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Matthew Melko

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WORLD SYSTEMS THEORY: A FAUSTIAN DELUSION? II

Matthew Melko

Is it fair to suggest that world systems theory is materialistically oriented? One of the conflicts within the paradigm concerns whether underdeveloped nations have not yet modernized, or whether their development has been skewed by dependency foisted upon them by developed nations (Sanderson, 1988:159-74).

From a civilizationist perspective, these are two aspects of the same side of the question. The other side is the extent to which other civilizations are in the process of absorbing and transforming Western technologies and ideas to make them culturally assimilatable. Just as China transformed Indian Buddhism so that it became more like Taoism, why wouldn't China transform Western technologies as well as political and economic ideas so that they were consistent with Chinese culture?

This, perhaps, is the crucial difference between world systems theorists and civilizationists. Everything else is resolvable, negotiable or translatable.

The idea of studying other civilizations is basically Faustian. Faustians can't help trying to bring their worldview to others. We are self-critical of this tendency, regret that we transform what we touch so that when we seek the exotic we find it transformed into ourselves. But somehow we feel this expansion is inevitable. The same folks who had to cross the Ocean because it could be done had to establish a physical presence on the Moon. It goes without saying that we must cure malaria and improve agricultural efficiency, leaving television, computers and Coca Cola in our wake.

So we perceive that we are transforming the World. We Think Globally. Some of us perceive the development of a Modern World System (capitalized). Founders of world systems theory, like Wallerstein and Braudel, tended to see the system as Europe-centered (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991:10, 12). Hence the modern world system is Western. And the civilizationist might add, if Western, Faustian.

The world system envisioned by Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall has come into existence only within the past five centuries, the period considered by many historians to be that of "modern" history. Before that human networks were "separate and autonomous with regard to their material and cultural processes of reproduction and development." But culture, even in these earlier phases, gets little attention. "Culturalists" are dismissed in a sentence. What is of central concern are economic and political interactions

(Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991:10, 15). If boundaries are to be determined, look at the interconnections, the trade, diplomatic interactions, and conflict. The term "world" means the boundaries of material interactions. Whatever these are form the worlds of a period. From this perspective, the global world system is the most recent, most important, the only true capitalist, and presumably the last of the world systems. There have been, however, earlier ones, ranging from primitive to civilized. These earlier civilized systems, either state- or empire-based and often multicentered, have been found in China, India, Persia, the Middle East, Mesoamerica and Peru (Chase Dunn and Hall, 1991:23). The organizing principle is different, but the systems are similar to those discerned by civilizationists.

World systems and civilizationist perspectives combine in the work of David Wilkinson, a founding council member of the American ISCS. His delineation of civilizations is fairly typical, and he sees Quigley as a major influence in his work. But he has long defined civilizations in terms of their political and economic interaction, rather than in terms of culture. Since Wilkinson's civilizational formulations appear to be usable either as civilizations or world systems, it would suggest that autonomous interactions played a major role in establishing the distinctive patterns of each civilization (Wilkinson, 1987).

The result for Wilkinson is an evolutionary model that makes the study of civilizations a historical enterprise, while the world we live in consists of a single global civilization, easily translatable into the world system of Chase-Dunn and Hall. While Wilkinson has studied and visited other civilizations, the global civilization, given the seemingly neutral title "Central", turns out to be Western Civilization expanding to engulf the world, which makes "central" no more neutral than the Chinese "middle."

The world systems perspective, then, suggests that we live in a global system that is no more than a few centuries old. Before that, there were separate systems of interaction that could be discerned. That long period of history has now terminated.

But is this perception valid? In the past it has been very difficult to transform other cultures. Mongol conquerors who dominated the world found their progeny becoming Chinese in the East and Muslim in the West. Conquerors, as Toynbee suggests (1954, VII:61), are mostly exporting government. Even carriers of basic ideas, like the Buddhists, become Sinified when they leave their own civilization.

What is different about the West? We ourselves are critical of it, of our loss of community, of our growing alienation, of our capacity for destruction which has in this very century produced a general war (1914-1945) that was far more lethal than all wars in all of history (Eckhardt, 1992:173-77). The

great lesson the civilizationists should have taught us is that each civilization has had its own culture, and the representatives of any one of them ought to be extremely cautious about assuming their own superiority.

Expansive phases in the past have often proved to be superficial and ephemeral. The Achaemenid Empire and the Roman, the Han and the Inca, each expanded and ossified. All, as Robert Wesson argues (1967), have been dreary places in which to live. Is it not possible that the current Western overlay will prove to be equally superficial? African nations fail to "modernize" according to Rostow's (1991) five-step prescription; Russia remains boringly Byzantine no matter how many revolutions; and China, whether Communist or Capitalist, looks like the Middle Kingdom in the process of reviving its own perception of a World System.

Of course, this civilizational expansion is arguably worldwide, which would make it appear unique, at least to Faustians. How like them to assume that what is quantitatively different must be qualitatively different.

There are important qualitative differences, of course. We have, for instance, expanded length of life decade by decade in most civilizations. That is a major and unique accomplishment. We are also fearful that this expansion is going to have damaging ecological results that will eventually reduce the quality of life and perhaps reverse those life statistics. Or, even worse, we have developed a capacity for human destruction that could solve the population problem for millennia to come.

But still, these potentialities are consequences of Faustian qualities, just as other civilizations have had florescences and collapses because of the qualities they had. Surely our awareness of the fragility of our situation should make us aware it may well be ephemeral, that our power and dominance may recede.

Even if the worst were to happen and we had a total nuclear war, a few would survive. A feudal system would emerge, as it has in bad times before. Feudalism occurs, Coulborn (1956) argues, in times of recovery, and what would recover would be a civilization, whether a new phase or a new civilization being a problem for the Hords and Wilkinsons of the future. In any event there would be a recovery of literacy sufficiently widespread that the civilization could again afford the luxury of having historians. Wouldn't they be likely to look back at our period and remark, not without irony: "They called it the Modern World System?" (cf. Melko and Archive, 1985).

No, there is no compelling reason to assume that we live in a world so vastly different from the past that it needs a classification all its own. We want it to be different because we live in it, just as Gibbon supposed his world to be different in an evolutionary sense from that of the Romans he studied.

One reason we study comparative civilizations is to gain insight into our own situation, to see ourselves from outside ourselves. If we adopt the world systems model, we throw away that advantage. We can only see ourselves as the cumulation of everything else, which is exactly the view we were trying to surmount in resurrecting the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations.

If we adopt a world systems model, we are also in danger of undermining our perception of reality. Giving priority to material interactions, world systems theorists appear to equate material interaction with reality. Hence “civilizations” are a reification placed within quotation marks, but world systems need no such qualification. Chase-Dunn and Hall go so far as to say “the reality” is that the British and French Colonial systems existed within a “multicentric, intersocietal system” (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991:12).

They also introduce Europe into the equation without quotation marks. I can’t find any Europe on the map, just a peninsula of Western Asia containing small countries that change boundaries and sometimes names from century to century. Whence came this “Europe”? What trade networks defined it?

What I am suggesting, of course, is that civilizations, world systems, and Europe are all reifications, terms that we have applied as matters of convenience. Their reality exists only in that a sufficient number of people find them convenient to use. Such terms are certainly useful; we couldn’t communicate without them. But a term that focuses on material matters, like economy, is no more real than one that has more spiritual content, like religion.

Civilizationists are always intrigued by decline and fall, even if it means the decline and fall of civilizational studies. From Kroeber’s perspective (1944, 1957), what we may be seeing is the eclipse of one pattern by another. The approach of Spengler and Toynbee is maintained by a few scholars. The average age of ISCS members, the last time I tried to calculate, appears to be in the 50’s. World systems theory, on the other hand, is growing; it has younger members and has become a strong force in graduate schools. If you don’t recognize this as a Kroeberian pattern, you may recognize it as Kuhnian (1962), for Kuhn provided a vivid example of a Kroeberian pattern in science, and others expanded it to apply in Kroeberian style. In any event, it may be that the world systems approach is attracting institutional support and the attention of the young. Civilizational theory may well be in decline. My attack on world systems may be the rear guard action of a civilizationist who has put his energy into a pattern that failed to develop.

This need not be an unmitigated disaster for civilizationists. David Wilkinson, after all, may be an epigonious Quigley follower as a

civilizationist, but with the same theory, in the vanguard of world systems theorists.

The core-periphery theory of world systems theorists (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991:26-27) is anticipated by civilizationists. Whereas the systems theorists seem to stress the exploitation of the periphery by the core, the civilizationists have noted the phenomenon of peripheral domination: the ultimate conquest of the core by the periphery (Melko, 1969:50-51, 151-53).

But civilizationists would probably be more sympathetic to the work of Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills, who have become more interested in tracing the world system back to earlier periods of history (e.g., Gills and Frank, 1991). They study what the first American ISCS president, Benjamin Nelson, called "intercivilizational encounters" (Nelson and Kavolis, 1973). It is true that most civilizationists would first establish and study their civilizations, then turn their attention to the encounters. But there were many periods, particularly feudal periods, when you would find more trade between civilizations than within, particularly in luxury goods, since feudal entities produced products similar to those of their neighbors. So they fought with those nearby, traded with those far away (Quigley, 1979).

Frank is as critical of the world systems approach as I am for its tendency to focus on modern history. He is aware of both the chronocentrism and the Eurocentrism of the world systems approach (Frank, 1990:157-58), and suggests that Western hegemony may be temporary (229). He mildly chides Chase-Dunn for being "reticent" about pursuing the study of world systems back to earlier periods (176). The present world system, he thinks, goes back at least to 2500 B.C., and probably earlier. It may be no accident that I was first introduced to Frank by Wilkinson. For Frank, looking backward, covers territory similar to that covered by Wilkinson looking forward. In fact, Frank says, "our" system has been variously called "world island," "ecumene" and "central civilization."

Frank has many perceptions that perhaps have been neglected by civilizationists. He reminds us that the fall of the Roman Empire was partly attributable to trade deficits and barbarian incursions (205-06) (Gibbon was right after all). He notes that sometimes events that civilizationists would see as discrete have a chronological connection. Between A.D. 742 and 755, for instance, there were "fundamental changes, usually signalled by successful political revolts, in every European Empire" among which were the Carolingian, Abbasid, Uighur, Turkic and anti-T'ang, all of these connected with Central Asia (Frank, 162, quoting from Beckwith, 1987). Or again, citing Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), he calls attention to the extensive 13th- and 14th-century economic connections among Europe, Byzantium,

Persia, Mongol Asia, India, Southeast Asia, and China (Frank, 190-92). All of this would be of interest to a civilizationist with ecumenical concerns (in two senses of the word) like Gordon Hewes (e.g., Melko and Scott, 1987: 11-22).

Like other world systems theorists, however, Frank seems to be blind to the influence of culture. In tracing back the world system, he is interested only in economic and political interaction. He doesn't seem to consider the possibility that Christianity may have been more important to the West than silk. Occasionally culture creeps in, as when (203) he cites Jacques Gernet's observation that Greek sculpture is preserved in the drapery folds, poses, and faces of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist statues. This serves for Gernet, and apparently for Frank, as "one of the finest proofs of the unity of our world" (Gernet, 1985). It does not seem to occur to Frank, as it would to any civilizationist but Wilkinson, that the same observation may attest to the power of Chinese civilization to absorb and transform both Classical art and South Asian religion.

And so far Frank seems to have focused more on what he calls "our" world system (Frank, 228) than on other political and trade systems of the past. In Wilkinson's terms, you might say he has been "centralcentric." Chase Dunn and Hall, on the other hand, have been aware of the existence of other systems of the past, but what I have seen of their work, including Chase-Dunn's most recent book (1989), has been more oriented toward recent Western history.

Not surprisingly, Frank downplays the civilizations themselves. He quotes with approval (Frank, 163) John Fairbank's method of starting at the end of the period he wants to study and working back (Fairbank, 1969: vii-xii) without seeming to notice that this is also Fairbank's method of bounding the civilization he is studying. In other words, Fairbank begins with China and studies whatever is relevant to his understanding of his subject. He works back in time as he needs to, but also out in space.

Frank asks in exasperation, after spending some time with civilizationists like James Farmer and David Kopf, should we not study both comparison and interaction (175)? Well, I'm glad he asked. Indeed we should.

And as the younger postmaterialists move into the field (Inglehart, 1990) won't they expand beyond world systems materialism and become interested in the cultural aspects of systems? If world systems theorists then include systems of the past for comparison, they may see the present world system very much as Toynbee did. Gills, if not Frank, may do pretty much the kind of work a younger civilizationist might have done.

As I read Frank, and look at his bibliography, I think: he knows Toynbee, but not Spengler or Kroeber. Shall I tell him about Kroeber? Nah. Let's be

sure our younger civilizationists read Kroeber. Come to think of it, we translated his configurations into civilizations. Let the younger world systems theorists translate him in their terms.

Then perhaps it will turn out that the civilizationists will become the viruses in the world systems pattern. Just as they think Wilkinson is a world systems theorist with an idiosyncratic terminology, so they may perceive civilizationists who understand Kroeberian patterns as “culturalists” augmenting systems theory by studying cases from the past, as Frank already does, but oriented toward cultural rather than material systems. Thus we may subvert their journals, meetings, grants, and graduate programs without their being aware that the cultural transactions occur between cultural systems that we would call “civilizations.” Such a subversion, in the longer term, would be at least enriching, and perhaps the salvation, of world systems study.

Wright State University

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