The Case for a World Systems Approach to Civilizations: A View from the "Transformationist" Camp

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INTRODUCTION AND DISCLAIMER

Many scholars are involved in the “world-systems” perspective. They may be divided into several camps, all maintaining more or less generally amicable relations—a general peace in Matthew Melko’s (1992) terms. I begin this paper with a summary of its main points. I follow this with a brief sketch of the world-systems territory. Next I address the issues raised by Melko in “World Systems Theory: A Faustian Delusion?, I” (this volume). I take care to correct some misrepresentations in that essay. I will conclude—again following Melko’s lead—with an argument for symbiosis. My goals are to facilitate further discussion, to clarify the areas of agreement and disagreement, and to discover what we may learn from each other.

THE PUNCHLINE

In standup comedy the punchline should be a surprise, but an academic paper should preview the conclusions. The punchline here is that civilizationists and world-system analysts are not in opposition, but travel different roads toward the same goal: understanding how our world came to be. The subtext here is that, contra Melko’s protestations, comparative civilizationists and world-systemists are doing very similar things, albeit—to borrow a metaphor from the stage—from distinct camera angles and with very different lighting. That is, we are both engaged in the comparative study of civilizations in order to better understand them.

AN INTELLECTUAL MAP OF THE WORLD-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

A geographer once explained to me that a map need be neither precise nor accurate; it need only get you where you are going. It is in that spirit that I sketch the territories of the world-systems perspective.

Immanuel Wallerstein (1974a, 1974b) claims, among other things, that
in the long sixteenth century (1450-1650) a new form of social organization appeared on the earth, the capitalist or modern world-system. The term “world-system” is properly hyphenated because it refers to a unitary concept and social system that makes up a self-contained “world.” This world-system by the late twentieth century became a global system, engulfing the entire planet. Wallerstein’s analysis stresses the systemic nature of this new entity, in particular that the social structure and function of any component of the system could only be understood in the context of its systematic relations with all other components.

In methodological terms, the system itself is the fundamental unit of analysis. All subcomponents, explicitly including so-called “modern” nation-states, are not completely autonomous actors but part of a larger system. As is well known, a key aspect of this argument is Andre Gunder Frank’s (1969a, 1969b) concept of the “development of underdevelopment.” That is, the development of the core states of this system depended on the exploitation of peripheral components. Furthermore, peripheral dependence was not only vital to core development, but necessarily entailed the simultaneous and consequential underdevelopment of peripheral components.

The empirical evidence supporting this general claim for the modern world-system is massive and impressive, as are the many subtheories it has generated. Christopher Chase-Dunn’s Global Formation (1989) is the single best summary of those findings. Because they are not compellingly germane to this argument I will not summarize them here. However, I will note that a major contribution of world-system theory has been to solve a sociological conundrum: some social processes seem to have opposite results in core and peripheral countries. Some have read this as evidence of the impossibility of a universal sociology. World-system theorists, however, see this as a consequence of world-systemic processes. Thus, in core countries development, or modernization, promotes class formation and undermines status divisions, especially racial and ethnic ones, improves the status of women, and leads to democracy. However, in peripheral countries, class formation is undercut, racial and ethnic divisions are rife, the status of women declines with development, and totalitarianism prevails over democracy.

This, then is the “modern” world-system camp. Here “modern” and Western are virtually interchangeable terms. This is not, however, due to racism or Eurocentrism of the garden variety, but to a recognition that the economic and political hegemony of the core carry cultural hegemony as well. It is not a statement of what is natural, or inevitable, or right, but a recognition of what is. Japan, of course, is problematic. I will have more to say on Japan below. It should be noted that this modern, Wallersteinian, camp of world-system theory has been accused of being “Eurocentric” in...
its lack of attention to peripheral and semiperipheral areas (see, for example, Amin, 1989, 1991; Hall, 1986, 1989a, 1989b).

Archaeologists and anthropologists quickly saw a potential in world-system theory to clarify several sets of continuing problems. These included the distortions of development among "indigenous" peoples due to their contact with Europeans, and for archaeologists a way to study seemingly systematic interconnections among prehistoric societies. The former might be glossed, in civilizationist terms, as the confrontation of "barbarians and civilizations," while the latter might be glossed as either civilization building or inter-civilization contacts.

The anthropological camp has met with considerable success, spurred by Eric R. Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (1982). For those not familiar with this book, the title is a somewhat satirical comment on Eurocentric scholars who have tended to view nonliterate indigenous peoples as having no "history" prior to contact or "discovery" by Europeans. Wolf's point is precisely that they do have histories, and that we cannot understand their societies without understanding how their histories have shaped their social lives. A major enterprise in anthropology, history, and ethnohistory has been writing the histories of "the people without history" (see Krech, 1991).

Brian Ferguson and Neil Whitehead’s title essay to War in the Tribal Zone (1992a) extends this critique by examining the interaction of state expansion and "tribal" peoples. They find two consistent effects of war in the "tribal zone." Not unexpectedly wars between state and nonstate peoples increase and intensify when states expand into tribal territories. What is less obvious is that wars among "tribal" peoples increase in frequency and intensity with state expansion. Conflicts often center around access to state-supplied goods.

These effects are not unique to modern contacts, but have occurred in most ancient civilizations or world-systems. Ferguson and Whitehead criticize world-system theory for failing to address these issues adequately. The impact of Central Asian nomads on the course of several civilizations is well known (Bentley, 1993; Frank, 1992; Hall, 1991b). But many other important, if less dramatic, state-nonstate interactions have shaped civilizational history. Finally, much evolutionary and historical analysis has been distorted by assumptions that the reports of the violence found among nonstate societies was "natural," when in fact it was a product of interactions with states (civilizations). Analysts of precapitalist world-systems differ in the attention they devote to such interactions.

Archaeologists using world-system theory, however, have met with more frustration. Again, I will eschew reciting the history of archaeological
theorizing and empirical findings. The reaction to extreme diffusionism led many cultural ecologists to become overly focused on circumscribed, local processes, to the neglect of intersocietal interactions in the production of social and cultural change (Schortman and Urban, 1992).

Several archaeologists have attempted to use world-system theory to overcome this narrow focus. They have struggled to modify, stretch, or transform world-system theory to make it useful in “precapitalist” settings — that is, settings that predate Wallerstein’s long sixteenth century. Most have experienced frustration in that attempt largely because it is so “modern world-system-centric,” that is, because it is almost an ad hoc theory focused only on the last five hundred years. While this “camp” has yet to produce its own complete, more generalized, world-system theory, it is still struggling with extant theory in an attempt to generate a more useful alternative.

Recently several people have entered this fray and are developing “precapitalist” world-system theories. Precapitalist world-system analysis seems to have four separate “roots.” Probably the oldest is that associated with Ekholm and Friedman (Ekholm, 1980; Ekholm and Friedman, 1980, 1982; Friedman and Ekholm, 1982, 1992; Friedman, 1982; Friedman and Rowlands, 1977, 1978) who claim that capital accumulation has been a continual process since the formation of the first states in ancient Mesopotamia. Their point is that there were capitalist-like processes in ancient states which did not become dominant until circa C.E. 1500. They see these accumulation processes as fundamental to the generation of inequality within societies and critical to pushing constant expansion.

A second root is found among those anthropologists and archaeologists who sought to explain intersocietal interactions, in particular the seeming connections between pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and what is now the American Southwest (Pailes and Whitecotton, 1975, 1979, 1986), or in complex developments in Oaxaca, Mexico (Blanton and Feinman, 1984), or early state formation in Mesopotamia (Kohl, 1978, 1979). These (and others) argue that local development or social change is highly conditioned or shaped by the quality and extent of connections with other societies.

A third root is found in the work of those world-system theorists who see a possibility of a major cyclical change coming sometime in the next century and seek to understand that change by looking at past major changes in world-systems. Chase-Dunn (1987, 1990) has been primary among these. He has also been concerned with the complex roles of semiperipheral components in the world-system, both the modern world-system (1982) and ancient world-systems (1988).

The fourth root is found in the work of Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills (Frank, 1990a, 1990b, 1992; Frank and Gills, 1990, 1992; Gills and...
Frank, 1991). They argue, paralleling Ekholm and Friedman, for a continual accumulation of capital since the first appearance of states. They argue that the locus of accumulation oscillates between private families and the state. They further argue that this accumulation process takes place within a single, sporadically growing world-system. Here they readily link up with David Wilkinson’s argument for the emergence of “central civilization” (1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1991, 1992, 1993). There are obvious close parallels in the first and fourth roots.

I should also note William McNeill’s (1990) call for attention to things like world-systems. My own work primarily grows from roots two and three. My study of the Southwest (Hall, 1986, 1989a) led me to see the importance of connections to Mesoamerica and to see the importance of the role of nonstate societies in social change (Hall, 1983, 1984b) in the Southwest. Later, I extended that work to precapitalist Central Asia (Hall, 1991a, 1991b).

These four roots, and much work by others, have given rise to a split among world-system theorists into the “pre-” and “post-” 1500ists (Bergesen 1992a, and this volume). Within the “pre-1500ist” camp there is a split between the “continuationists,” represented by Ekholm, Friedman, Frank, Gills, and Wilkinson, and the “transformationists,” represented by Chase-Dunn and Hall (Chase-Dunn, 1992; Hall and Chase-Dunn, 1993, 1994). The continuationists argue for one continual — if episodic — world-system that began with the first states (or civilizations) in Mesopotamia some 5,000 years ago. They see the “modern world-system” that Immanuel Wallerstein has described in much detail as the current manifestation of this world-system.

The transformationists, however, argue that there have been many types of systems, and their transformations have been and continue to be problematic. They further argue that future transformation can only be foreseen, and possibly shaped by human action, by studying the logic of past transformations (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991a, 1992, 1993, 1994). They argue further that their initial assumption of different systems is scientifically conservative in the sense that if the continuationists are, indeed, correct, then this will become readily apparent in the course of pursuing a transformationist, comparative study of world-systems.

Some additional issues germane to the dialogue with civilizationists should be mentioned. First is the issue of boundaries. There are close parallels in bounding civilizations and bounding world-systems (McLko and Scott, 1987; Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1993). One area of rapprochement between these two approaches may be that both are talking about the same fundamental entity but using different boundary criteria: culture versus the combination of trade in bulk goods, war, and trade in luxury goods. Both approaches
clearly recognize that the bounding of the relevant entities under discussion is problematic. This is closely linked with a second issue: the relevant unit of analysis, or the fundamental entity being discussed. A major contribution of the world-system approach is the focus on the system itself as the fundamental locus of social change. Here, too, there seems to be a close parallel with civilizationists, in that they too attribute significance to a unit of social organization larger than individual states.

A third component of the world-system approach is the attention to nonstate societies in the processes of change, or history. Hall (1991a, 1991b) has argued that to ignore the role of nomads in civilizational and world-system change is to misunderstand historical processes. Frank (1992) argues that Central Asian nomads have played a central role in the evolution of the continuous world-system. As noted above, Ferguson and Whitehead (1992) establish the importance and historical depth of state-nonstate interactions.

Finally, there is that frightful e-word, evolution. World-system analysts, like archaeologists and anthropologists, find it a friendly and useful term. Some civilizationists seem to find it to be something of a grand bugaboo. While properly the subject of the next section of this paper, it is important to note here that “evolution” as used in world-system approaches refers to patterns in the processes of social change (here “social” is a covering term including, political, economic, and cultural change) that led from a situation some 10,000 years ago of as many as 100,000 more-or-less autonomous societies to the present state of an emerging global society or civilization. The term explicitly does not imply a teleological process, or a unilinear one, but rather refers to multistranded, complex, and historically contingent processes. A goal of the world-system approaches is to describe and understand those processes.

Obviously, the entire precapitalist world-system research agenda is still expanding and still sorting itself out into camps and positions. What these camps all hold in common, besides obvious debts to Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank’s early work on dependency, is a focus on intersocietal interaction systems. Beyond that the fundamental difference is between the continuationists and the transformationists. Clearly, I write from inside the “transformationist” camp, hence the subtitle of this paper.

It is now appropriate to address some of the issues raised by Melko.

**THE ILLUSION OF A “FAUSTIAN DELUSION”**

First, I want to repeat a disclaimer. Much of what I refer to below is new, at least with respect to world-system approaches to civilizational studies. Hence, Professor Melko’s critique is understandable even if, in my
opinion, it is considerably off the mark. Rather than argue with or vilify him, I will use his remarks as an opportunity to clarify the world-system position, or better positions, and, I hope, to open further dialogue.

As may be apparent in the preceding discussion, several terms are used differently by world-systems analysts than they are by Melko. Key here is the term "evolution." The notion of unilinear evolution as the model inherent in the analysis of everyone who uses the term is a double chimera. First, none of the neoevolutionists working in the last few decades uses the term that way. Rather, as noted above, they refer to historically contingent processes that follow general patterns, which, while explainable in general, are quite diverse in their specific results. Second, even nineteenth-century evolutionary thinkers were closer to the current model than to the unilinear, "the West is the best," teleological strawman implied in Melko's comments.14

Melko is, in a quaint nineteenth-century phrase, "much exercised" about the concept of "modernization" as garden variety ethnocentrism elevated into "scientific dogma" (an oxymoron to be sure). It may surprise him and many others to know — and this despite the critiques of world-system theory for being Eurocentric (e.g., Amin 1989) — that no less a world-system analyst than Immanuel Wallerstein pronounced "modernization theory" dead (Wallerstein, 1976). He was at considerable pains to tie his requiem to the concept of underdevelopment.

"Underdevelopment" in the dependency and world-system literatures is explicitly not a unilinear evolutionary term, as it in fact is in modernization theory. Rather, "underdevelopment" refers to the systematic changes introduced into economic development, and social change in general, in peripheral areas as a direct consequence of interaction with more developed areas. The so-called "backwardness" of these areas is not due to lack of development, but to a peculiar kind of "development" that results when a region is exploited for its resources, whether those be in the form of raw materials or comparatively cheap labor. Melko's major point, critique, and worry is that a world-system approach to civilizations will emphasize the processes of interaction, especially economic interaction, to the neglect of both the internal conceptual integrity of civilizations and the comparative study of civilizations. He cites the lack of attention to culture and the problem of influence of Japan on the West. These are serious concerns that, it seems to me, vary in seriousness of threat to the various world-system camps.

In general, world-system analysts study the interplay, feedback, or dialectic (pick your favorite buzz word) between the internal structure of the components of a system and its position in the system. While each of the structural positions — core, periphery, semiperiphery — has a "typical social structure" (at least in the modern world-system), the social structure of any
component of the system significantly shapes its potential for change in position in that system. It is the interplay of these two processes that is the focus of most modern world-system research.

Now enter the question of the existence of earlier world-systems and their roles, if any, in the emergence of the modern world-system. It seems to me that the only way this question can be addressed empirically is by studying earlier world-systems. It is here that the division between the continuationists and the transformationists becomes singularly salient, and why I subtitled this paper "a view from the 'transformationist' camp." If, in fact, there have been many different types of world-systems, the transformation from one type to another is an important problem, and one that can only be addressed comparatively. This also applies to the continuationist camp, but there it is less clear why this is so.

Both camps also face a fundamental problem: how does interaction between world-systems take place? This is especially problematic in a tight definition of a "world-system" as "self-contained." If world-systems are in regular contact and exchange anything (material or ideational), they are no longer self-contained. Chase-Dunn and Hall (1993) address this problem by conceptualizing the boundaries of world-systems as theoretically and empirically problematic. They see three levels of interaction: bulk goods, military/political interaction, and luxury goods. Each level is successively larger, with the smaller ones nested within the larger ones. Interaction within each level is at least partially independent of interactions within the other levels.

A closely related problem for both camps is how one world-system absorbs or incorporates another. My own work (Hall, 1986, 1989a) shows that incorporation even at the very fringes of the modern world-system in its weakest form (Spanish colonization of what is now New Mexico) is an extremely complex process which has been seriously understudied and undertheorized by world-system analysts. Indeed, one of my own research questions focuses on the generality of the specific processes of incorporation which occurred in what is now the American Southwest. This is an issue that can only be studied by a multifaceted comparative strategy: comparing processes of incorporation among areas of the Spanish empire, between different European empires, and among world-systems.

In examining the history of Afro-Eurasia (Hall, 1993), I found that the three boundaries often did not coincide. It appears that a distinctive feature of the modern world-system is that these three boundaries do coincide, so their partial independence has not been problematic for analysts of the modern world-system. Thus, one can analyze the interaction of world-systems in terms of incorporation at these different levels. Following McNeill’s phrase
"the Closure of the Eurasian Ecumene" (1963:195), Eurasia became one large world-system at the luxury goods level in the last centuries B.C.E. In the next millennium a considerable amount of Africa was drawn into the net (Moseley, 1992; Willard, 1993). Only with the Mongol conquest was Afro-Eurasia united at the military/political level, albeit briefly. Finally, in the nineteenth century it was united at the bulk goods exchange level.

Despite these differences and gaps, it seems to me that the comparative logic is the same for world-system analysts and civilizationists. These two approaches differ primarily in what they see as similar and what they see as different among the world-systems/civilizations they compare. This is where Melko's other major concern becomes paramount. Civilizations and world-systems are not the same thing, but they seem to be close cousins. Both concepts share a frustrating vagueness of definition which seems, at least in part, to be due to a fuzziness of the actual boundaries of each. What is different are the criteria each uses to bound systems.

Enough of countercritiques of Melko's article. Following his lead, how might a symbiotic relationship be built? An answer might be found precisely in the different concepts of world-system and civilization.

TOWARD A SYMBIOSIS: ANOTHER ROUND

Civilizationists, it seems to me as an outsider recently invited in for a visit, focus primarily on cultural or ideational elements as opposed to material criteria. This, does, in fact, point to significant differences between the two approaches. While it is a cliche — and a tired and incorrect one at that — that world-system analysis is overly materialistic or economic, there has been increasing attention to culture and its role in world-system processes (see Bergesen 1992b for list of citations). This attention goes beyond culture as epiphenomenon and examines it as an important component of world-system processes.

Alice Willard's (1993) recent article on west African trade and religion points to one way these issues might be joined. She highlights the role of Islam in facilitating trade across the Sahara, noting world-systemic pressure driving the trade. Here there are interesting parallels with Jerry Bentley's (1993) discussion of religion in all sorts of exchanges in first- and second-millennium Eurasia. This is not the place to address the old debate about the causal priority of material or ideological processes in social change. Rather, I seek to highlight that the two tend to move together and the patterns of world-system exchanges, especially of luxury goods, often facilitate, and are facilitated by, the spread of new ideologies, typically in the form of religion. What remains unanalyzed at this point is the role of ideology in
incorporation processes.

Indeed, both Wallerstein (1992) and especially Albert Bergesen (1992b) have pointed out that if hegemony in the modern world-system is in the process of shifting from the United States to Japan, this will be the first time (for the modern world-system) that a hegemonic shift coincides with a civilizational shift. Bergesen argues that Godzilla and transformers (the toys and the cartoon characters) are a beachhead of the Japanese cultural invasion of America. Whether Japan is actually becoming hegemonic, and if so, whether Godzilla is the pointman of the cultural invasion, is not the point. The point is, if such a shift is taking place it is unprecedented in the modern world-system.

It seems to me that this type of problem, again, can only be studied comparatively. Furthermore, it seems to me that civilizationists are most likely to have knowledge and insights into how to study the issue. On the other hand, world-system analysts offer a variety of ways to study intersocietal interaction systematically. Much more is involved than simply knowing that civilizations exchanged things and ideas: What were the things and ideas exchanged? How important were they in the respective civilizations/world-systems? How were they produced? How was production changed by the demand for external exchange? Why did the exchange begin? What sustained it? Why did it end? And so on.

The contribution of world-system analysts, and this is what I read in McNeill’s autocritique (1990), is that the system itself — no matter how inchoate or ramshackle — provides the fundamental context within which these questions must be answered. It is only by giving attention to the formation and transformation of such systems that we can begin to grasp how we got from some 100,000 small, autonomous bands around 10,000 years ago to our modern global village. The puzzle is sufficiently complex, enticing, and important to warrant a large variety of attempts to solve it. It is precisely because civilizationist approaches are so different from the world-system approach that they are interesting. World-system analysts are not seeking hegemony in the comparative study of civilizations, but rather a theoretical multiculturalism.

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NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was prepared for the ISCSC meeting, Scranton, PA, June 3-6, 1993 for a panel entitled: “Are There Better Approaches to Civilizational Studies?” Stephen Sanderson kindly represented my position in my absence. While the usual disclaimers apply, special thanks are due to Professor Sanderson for comments and sharing a number of his unpublished papers. Professor Matthew Melko did likewise, “agreeing to disagree.” Finally, I must acknowledge the contribution of my students in Social Change, Fall 1993, who insisted on clarifications and asked probing questions.

2. I capitalize and italicize the final “S” to emphasize the plurality of theories. For those readers familiar with Kuhn’s (1970, 1977) concept of paradigm, I am using “perspective” as a close synonym, the point being that there are a number of world-system theories.

3. For a shoot-out over the hyphenation of this term, see Wallerstein (1983) and Thompson (1983).

4. The concept of underdevelopment has a long intellectual pedigree which is reviewed by Chirot and Hall (1982). The empirical evidence for Wallerstein’s claims has been challenged; see especially O’Brien (1982), Bairoch (1986), and Stern (1988a, 1988b), along with Wallerstein’s reply (1988).

5. Global Formation received the Political Economy of the World-System section of the American Sociological Association prize for distinguished scholarship in 1992. This is clear recognition by world-system scholars of his work on the modern world-system.


7. Wolf’s extension of this analysis to the problem of “culture” may be of particular interest to civilizationists (1984). For one world-system interpretation of Wolf, see Hall (1984a).

8. The term “tribal” is in quotes because in practice it is a very imprecise term which carries a great deal of theoretical and ideological baggage.
These issues are summarized in Hall (1991b, 1989:Ch. 2).

9. However, some writers have addressed this issue. For example, several writers have used world-system theory to analyze Indian-White relations in North America (Hall, 1989a, 1989b; Harris, 1990; Jorgensen, 1978; Kardulias, 1990; Meyer, 1990, 1991).

10. The archaeological approaches to precapitalist world-systems are reviewed with an extensive bibliography in Hall and Chase-Dunn (1993).

11. See Santley and Alexander (1992) for a recent exception. There is a major controversy lurking in the wings. Some social theorists, notably Max Weber and many neo-Weberians, argue that there can only be "secular histories," that is, histories and social theories applicable to relatively limited time spans (a few centuries). Others, notably modern positivists, argue that a universal history and social theory is possible — even if exceedingly difficult to produce. Braudelians (of whom Wallerstein considers himself one) argue that there are at least three time scales: ordinary or daily time, cyclical time, and long-term time (la longue durée). World-system theory as propounded by Wallerstein operates at the cyclical scale. Archaeologists are trying to stretch it to la longue durée. John Hall (1980, 1992) and Fernand Braudel (1980) discuss time scales in detail.

12. For more detailed description of the different camps see Hall and Chase-Dunn (1993) and Chase-Dunn's (1992) introduction to a special issue of Review on "Comparing World-Systems."


14. Sanderson (1990, 1991) makes this argument in considerable detail. I do not mean to imply that there is no difference among evolutionary thinkers. Rather, I seek to point up the ethnocentric, teleological image of evolutionary thinking as overdrawn.

15. While I reject Iberall's gas-liquid-solid model of societies or civilizations (Iberall and Wilkinson, 1993), a wave model of matter might serve as a useful metaphor. In a drive for clarity combined with the excessive reliance on linear mathematical models, social scientists
have too often used “billiard ball” concepts (Wolf, 1982) rather than probability concepts (Roth, 1992). In other words, the fuzziness is not due to improper conceptualization of boundaries, but to an accurate reflection of social reality.
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