Fluctuations in the Political Consolidation of Civilizations/World Systems

David Wilkinson

University of California, Los Angeles, dow@ucla.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol52/iss52/7
FLUCTUATIONS IN THE POLITICAL CONSOLIDATION OF CIVILIZATIONS/WORLD SYSTEMS

DAVID WILKINSON
POLITICAL SCIENCE, UCLA
DOW@UCLA.EDU

Introduction

A previous paper showed that, as among the political models of several civilizationists, Toynbee's revised "Helleno-Sinic" model (from his "Reconsiderations") best fit the data of actual alternations between "empires" and "states systems" in civilizations. An examination of more closely observed political trajectories as seen in an evolving dataset on the power configuration sequences of several civilizations/world systems is consistent with this previous finding.

Many scientific disciplines have a more or less customary division of labor between theorists and observationalists, experimenters, field workers and the like. Most theories of world systems and civilizations could do with a bit of independent testing. Some of these theories propose to describe, and perhaps also explain, predict or control, variation in the political centralization of such systems. It would seem helpful for researchers to collect data on different patterns of centralization in world systems, and changes in such patterns, and from sources independent of the theories to be tested. The current paper attempts to test some models of civilization/world-system history against some independently collected data on that topic.

I have for some years been working on developing data and, to a much lesser extent, testing theory concerning the centralization history—the political structures or power configurations—of civilizations or "world systems," exploring typologies for such structures, locating the sequences of such configurations over very long durations, developing and testing hypotheses about the expected succession of such sequences.

Though the data remain incomplete, I now have enough sequences of power configurations within several world systems of the distant past to conclude that the most prominent existing kinematic hypotheses are largely inadequate, and that more sophisticated techniques and models will be needed to reduce the data to some better order.

What are these "civilizations" or "world systems?"
Figure 1.

The incorporation of fourteen civilizations into one "central civilization."

This figure illustrates the successive incorporation of autonomous civilizations into a larger, composite "Central civilization" (in grey). ???? = Transitions to civilization took place no later than this date.
This chart is a chronogram which begins at the top of the page. As one goes downward on the page, and forward in time, entities begin to appear on the chart. These are the classic or primary civilizations or world systems, Egyptian and Mesopotamian, to begin with, then a collection of others—all of the largest, plus some of the smaller ones—arranged roughly west to east, left to right.

Civilizations/world systems come into existence at some point in space, and at some moment in time. The moment of origin is usually uncertain—the question marks indicate that uncertainty. World systems have coexisted on the globe for some period, and then merged into larger entities through long-term growth, collision and fusion.

The 14 particular systems distinguished here (and there are in history several more, usually small ones, not shown on the chart) when viewed at their origins mostly reflect those "civilizations" which have been generally recognized by civilizationists. After about 1500 BC, however, the chart reflects my own view that a composite world system, here called the "Central" system and shown shaded grey, arose in the Near East by way of the fusions of two previously separate politico-military networks, the Mesopotamian and Egyptian. Over its entire duration, this Central civilization, at first dominated by Near Eastern powers ("Near Eastern Phase"), next by Mediterranean powers ("Greco-Roman Phase"), then by Muslim and Christian states from both previous cores ("Medieval Phase"), and next by West European and Atlantic powers ("Western Phase"), ultimately expanded to the global scale which it enjoys today ("Global Phase"). Thus after AD 1500, the chart reflects the world systems view that Western expansion globalized its system, incorporating all the others, previously autonomous, into its own politico-economic structure.

My specific research interest is to represent and analyze the power configurations or political structures of these world systems at different moments in their careers. Figure 2 gives a preliminary look at what I have in mind. The shadings in Figure 2 represent values of a dichotomy which answers the question: at a given moment in time, was a world system structured as a system of independent states, or was it united in a universal state or empire? The grey areas represent the answer "system of states." The black areas represent the answer "universal empire." The unshaded areas represent the ever-necessary alternative "don't know."
FIGURE 2.
ALTERNATIONS BETWEEN STATES SYSTEMS AND UNIVERSAL EMPIRES

Each vertical bar in this chronogram represents a civilization: See Figure 1.
Central civilization is set off by a dashed line.

- **WORLD-STATE PERIODS**
- **STATES-SYSTEM PERIODS**
- **POLITICAL STRUCTURE NOT YET CLASSIFIABLE**
The data represented in this chart are helpful in addressing certain theories. Various theories of civilizational development, for instance, expect increasing political centralization over time. If we had seen a preponderance of grey areas toward the top of Figure 2, and black areas toward the bottom, that picture would be consistent with such theories. This graphic is useful for showing that this is not precisely the case, and that the problem is more complex.

Earlier versions of Figures 1 and 2 were used in a previous paper ("Kinematics of World Systems," 1986) to test the theories of several noted civilizationists: Spengler (1926-28), Bagby (1958), Quigley (1961), Melko (1969), and Toynbee (original version, 1939-46, and revised version, 1961). That paper concluded that Toynbee's revised "Helleno-Sinic" model (from his "Reconsiderations") best fit the data of actual alternations between "empires" and "states systems" in civilizations.

Since producing Figure 2, I have been attempting to deal with the obvious concern that a dichotomous variable—Empire vs. States System—under-represents intriguing complexities of power structure. For the next step in data collection I elected to try a heptachotomy, a seven-valued nominal power configuration variable, which included configurations long of interest to political scientists and world-systems analysts, as shown in Figure 3.

**CIVILIZATION/WORLD SYSTEM POWER CONFIGURATIONS**

**Phase I: Two Configurations**

1. STATES SYSTEM
2. UNIVERSAL EMPIRE

**Phase II: Seven Configurations**

0. NONPOLARITY
1. MULTIPOLARITY
2. TRIPOLARITY
3. BIPOLARITY
4. UNIPOLARITY (non-hegemonic)
5. HEGEMONY
6. EMPIRE
FIGURE 3

In addition to empire, I look for a weaker form of domination, namely hegemony; and among states-systems, I varied the number of great powers, distinguishing unipolarity (with one superpower, as in the world today) from bipolarity (as during the Cold War) from tripolarity (with three great powers), multipolarity (more than three great powers, as in the world system during say 1815-1945), and nonpolarity (no great powers but many small independent states).

Surveying the world systems on this much more complex variable is taking a long time, and I am far from finishing even a first cut, but I have some results. The data have been published or presented (in Wilkinson, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004). I provide these results in graphic form as Figures 4-8.
FIGURE 5--INDIC SYSTEM

FIGURE 6--NORTHEAST AFRICAN SYSTEM

FIGURE 7--SOUTHWEST ASIAN SYSTEM

Wilkinson: Fluctuations in the Political Consolidation of Civilizations/Wor
The values on the Y-axis are: 0=Nonpolarity, 6=Empire, and the other configurations in between, as stated in the legend on each charts.

Figure 4 charts the centralization fluctuations of the Far Eastern world system 1025 BC--AD 1850 at 25-year intervals, Figure 5 the Indic system 400 BC--AD 1800 at 10-year intervals, Figure 6 the Northeast African (Egyptian) c. 2625-1500 BC at 25-year intervals, Figure 7 the Southwest Asian (Mesopotamian) c. 2700-1500 BC at 10-year intervals, and Figure 8 the Central system 1500-700 BC at 10-year intervals.

These data allow us to address a number of recurrent issues in civilizations theory and world system theory having to do with the behavioral and evolutionary propensities of whole systems.

Let us consider some of the simpler hypotheses which float about the research environment, sometimes compatibly with, sometimes contradicting one another.

(1) Systems increase in centralization as they age.
(2) Systems tend to increase in centralization over time, but there are strong short-duration fluctuations en route.

The data graphed in Figures 4-8 are not at all consistent with either (1) or (2), which reflect the civilizational ideas of Spengler, Toynbee (original) and Melko.

(3) Multipolarity is the norm.
(4) Multipolarity is the most stable configuration.

The notion that multipolarity is the stable norm is illustrated in Figure 9 by a data trace that represents an idealized career of a stably multipolar world system's power configurations. The system is usually
multipolar, and when it deviates from multipolarity it quickly returns thereto.

Although multipolarism is widely approved by contemporary politicians, it is fairly consistent with only two graphs (Figure 7, SW Asia, and Figure 8, Central), and even there one observes long failure epochs.

5. Empire is the most stable configuration.

No doubt approved by Sons of Heaven, Caesars and Pharaohs, and certainly by Dante Alighieri, what we might call ultra-imperialism is very consistent with part of one graph (Figure 6, Northeast Africa), but not the rest.

6. Bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity.

Particularly identified with Kenneth Waltz (1979), this hypothesis is inconsistent with one graph (Figure 4, Far East), not inconsistent with three graphs (Figures 5, Indic, 7, SW Asia, and 8, Central), and probably not adequately tested in the fifth (Figure 6, NE Africa).

7. Systems fluctuate between the hegemony of one power and a multipolar balance.

This notion has great currency among world-systems analysts. It is not a particularly good fit to any of the data traces.

8. All world systems display cycles of centralization and decentralization, with no clear directionality and no normal resting point, stable state, or terminus ad quem.

This, the weakest hypothesis of the set, identifiable with the "Helleno-Sinic" theory of civilizations to which Arnold Toynbee retreated in his late work (Reconsiderations), after abandoning his orig-
inal increasing-centralization theory. By inspection, it seems broadly consistent with all graphs except perhaps one (Figure 6, NE Africa).

One would like to know more than this, certainly. One clue may lie in the fact that each system seems to have an "individuality," a recognizable signature, reflecting some persistent behavioral patterns.

Of course there can never be an end to the need for better data. Astronomers and geographers have been collecting their data since before Ptolemy and continue doing so, ever conscious of the incompleteness of whatever they collect. More and better data might change our conclusions: if Aristotle had had more accurate data on planetary motion, he might have been less confident of the unshakeable eternity of the universe. One may hope that more civilizationists and world systems analysts will involve themselves in basic data collection. If new data resurrect some theories and reinter others, so be it. For the moment, however, it would seem that Toynbee’s Helleno-Sinic model rules!

BIBLIOGRAPHY


