizational analysis, and he closes by contemplating the possibility that the dialogue between the two camps might result in civilizational

analysis's acting as a virus of its own in invading the host of world-systems theory!

Andre Gunder Frank replies to each of Melko's articles but concentrates mostly on the first. His view is that Melko is laboring under some serious misconceptions. Melko attacks modernization theory but somehow ends up assuming that this perspective is endorsed by world-systems theorists. As Frank notes, exactly the opposite is the case, as he, Wallerstein, and other world-systems theorists have been vehement opponents of modernization theory. Melko's criticism that world-systems analysis is insufficiently comparative is also misdirected, says Frank, for world-systems theorists usually insist on the importance of comparison. This has been especially true of Chase-Dunn and Hall's world-systems approach. Moreover, Melko emphasizes the cyclical view of the civilizationists in opposition to the allegedly evolutionary view of the world-systems theorists, yet fails to recognize that world-systems theorists give special emphasis to cycles of their own. Frank, it seems, sees much more commonality between world-systems and civilizational analysis than does Melko.

Thomas Hall's paper was originally written at least partially in response to Melko's original article. Like Frank, Hall sees many misrepresentations of world-systems theory in Melko's article, and also like Frank he seems more concerned to emphasize the similarities rather than the differences between civilizationists and world-systems theorists. Hall is especially interested in determining what the two camps can learn from each other. To this end, he notes that the world-systems perspective itself is quite broad and contains many different camps of its own. First there is the distinction between those who would apply world-systems analysis only to the modern (post-1500) world and those, like himself, who are trying to reformulate it so it can be fruitfully applied to precapitalist systems over thousands of years of world history. As Hall notes, this latter camp — what is sometimes called precapitalist world-systems theory — contains several subcamps of its own, one of which is associated with his own work with Chase-Dunn (the "transformationist" camp), and another of which is associated with Frank's work (the "continuationist" camp). Hall then goes on to note several important areas of overlap between civilizationists and world-systems theorists, particularly parallels in the bounding of civilizations and world-systems, as well as an emphasis on units of analysis larger than individual societies or states. He also tries to allay Melko's fears. The evolutionism of world-systems theory is not of the teleological sort, as Melko seems to imagine; world-systems theorists are not modernization theorists at all, but strongly opposed to modernization theory; while world-systems theorists emphasize processes of interaction between societies they

still take into account the internal characteristics of civilizations; and world-systems analysis is not the hypermaterialist perspective that totally ignores culture that Melko thinks it is. In the end, Hall insists that civilizational analysis and world-systems theory are complementary rather than competing perspectives, and that both contribute in important ways to the study of world history.

Roger Wescott's paper is a critical reaction to the precapitalist world-systems analysis of Frank on the one hand and Chase-Dunn and Hall on the other. Wescott is concerned that students of the human situation avoid four types of parochialism, which he calls disciplinary, regional, temporal, and ideological. He admires the work of Frank, Chase-Dunn, and Hall for having avoided the first three of these forms of parochialism, but feels that they have failed to avoid the fourth. For Wescott, their ideological parochialism is closely linked to their political and economic reductionism and their neglect of the artistic and symbolic aspects of civilization. He feels that they speak too abstractly and miss the "sensuous texture" of actual cultures. These criticisms, of course, closely parallel those of Melko.

David Wilkinson, although usually known as a civilizationist, feels at home in both the civilizationist and world-systems camps. He sees the two camps as doing very similar things and as having complementary emphases. Civilizationists are more interested in the cultural aspects of society, world-systemists in the political and, especially, the economic aspects; civilizationists may be more inclined to explore the earlier epochs of social evolution, world-systemists the later epochs. Wilkinson lays out his own unique perspective in a crisp 10-point summary, and then proceeds to make clear how he stands with respect to Toynbee, Quigley, Spengler, Melko, Hord, Sorokin, Huntington, Chase-Dunn and Hall, and Frank and Gills. He concludes by saying that the entities studied by civilizationists and world-systemists are largely the same, and that their theories should be synthesized.

Immanuel Wallerstein, the originator of world-systems theory, raises serious questions about both the world-system analyses of Frank and Chase-Dunn and Hall and the analyses of the civilizationists. Wallerstein is concerned with three temptations, what he calls the nomothetic temptation, the idiographic temptation, and the temptation to reify. To the extent that students of human society and history fall victim to any of these temptations, he believes, their analyses run aground. Chase-Dunn and Hall, he feels, fall victim to the nomothetic temptation, wanting to generalize historically the world-system concept as far as they can. Wallerstein is skeptical of such an attempt, wondering just how much a concept developed for one particular historical situation can be reworked in order to be applied to other situations.

Concepts come in packages, he says, and thus his concept of "core/periphery" was closely linked to, among others, the notion of "endless accumulation of capital." Thus, does not a certain sort of incoherence and conceptual violence occur when we attempt to use the concept of "core/periphery" in situations where there is no "endless accumulation of capital?" Andre Gunder Frank's form of precapitalist world-systems analysis, Wallerstein argues, falls victim to the opposite, or idiographic, temptation. For Frank, there is but one single world-system that has existed for some 5,000 years, and the modern world-system that is usually dated from about 1500 is only a continuation of the development of that system. In Wallerstein's thinking it is always possible to show that a particular system is part of some larger system; however, once we do this where do we stop? And how fruitful is it, he wonders, to make such connections, many of which must be extremely tenuous indeed. The final temptation, that of reification, is the one to which civilizationists have succumbed. They take something like "China" and see it as having a single indivisible history and virtually a life of its own over thousands of years. But there is danger in this, Wallerstein believes, for China since 1945 may be more similar in several respects to Brazil since 1945 than the former is to earlier Chinese dynasties. If this is the case, then what sense does it make to consider China a single historical entity with its own cultural essence? Wallerstein thus ends up being skeptical of civilizational analysis just as he is skeptical of the precapitalist world-system analyses of Frank and of Chase-Dunn and Hall.

Albert Bergesen is a scholar who has worked within the world-systems tradition but who at the same time has often been quite critical of some aspects of it. Bergesen begins his paper by looking at the differences between what he calls the "Pre-1500ers" and the "Post-1500ers." The Posts limit themselves to applying world-system concepts to the period after 1500, whereas the Pre's look for earlier origins of world-system-like phenomena. Wallerstein, of course, is a Post, whereas Frank, Chase-Dunn, Hall, and Janet Abu-Lughod are Pre's. Rather than attempt to reconcile the differences between these world-systems camps, or to choose one over the other, Bergesen has harsh criticism for both. They have failed, he claims, to produce anything distinctly new and their respective paradigms do not transcend traditional sociological concepts. Although they claim to be substituting the notion of "world-system" for that of "society," their notion of world-system is simply that of a structure which is made up of interacting societies. The world-system only exists by virtue of the interactions among its component societies, and thus is little more than a large-scale aggregation of societies. What is needed, Bergesen argues, is a notion of a world-system that has its own emergent properties and that determines the traits of the

various societies upon which the world-system has an impact — a sort of “Durkheimian world-system theory,” as it were. Thus, to the charge that world-system theory engages in a process of reification, Bergesen’s response is that, on the contrary, it does not reify enough. Until this happens, Bergesen feels, until we shift from sociology to “globology,” no real intellectual progress will be made in the social sciences.

All of the preceding articles have been think pieces designed to promote an open exchange of ideas between different groups of students of historical social science. The final two articles, however, are more substantive in nature. My own article turns the tables on Melko and Wescott by insisting that civilizationists have a strong idealist bias and something of an antievolutionary orientation. They need to pay much more attention to politics and economics, and they need to recognize that patterns of cyclical change may coexist with patterns of long-term social evolution. I then go on to suggest a new concept, that of “expanding world commercialization,” as one that provides something of a bridge between the two perspectives. By expanding world commercialization I mean a long-term evolutionary process in which trade networks have become both more extensive and more intensive throughout the agrarian era between about 3000 B.C. and A.D. 1500. I derived this idea from the work of Frank and Gills, even though I reject their notion of a single world-system covering 5,000 years of world history. World commercialization retains the economic focus of world-systems analysis but also gives us a feel for what Wescott has called the “sensuous texture” of the life of civilizations.

The final paper, that of Christopher Chase-Dunn and Alice Willard, demonstrates by example that civilizational analysis and world-systems theory can be fruitfully combined in actual research. Their paper makes use of civilizational analysis à la David Wilkinson and world-systems theory to study changes in city size hierarchies since A.D. 1200. City size hierarchies involve the relative distribution of the sizes of cities in a particular region. In this case, the region is what the authors call the Central Political/Military Network, an Afro-Eurasian world-system within which both economic exchange and political and military competition went on, and within which Europe eventually became dominant after 1500. Chase-Dunn and Willard study the changes in the city size hierarchy with a special eye to understanding the causes and consequences of changes in the relative sizes of cities. Two central questions to which they seek answers are, Do changes in the city size distribution reflect a cycle of the concentration and deconcentration of political and/or economic power? and What does the changing city size distribution of the Central Political/Military Network tell us about the kinds of power that have been most important and how the nature of power may

have changed with the emerging dominance of capitalism in Europe? The authors also go on to ask about the implications of their findings for an understanding of contemporary world cities and the future shape of settlement systems on Earth.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania