He Kept the Candlelight Aglow, Ever Brighter

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The onset of the 21st century was a period of hope and despair for the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilization (ISCSC). The despair arose as a result of a few of its luminary scholars departed in death while its prospects for rejuvenation were getting brighter. One of its luminaries who always kept the intellectual fire burning and the candlelight of scholarship aglow was Matthew Melko. Unfortunately, he too is no longer with us since his death in 2010.

During the Society’s 2005 annual conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, Lee Snyder, then President of the Society, but now he too is no longer with us, in his presidential address to the Society stated: “I see us as heirs of the tradition started by Spengler, and continued by Sorokin, Toynbee, Quigley, Melko and others.”

Snyder’s testimonial to the effect that Melko stood with the giants in his penetrating methodology on comparing civilizations was accurate to the point, as can be observed from Melko’s books and illuminating articles. Among the scholars who have vouched for Melko’s contributions to research are the illustrious Crane Brinton, Arnold Toynbee, Andrew Quigley, Andre Gunder Frank, Andrew Targowski, and David Wilkinson.

They all noted the essential values of Melko’s work as detailed in the following books of Melko and his coauthors:

- The Nature of Civilizations, 1969
- Fifty-Two Peaceful Societies, 1973, Canadian Peace Research Institute
- Peace in Our Time, 1990, Paragon House
- General War Among Great Powers in World History, 2001, Mellen Press
- Single Myths and Realities, (with Leonard Cargan), Sage Press, 1982

Melko delved into the dynamic political and diplomatic atmosphere at the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. He was recruited to active duty in the United States Army where he served in Korea from 1952-1954 after he earned his master’s degree from the University of Chicago in 1952. Upon his return from the Army, Sergeant Major Melko went to pursue a second Master’s of Science degree from Columbia University. He then went to London to pursue his doctoral studies from the London School of Economics.
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and Political Science where he studied under the incomparable historian, Arnold Toynbee. His military and pedagogical training, in addition to the vibrant and optimistic post-World War II years, allowed Melko to flourish in intellectual depth.

After his honorable service to his country in Korea, Melko’s career span the fields of journalism, teaching, research and publication and university administration as a dean. In all of these fields, Melko offered himself as a dutiful leader and a scholar of impeccable accomplishments. He has authored and coauthored eight books, published over 70 articles and served as a president of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations.

During his tenure as president of the ISCSC (1983-1986), he endeavored to increase membership and focus the Society’s mission on describing and articulating the meaning of civilization. Beginning as early as the 1980s and continuing after the year 2000, the Society also oriented its agenda on the problem of articulating civilization in terms of time and geographical space.

The approach that Melko and his colleagues at the Society selected was a comparative study of civilizations. This approach opened up the way to naming, categorizing, ranking/classifying and assigning origin, influence, evolution, and identification of civilizations. The prominent civilizations that were not disputed as historically visible were not sources of controversy. Melko stated, “The mainstream civilizations are Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Classical, South Asian, East Asian, Andean, Mesoamerican, African, Byzantine, Islamic and Western.”¹ These civilizations were accepted as units of analysis and open fields of research. They were recognized, in their due times, as having impact in terms of culture, language, diplomatic, and trade influences.

On the other hand, “the boundary of civilizations” and the character of their cultural, diplomatic, ideological, and socio-linguistic contents with respect to war and peace may vary. Melko emphasized the prevalence of war and peace and the extent to which war is an abnormal occurrence and peace throughout the centuries, an abiding norm.

The problem arises from the fact that comparing civilizations involves examination of the topic from a spatial perspective. In the spatial perspective, the intellectual panorama and the methodological landscape are amorphous, with the structural lines in terms of origin and influence difficult to articulate. Even if painstaking research efforts manage to produce cogent conclusions about time-tested civilizations, the identifying features of a specific civilization, such as the Greek or Egyptian civilizations represent problems of certainty.

- Do we identify a specific civilization when scholars found the wherewithal to observe, define, and enumerate its identifying characteristics, when it was firmly institutionalized into the soil and soul of space and time, or do we possess the

essential perspicacity to clearly say that other civilizations have or do not have a role in its origination?  

- The time horizon and the “boundary” with which we associate civilizations is obscured by the material facts the researcher must rely upon to articulate the civilization’s origin, its internal characteristics, and the extent of its influence.

Along these lines, Melko queried the tendency of emerging and vibrant civilizations attracting the glare of light to obscure other equally established civilizations. He asked, “Is it conceivable that the great explorations beginning in the fifteenth century, and the tremendous improvements in transportation and communication that followed, may have stultified attempts to isolate and understand individual cultures at the very time such study was beginning?”

His answer was to be mindful, and circumspect in our selection with respect to the “boundaries of civilization in space and time” and to be sensitive as to the scientific bases of our research. Failing to do so, we risk accepting predetermined historical and civilizational realities shrouded in subjectivity and devoid of scientific objectivity.

Professor Melko became the Society’s president in 1983 when its intellectual energy was dynamic and substantive. Internationally recognized scholars enriched the Society and Melko’s capacity to integrate scholars of various disciplines and steer them to the study of comparative rigor revitalized the Society. They built on the Society’s founding principles under the able leadership of Sorokin, Quigley, Melko, Wilkinson, and Wallerstein.

Melko received accolades for his edited book, *the Boundary of Civilizations*. Some were glowing reviews recognizing his command of facts and the analytical force that he brought to bear on his work. Some reviews were mixed, but nonetheless they celebrated Melko’s scholarship and analytical creativity as setting new standards for the study of civilizations.

Quigley viewed Melko with reserve, but appreciated Melko’s book, *The Nature of Civilizations*, stating:

“The successful accomplishment is his succinct exposition of the present state of the study of this orphaned subject, which finds a home in no academic department or discipline but turns up as frequently in sociology or philosophy as in anthropology or history, and may, indeed, even be found resident in two of these simultaneously on the same campus without anyone recognizing the fact.”

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Even though Quigley in his praise of Melko is not so generous, other towering scholars have credited Melko’s creativity and the meticulous tenacity of his scholarship. Arnold Toynbee, who must have sensed Melko’s contribution to the advance of the comparative studies of civilization, said of Melko:

> Melko, in his present book, recognizes handsomely his debt to his predecessors, and at the same time he uses their work to help him to carry his and their common study farther than the points reached by them. As a survivor of the preceding generation, I am delighted by this. If one has taken a hand in any branch of study at a fairly early stage in this branch’s development, when the workers in this particular field have still been few, one hopes that the number of one’s fellow workers will increase and - speaking, here, simply for myself - I gauge the success of my own work by the speed and the extent of its replacement by the work of younger colleagues. Melko’s *The Nature of Civilizations* covers much ground in few pages.  

Melko himself was pugnacious when he felt the need to assert the parameters of comparative studies of civilization within the orbit of liberalism. He was not so parochial as to easily be type-casted as Eurocentric. He was a progressive internationalist with most of his research aimed as studying civilizations from their peaceful characteristics.

To that extent, he argued that Western Civilization is no different than any other civilization. In its case, however, a difference is that Western civilization used technology to harness its environment. Western science complemented Western Civilization. It was not encumbered by religion or the overbearing demands of a command ideology. Equipped with its scientific resources, it exhibited secular and progressive character. Its secular temper unleashed bounties of technological innovations enabling it to extend its reach to the highest firmaments and deepest shoals.

As the Society was expanding its influence, a few great scholars from the field of World Systems theory added intellectual vigor to the Society’s stature. Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Christopher Chase-Dunn were members who looked at the study of civilization from the center-periphery perspective. They argued that Western capitalism, rationalized by liberalism, emboldened with technological innovations, endowed with industrial infrastructure and oriented for exploiting primary resources of the less developed countries has subjugated the vast humanity of the Third World. Melko disagreed with the substance and the tenor of the World Systems argument. Melko’s stance was combative without being offensive in his criticism. He showed his sharper edges when he confronted the World Systems approach for its vertical analysis of the colonial and the pre-colonial evolution of powers. The vertical analysis was masterfully addressed by such Society members as Andre Gunder Frank, Christopher Chase-Dunn,

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Immanuel Wallerstein, and David Wilkinson, all Melko’s friends and fellow members at ISCSC.

These scholars took approaches that were laser-focused on delineating global configurations of economic and political power from the perspective of “center-periphery” relationships. They argued that military, industrial, and economic power were the determining factors in the progress and development of societies. Whereas Melko was “cosmopolitan”, patient, and circumspect so as to accord past civilizations their due reverence on account of their glorious past, the scholars who propounded the World Systems theory looked at the Third World states basically as plaintiffs helplessly needing advocacy before the court of global jurisdiction. That jurisdiction is more responsive to the Western interests, however. It is structured to facilitate exploitation and compound the dependency status of the poor societies at the periphery.

From the World Systems approach camp, Andre Gunder Frank was imputative of the West. He indicted European powers for the “accumulation” of the wealth of the periphery. Ever since the European exploration and subsequent colonization, the primary resources of the peripheral states were gutted by European powers to enrich their treasuries and feed their ever gluttonous industrial establishments. The outcome, he argued, is “the Development of Underdevelopment” or the slow, but progressive, impoverishment of the periphery and the enrichment of the Center at a compound rate of exploitation.6

The year 1492 figured prominently in Frank’s analysis. He argued that it kick-started the dynamic forces of European colonialism. Ever since then, the world was set to be configured in accordance to the cultural tastes and industrial appetites of the “metropolitan” states.7 That was the extent of Western civilization, according to Frank. As direct consequences of this civilization’s actions, Europe reigned supreme and its former colonial possessions lay supine, prostrated under the iron fetters of neocolonialism. Frank was vocal, angry, apostolic in his denunciations, and supremely rich in his details. He has not gone so far as to call for revolutionary uprising in the tone of the Communist Manifesto, but did not hide his socialist beliefs and his rejection of the promises and possibilities of liberalism.

Melko took exception to Frank’s theses and he expressed his protestation by calling Frank’s argument a “Faustian delusion.”

Equally forceful and meticulously elegant in the scope and range of his historical, sociological, and political analysis was Immanuel Wallerstein. His book, The Modern World-System, trail-blazed a comprehensive and causal look at power, again from the perspective of Europe’s insatiable appetite for industrial input.8 The raw materials of Africa, Asia, and the Americas meant more to European powers than did the humanity and soul of the natives. In Wallerstein’s conclusion, the causal link between the economies of the poor

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countries, which he identified as the “periphery,” and those of the Europeans, identified as “the center,” is irrevocably linked to a horrible and inevitable result -- the dismal impoverishment of the periphery.

Next, Christopher Chase-Dunn elaborated on World Systems theory from the structural perspective. He was more in consonance with Melko and praised Melko’s work as an “excellent introduction to an alternative way of conceptualizing and bounding of civilizations.” Chase-Dunn argued that the superstructure of the World Systems theory needed to look at the bureaucratic grassroots of colonialism.9

Both Frank and Wallerstein are ideological in their analysis. They have identified global politics as structured along the lines of capitalism. Liberalism rationalized and enthusiastically praised capitalism and countenanced its “tentacles” for global exploitation. Capitalism cultivates the rise of avaricious industrial and commercial enterprises. These enterprises are driven, restless in their quest to expand the horizons of scientific frontiers and the “boundaries” of their domination. They push to the outer horizons of the periphery irrespective of the inevitable human rights abuses and widespread corruption they cultivate in the Third World. Liberalism, regardless of its stated principles of democracy and human rights, lacks the capacity to harness multinationals and capitalist enterprises in the face of massive human rights abuses and economic plundering.

The World Systems School saw this symbiotic link between liberalism and capitalism as a detrimental force endlessly working against the prospects of Third World development. Melko disagreed. Melko focused on liberalism and praised it for its ability to motivate citizens, its endless capacities for creativity, its endorsement and championing of individual freedoms, and its open and broad celebration of the sciences. He rejected the laying of blame on liberalism. He is lukewarm on capitalism but warmhearted on liberalism for its measures of natural rights and individual freedoms irrespective of its imperfections.

Melko’s forceful rejection of the World Systems approach and its pairing of capitalism and liberalism was assertive and biting. He aroused the anger of its champions by calling the World Systems theory a “Faustian Delusion.”10 The drama that unfolded and the disquiet that Melko ignited on Frank, who has earlier commended Melko’s work as an excellent scholarly endeavor, is revealing.11

Neither ideological nor polemical is the work of David Wilkinson who answered back to those scholars often referred to as the radical school. Wilkinson’s identifying markers are meticulous analysis, great craftsmanship in presenting data, tireless energy in amassing and tailoring details, and mastery of historical, political, and cultural details. He exhibits

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scientific sensitivity and masterful scholarship. He catalogues the evolution of civilizations to bring to bear scientifically grounded pedagogy. In Melko and Wilkinson’s analysis, the analytical details and the spirited marshalling of arguments are visible; they share the same ideological and intellectual template.

Disagreements notwithstanding, Melko felt at home with the scholars mentioned above. The range of Melko’s analysis and the trajectories of the World Systems theory overlapped and shared reciprocal “interdependence.” The sense of collegiality and the civility with which they debated their ideas are instructive. They can be categorized into the conventional classification of scholars that had prevailed since the end of the Second World War.

Whereas Frank and Wallerstein are at home with the spirit of socialist analysis, Melko, Wilkinson, and Chase-Dunn are progressive liberals in the sense they empathize with the Third World, but they do not credit socialism or communism to serve as the panacea for the Third World ills. Melko, particularly, railed against these ideologies. He struck punches courageously as a valiant soldier and received reactive punches, but these neither fazed nor dispirited the Ohio thinker.

Melko was a great scholar and professor, a man of integrity, and a gentleman in the truest sense of the word. He had gravitas, but he would also be the least enthusiastic to accept words of endearment coming from people like me who observed him and who were edified by the intellectual wealth of his vast scholarship and the gravitas of his character. Few praises would be too many, given his sense of humility, but he would also be confirmed by many who knew him as deserving the accolades and praises becoming a father to his beloved children, a loving husband to his wife, and a great colleague to those who had the great fortunes of knowing him.

Dr. Matthew Melko was a man of a few words, but he was full of intellectual wisdom emanating from a context of tolerance, a gracious and unassuming giant. He was a scholar of tenacious energy, enthusiasm, foresight and superior grace. He was a heavyweight, but he liked to obscure his luminary force, opting to work from the depth of the deep trenches, laboring, sweating, and exerting endless energy to recruit new members for the ISCSC. He faithfully encouraged young scholars to increase their participation in the field of comparative civilization studies, and he charted ways by which the ISCSC would sharpen its vision and expand its horizon. His labor was not in vain as the ISCSC is growing in those very areas that Melko envisioned.