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CIVILIZATIONS ARE WORLD SYSTEMS!

David Wilkinson

The title of this article states my position in the rich and burgeoning civilizationist/world-systems debate about as succinctly as possible. Civilizationists and world-systems analysts should be studying the same entities. This will occur if and when civilizationists accept that the many local civilizations of the past have become the single global civilization of today; and when world-systemists accept that the single, global world-system of today is the fusion product of a substantial number of smaller-scale world systems of the past; and when both accept that the plural civilizations of the past, and the plural urbanized world systems of the past, were, and that today's singular civilization and singular world system are, identical.

A joint intellectual undertaking could then be pursued, probably with different but complementary emphases. Civilizationists might cluster their efforts more (but not exclusively) toward the earlier, more pluralistic epochs of civilizational evolution, world-systemists toward the later, more monistic. Civilizationists already tend, I think, to interest themselves more in the cultural aspects of a society than in the political, and more in the political than in the economic; world-systemists tend oppositely; neither group need surrender its inclinations, though each would have to take account of the other's propositions.

Few readers will be shocked to learn that my proposals suit my own established predilections; for their benefit I should place my cards face up on the table. In 1966 I was urging my graduate students in international relations to find ways of integrating the work of Spengler and Toynbee with what was then called a systems analysis approach to international relations theory, whose chief representatives then were Morton A. Kaplan (1957) on the deductive, theoretical, normative side, Stanley Hoffmann (1960, 1965) on the historical-sociological side, Richard N. Rosecrance (1963) combining both — all three were my teachers — and George Modelski (1961). This is the kind of assignment which one usually winds up having to carry out oneself. That duly occurred, and in 1967 I found myself producing for my students' benefit, or dismay, a manuscript called "Civilizations and World Politics," whose then incarnation drew on most of the aforementioned, plus Charles McClelland (1958), A.F.K. Organski (1958, esp. chs. 8, 12, and 17), Martin Wight (1946), Raymond Aron (1966), but most centrally the civilizationist Carroll Quigley (1961), for the desired theoretical synthesis. It didn't work.

It didn't work because it vacillated between accepting the assumption of the international-systems analysts that the contemporary globe contained one and only one system, which produced the interesting and important phenomena of balance-of-power, states-system-and-empire, order-and-disorder, peace-and-war, and the assertion of the civilizationists that the contemporary globe contained several distinct civilizations, defined by common cultural forms, for which the above-mentioned phenomena were the results of their internal processes.

Examining that manuscript at this distance in time, I am struck by the fact that I had all that I needed to reach the resolution I in fact accomplished much later. On the systems side, Modelski had drawn attention to "homogeneity" (one vs. many parallel "traditions") in a social system as an important variable (1961:126-30). Aron, following Papaligouras' (1941:174) contention that multiple parallel international legal processes had authoritatively posited mutually contradictory international legal norms, had argued that "the distinction between homogeneous systems and heterogeneous systems" was fundamental (Aron, 1966:99-100), and had defined as "heterogeneous" those international systems in which states were organized according to different principles and obeyed different values (1966:94, 98-100, 128). Hoffmann, extending Papaligouras' argument of (1941: Ch. VII-VIII), had argued that heterogeneous or "uneven" international systems were also unstable or "revolutionary," because the stakes of conflict therein were unlimited (1965:92-93). In contrast, Rosecrance, following Ashby's cybernetics, had contended that the degree of "variety" in international systems' disturbance and regulation was an important empirical variable in accounting both for breakdown and for stabilization (1963:220 ff). On the civilizationist side, Toynbee, in his *Reconsiderations*, had defined "society" as the total network of relations between human beings, "societies" as particular networks that are not components of any larger network, "civilization" as a state of society in which a minority of the population is liberated from economic activities, and "civilizations" as that species of the genus society whose members are particular historical exemplifications of the abstract idea "civilization" (1961:271, 278, 280, 282, 287). I also had Quigley's preliminary criterion of cities (and writing) as the external identifiers of a civilization (1961:31-32). But I tried to compromise among incompatible world-views by adopting the criteria of all simultaneously. I proposed to examine, as civilizations and world systems: large and coherent social areas with a large and fairly dense population, cities, and writing; which comprised social-transactional network structures with closed boundaries; in which wealth is created, savings accumulated, a nonproducing class supported, and economic inventions

created and exploited; and having unity of cultural form. These criteria simplified empirical and comparative study famously, as nothing got past them.

My work along these lines accordingly stagnated, though I watched with interest the extension of Kaplan's model to a smaller scale by my then-colleague Anthony Martin (1970), the new work of Modelski (1972, 1987) and Modelski and Thompson (1988) on the evolution of the world system, and the beginning of what was to prove continuous development of the world-systems approach of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), none of which, however, could quite resolve my difficulties. Martin was examining a regional subsystem, a core, rather than a whole system. Modelski and Thompson brought a very useful reflection on geopolitics, and particularly the changing meaning of naval power in systems of different sizes and hence spatial configurations, without resolving for me the problem of the unit of analysis. Wallerstein (like Modelski) went farther back in search of relevant history than most systems analysts, but not as far as Quigley, whose political economy seemed more persuasive.

After participating in the refoundation of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations in the United States (Philadelphia, December 1971), and in response to the dialogic initiative of Matthew Melko, reading Melko's 1969 work *The Nature of Civilizations* and the manuscript works of John Hord (q.v.), and having a 1977 redraft of "Civilizations and World Politics" (which tried to produce a Quigleyan model, but in process found coherence and closure to be incompatible criteria and ended by proposing that the contemporary world constituted a single incoherent civilization with a core-periphery structure) commented on by both, I was impelled, in Melko's ISCS "Boundaries" sessions of 1978-1983 (documented in Melko and Scott, eds., 1987), to a reaffirmation, a radical simplification, a change of direction, a complete abandonment of the coherence criterion, and new conclusions, as follows.

1. Civilizations are world systems.
2. Their relevant criteria are cities and closed transactional networks, not size, nor writing, nor a Quigleyan "instrument of expansion," nor cultural coherence/homogeneity (Wilkinson, 1987b).
3. On applying these criteria to the roster of candidate civilizations, we find that many of the "usual suspects" — Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Far Eastern, Indic, Japanese, Peruvian, Mexican — pass muster. But many others — Western, Islamic, Russian, Greco-Roman, Medieval — are not closed societies; they are parts of a larger, culturally heterogeneous network-entity. This civilization, of which these other putative "civilizations" are then regions or epochs, needs a name. I have called it "Central" civilization

(Wilkinson, 1987a, 1987b).

4. There was a plurality of civilizations/world systems on the globe until the late 19th or early 20th centuries. Now there is only one survivor, Central civilization, whose network expanded to global scale and absorbed all others (Wilkinson, 1987a).

5. Civilizations typically show the alternation between political disunity and political unity posited by Toynbee in his revised "Helleno-Sinic model" (1961:157, 170-209). However, the unity — the phase of the "universal state" (Toynbee), "universal system" (Kaplan), "world state," "universal empire" (Quigley), or "world empire" (Wallerstein) — is usually brief and fragile, for reasons having to do with the structure and succession of leadership (Wilkinson, 1983, 1988).

6. The chief social bond scaled to the dimensions of the civilization is politico-military-diplomatic. Cultural bonds have smaller scales. Until the growth of Central civilization to global scale, economic bonds had larger scales, and defined oikumenes, trading areas that were larger than the areas in which states could rule, fight or ally (Wilkinson, 1992, 1993).

7. Central civilization is only the most blatantly heterogeneous of civilizations. Other civilizations too are polycultures (Iberall and Wilkinson, 1993), though when (e.g., Japan) they have possessed a universal state of long duration it has usually had a homogenizing ideology and utopia (cf. Mannheim, 1936) and policy.

8. The civilization-formation process was still continuing — that is, cities were appearing on preurban social terrain, not as extensions of or reactions to the political impingements of neighboring cities, but often as reactions to the economic impingements of oikumenes — perhaps as late as the 17th, even the 18th century in Africa (Wilkinson, 1993, 1994).

9. Central civilization formed in the first instance in the mid-2nd millennium BC, in consequence of the expansion, collision and fusion of two pre-existing civilizations, Mesopotamian and Egyptian. It grew by expanding against, and engulfing, other civilizations, without ever fully homogenizing them or itself (Wilkinson, 1984).

10. The heterogeneities of other civilizations may be the result of the same processes. That is, a trade network extends itself into a preurban social terrain; a city forms, perhaps so that a local political elite can avail itself of the local surplus thereby generated; but a larger expanding civilization, its familiars driven by similar motives, in due course recruits the new city to its polity. The motives to recruit it to its (anyway heterogeneous) culture are weaker, and a diversity of languages (and dialects), religions (and cults and schisms), races (and physiognomies and ethnicities and families), apparels, etc. persists. Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Indic, Far Eastern, Mexican, and

Peruvian civilization could fruitfully be examined comparatively, with a view to relating their various heterogeneities to the order and independence of their urbanization processes.

This summary leads naturally to the main topic of this paper: the current debate in our overlapping fields, and the positions of the participants. I shall try to locate myself with respect to each of a large number of participants.

Toynbee. I draw very heavily on Toynbee, both in agreement and in opposition, but almost exclusively on his extensively revised model of 1961, from *Reconsiderations*, rather than on the much better-known earlier volumes of *A Study of History*. My definition of a civilization/world system takes off from his rethinking (1961:278-87). My roster is based on a critique of his list and Quigley's. In an empirical test of his civilizational kinematics (phase transition sequence), original and revised versions, vs. those of Spengler, Philip Bagby (1958), Melko, and Quigley, my data fit the expectations of his revised theory perfectly; those of his original theory came in next best (Wilkinson, 1986:29). Toynbee is however seduced by the mythos of cultural coherence — not entirely, no one is, and he provides a useful model of cultural contradiction and conflict, but he relates it integrally to breakdown. He is replete with fertile notions, and, I believe, is the most liberal of civilizationists, in the oldest sense of that word; an excellent teacher.

Quigley. Carroll Quigley provides a single, powerful, illuminating insight into the dynamics of civilizations, the concept of the instrument of expansion, which I view as a nonpartisan and nonsupersessionist empiricization of the Marxian “mode of production,” and as such an improvement, with extensive research and practical implications. Some hint of the latter can be found, on suitable occasions, in the kaleidoscopic consciousness of Quigley's one-time student, William Jefferson Clinton. Where many if not most civilizationists have centrally focused on culture, Quigley focuses centrally on economics, and will probably be easiest for the world-systems tradition to come to grips with. However, after spending some time trying to validate his proposition that growing civilizations are pervaded by a single instrument of expansion, I judged that I had disconfirmed it instead, gave up expecting macrosocieties to display much institutional coherence, and began to consider the structure of their incoherence. In that incoherence, I think that many of Quigley's propositions will be partially confirmed, and that the location and limits of their application will be significant.

Spengler. Spengler is the Antaeus of civilizationists, brilliantly, perversely, powerfully wrong in more ways than any two others combined. Spengler's key proposition, to the effect that each civilization develops a single prime symbol, an all-pervasive style, is especially brilliantly wrong

(the Gramscian doctrine of cultural “hegemony” being less so, except insofar as it is doctrinaire, an answer instead of a question), and should point us to the study of the failure of repeated attempts in that direction, and the resilience of deviant, oppositional, variant, heretical, inverted, oppressed symbols, as thematic of polycultural history. Is this failure correlated with the failure to develop a single prime mode of production, class struggle, durable world state and cosmopolis? I suspect so.

Melko. Melko accepts that today many civilizations coexist, and objects to the idea that the only way we can study contemporary civilization comparatively is to do so by reference to history. That is indeed the logical consequence of my acceptance that today only one civilization exists. Our respective rosters are properly derived from different definitions; we can agree on some phenomena common to the civilizations that appear on both our rosters. However, while he, like Spengler (1926: Table III), sees a feudal state-imperial polity sequence (1969:101-32), I perceive no holocivilizational feudal phase. Feudalism does indeed appear in semiperipheries, with regard to which I find Rushton Coulborn’s arguments (1956:364-66) about feudalism as “a mode of revival of a society whose polity has gone into extreme disintegration” in marginal regions — religion being the general and core-area recovery modality — quite convincing. As for states systems and empires, I find not a supersession but an alternation, following Toynbee’s Helleno-Sinic model, in which, consistent with Robert Wesson’s work (1967, 1978), the states-system phase is more robust.

Melko is also doubtful, as is Chase-Dunn, about my admission to civilizational status of very small-scale societies, with only one or two cities — Melko questions my “Chibchan” civilization, Chase-Dunn my “Irish.” More recently — since I have responded only by accepting even smaller civilizations into my roster (Wilkinson, 1993, 1994), Melko has suggested that I will have to locate still others, for example, in Central Asia. My point (10) above concurs with him. I hadn’t closed my roster of civilizations in 1982 or 1987 (Wilkinson, 1980-1982, 1987b), and I am not ready to close it now. Current candidates not treated then include several African possibilities, and a second (!) Colombian candidate, Tairona “civilization.”

Hord. I view all of John Hord’s papers (q.v.) with great interest. Our definitions of “civilization” are irreducibly different, but I believe that the relatively homogeneous political-cultural entities he studies under that label are genuine, and his understanding of them creative and novel. The persistence and the fissility of his constitutional traditions has helped to persuade me that (my) civilizations are characteristically, not just incidentally, polycultures.

Sorokin. I have discussed Sorokin more fully elsewhere (forthcoming,

1995). In brief: I concur with Sorokin's powerful critique (1950:113-20, 206-17; 1956:163-64; 1963:413-19; 1966:121-22, 548-49) of civilizationists — Spengler, Nikolai Danilevsky (1920), and especially Toynbee — who observed social groups and thought they observed cultural groups. Sorokin however resolves the difficulty by refusing the analytic concept of "civilization." I resolve it by treating civilizations as social groups and not as cultural groups, each, just as Sorokin complained (1950:213), "a cultural field where a multitude of vast and small cultural systems and congeries — partly mutually harmonious, partly neutral, partly contradictory — coexist."

Huntington. Sorokin's comment is worth recalling in another context. Samuel P. Huntington has lately (1993) brought a political scientist's perspective to the study of civilizations. He defines civilizations as cultural groupings and cultural identities, accepts the plurality of contemporary civilizations, presents a largely Toynbeean civilizational roster (23-25), and hypothesizes that in the next phase of world politics "the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future" (22). His argument is detailed and provocative. I believe Sorokin would rightly contend that Huntington's "major civilizations"—"Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African civilization" (25) — are "cultural fields" rather than either systems or potential actors. I would add that they are cultural subfields in the global cultural field of a single civilization, a social and not a cultural entity. I consequently doubt the hypotheses that "conflict between civilizations will supplant ideological and other forms of conflict as the dominant global form of conflict" and that "international relations...will increasingly...become a game in which non-Western civilizations are actors..." (48). More likely, nostalgic ideologies of lost civilizational isolation and cultural status will be used to mobilize support for struggles for power and prestige within a solitary, incoherent civilization in which the ideologues have neither the capacity nor the intention to create a coherent cultural system, let alone a culture capable of functioning as an actor.

Melko has objected to my schema (which describes the general course of macrosocial history as the fusion of many small civilizations into the one contemporary global civilization) on the grounds that it destroys the possibility of a comparative study of civilizations, except so far as that study is also historical. That is indeed its logical consequence. But those who nonetheless wish to examine dialogically Huntington's contention that the next stage in global political conflict will be a conflict of civilizations can still do so perfectly well, but employing the different (and to my mind more precise) locution "conflict of cultures within a single civilization." We can then proceed to use for our historical analogs not the past collisions and

fusions between civilizations, but the more frequent, more complex and delicate (and, I suspect, more dialogic and perhaps even less violent) interplay of the parts of a single society's polyculture. As a first approximation, on account of the analogy I consider appropriate I am probably a bit more sanguine about the outcome of such a conflict, even while being less sure of its coming rise to prominence, than Huntington.

Chase-Dunn and Hall vs. Frank and Gills. On the issue of whether there are many different precapitalist world-systems with different modes of production (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991a:23), or a single 5000-year world-system with a single developmental logic (Frank and Gills), I partly split the difference and partly disagree with both. (1) I don't use the term "precapitalist" to describe any empirical civilization/world system; while capitalist (and socialist) ideals, ideologies, and utopias are rather recent, their accumulative and distributive practices are very old, possibly both contemporaneous with the startup of civilization. (2) I find many different world-systems (like Chase-Dunn and Hall), but of such unequal size, duration and terminus that one of them (essentially that focused on by Gills and Frank) eventually engulfed the others; this is the political/civilizational structure I call Central Civilization. (3) In consequence of not finding one pervasive Quigleyan "instrument of expansion" in any civilization, I don't use the term "mode of production" in any world-system-level application, except as a hypothesis I don't expect to see confirmed. Each of the civilizations is heterogeneous, polycultural, incoherent with respect to its politico-economic patterning; though at some times in each some new or reinvented form has looked like it would spread throughout and extirpate all others, it is "institutionalized" (in the Quigleyan sense, i.e., deflected and corrupted) and reaches a limit well short of that. This pattern of failure is as interesting as the variety of forms and their mutual displacement processes, and should keep a generation or so of macrosocial theorists productively employed in verifying, describing, and explaining it.

This said, I find the projects of these four researchers intriguing and productive, and extremely worthwhile discussing. I suspect that all of these researchers are more sanguine than I am about the possibility of reducing political to economic phenomena. This vision is appealing because it suggests there may be economic (non-zero-sum) solutions to political (and apparently zero-sum) problems. Without necessarily rejecting the vision, I would treat economies and politics as different though always linked. Critical evidence that this is an empirical, and confirmable, proposition is the difference in historical scale between the political-diplomatic constellations of civilizations and the trade-networks of oikumenes/world-economies until the 19th century. A critical case for future discussion is the relationship

between Rome and China, in which China, politico-diplomatically and militarily inaccessible to Rome (and not part of the same civilization/world system), seems inadvertently to have inflicted severe economic damage on it (currency drain, implying location in the same world-economy/oikumene). This proposition is related to, and strengthened by, F.J. Teggart's contention (1939:239-41) that Chinese statesmen who consciously chose to make wars on their western frontiers caused, without intending or knowing it, invasions of Rome's eastern frontiers, "conflicts and devastations in regions of which they had never heard," by disrupting silk route (and fur) trade. Rome and China in this period present the classic case of states belonging to the same world-economy, or oikumene, and different civilizations, different world-polities, and — in my meaning — different world systems.

Chase-Dunn. Since the 1970s I have held that all civilizations are world systems; but since the 1960s I have accepted that there are some world systems which are not civilizations, that is, very small, nonurban polycultures. Christopher Chase-Dunn is now in the lead on this line of research, which should help to detail the differences between the smallest, cityless, world systems and the next level larger, the one- and two-city protocivilizations, of which I now believe several, probably many, more must have existed (most only briefly, "abortive" in a sense analogous to Toynbee's) than have as yet been found. One appropriate line of comparative-civilizational fieldwork for the future will, with luck, be the search for lost and forgotten cities, carried on with new and superior technical means afforded by aerial and satellite photography, with searches for patterned, centric, and radial disturbances of soil and vegetation, showing the patterns of points and lines that usually represent civilizational geometry. The first fruitful zone for such exploration will I think be the forested areas of Africa south of the Sahara.

On another issue (not yet discussed in print), Chase-Dunn is considerably more skeptical, and I considerably more receptive, to the social-physics or complex-systems-physics ideas of Arthur S. Iberall, which I have found productive of useful hypotheses (as to, for example, why and how the several early-born civilizations initially formed near simultaneously (Iberall and Wilkinson, 1986); the relation of polyculturality to civilization (Iberall and Wilkinson, 1993); what might be the order of magnitude of the number of cities and civilizations "missing" from current records and to be searched for (Wilkinson, 1994, forthcoming).

Gills and Frank. Currently the best short compilation of their contentions, examined at length in Frank and Gills (1993), is Frank's five propositions (1993:2). (1) The "existence and development of the present world system stretches back at least 5000 years": I date its existence back

3500 years, when there was a critical fusion of its predecessors or roots, which go back at least 5500 years; in essence we concur. (2) The “same process of capital accumulation has played a, if not the, central role in the world system for several millennia”: I say “a, but not the” central role, in this and all other civilizational world systems (but not in the nonurban world systems Chase-Dunn studies). (3) The “Center-Periphery Structure...is also applicable to the world system before 1492”: having accepted Quigley’s (1961) argument on this point when he made it, I more than agree; the structure is applicable to all civilizations, that is, to all civilizational world systems (but not necessarily to nonurban world systems); I have provided a more detailed account (Wilkinson, 1991). (4) Hegemony “and rivalry for the same also mark world system history long before” 1492: I agree as to rivalry, extending my agreement to the other world systems; but there is a lot less hegemony achieved than is believed, and most of the best-known “hegemons” (e.g., 19th-century Britain, the United States after World War II) simply aren’t. (5) The “world system cycle” of A phases and B phases extends back many centuries before 1492: I agree fully, and have confirmed this independently (Wilkinson, 1992, 1993), for other world systems as well.

Aside from differences over the centrality of economics and the frequency and nature of hegemony still to be resolved, I see another topic for argument — within basic agreement — over the balance between statist and marketive capital accumulation. There may be periods in which states are the main engines of accumulation, and other periods in which private families are; more likely there are areas in each period where one or the other form dominates. But I suspect the prevailing pattern and persistent substratum is the cheek-by-jowl coexistence of very different forms even at the very local spatial scale, with a process change at the house threshold, at the market gate, at the cultic center (see my argument about the classical Athenian economy [1987a]).

I conclude as I began. The best way to deal with the discussions between civilizationists and world-systems analysts is to aver that the entities we are studying largely are, and ought to be, the same. Our theories ought to be merged. Having attempted to develop such a merger since encountering the civilizationist literature in the 1950s and the international-systems literature in the early 1960s, I can only view the current interaction with great pleasure.

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