Matthew Melko and Leighton R. Scott *The Boundaries of Civilizations in Space and Time*

Christopher Chase-Dunn

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

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol20/iss20/5

This volume is the result of a decade of discussions held at the annual meetings of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations on the question of identifying the universe of human civilizations. Following the comparative discussions of Spengler, Sorokin, Kroeber, Toynbee, Coulborn and Quigley the authors have debated the main issues involved in conceptualizing and bounding civilizations. They also discuss the theories of origins of civilizations, the idea that civilizations terminate or die, and the notion that there is today a global civilization.

I am not really qualified to evaluate the substantive debates in this book because the whole arena of ancient history and archaeology is new to me. I am trained and practiced in the realm of cross-national comparisons in the modern era. Nevertheless, as an enthusiastic beginner I can report my reactions.

The book is an excellent introduction to alternative ways of conceptualizing and bounding civilizations. It confronts directly the most difficult questions, and its dialectical style provokes thought. There is an excellent Glossary containing definitions of names and places which I found very helpful. This book might be a bit difficult for undergraduate courses but quite useful for graduate courses on large-scale social change.

In the debate about how to define and bound civilizations I was most convinced by Professor David Wilkinson’s argument for the usefulness of interconnectedness rather than homogeneity. There are several possible sorts of interconnectedness, i.e., basic and prestige good trade networks, military competition, and political authority. The interaction among these differently bounded networks could and should be studied empirically. It is interesting that both basic trade and military competition produce a result similar in broad outline to Professor Wilkinson’s description of the emergence of “Central civilization.” This is a sequence of mergers and incorporations of networks from the joining of the Egyptian and Sumerian civilizations to the final incorporation of the globe by the Europe-centered system in the nineteenth century A.D.

This rather structural and relatively easily operationalizable definition of civilizations/world-systems (Wilkinson’s usage) does not, of course, make the culturalists happy. But it does, I think, give them a solid foundation onto which to build their analyses of styles, world-views, and value-orientations.

I would like to point out several “silences” in the material covered in this volume which I think ought not be left out of a consideration of large-scale social change. Perhaps the most serious lacuna is the absence of any
discussion of the deep structural logic of large scale social systems. By refusing to acknowledge that basic logics of production and institutional reproduction differ across social systems the whole issue of transformation is missed, or rather is reduced to a consideration of the rise and fall of centers of domination. Following Marx, who is used primarily as a “determinist materialist” whipping boy in this text, we can understand fundamental social change to consist of transformations in the basic logic of social production and the appropriation of surplus product. Thus the “mode of production” distinction looks at the extent to which kin-based, tributary, capitalist (market), or socialist relations are functioning in any existing historical system. I am not one who argues, as does Immanuel Wallerstein, that each civilization/world-system has only one mode of production, and as a corollary that modes of production can be used to determine the boundaries between world-systems. This produces much confusion in the analysis of transformation, a situation which is greatly improved by using criteria of interconnection for boundaries and analyzing the relative domination of modes of production and their interaction, competition, conflict and (sometimes) complementarity within each civilization/world-system.

The second silence which affects the questions posed and the answers given in this volume is the absence of any but passing consideration of core/periphery relations as constitutive elements in the processes of fundamental social change. The very notion of “civilization” connotes a value bias in favor of core regions as the key elements in social development. Peripheral areas are described with terms like “primitive” and “barbarism,” and are seen primarily as lower forms and as destructive in their impact on civilization.

Rather than taking a “pro-periphery” value position, I wish to argue that peripheries, and especially semiperipheries have been important contributors to fundamental social change, and the dynamics of core/periphery relations have had enormous impacts on social development. The comparative study of core/periphery relations is yet only in its infancy, but systematic and comparative analyses of core/periphery hierarchies will add greatly to the discussion of the dynamics of the rise and fall of civilizations and fundamental social change.

A third silence is also produced by the very focus on civilizations. Though the book does consider various explanations for the origins of civilization, there is little study of the nature of pre-state societies. In a small section on “the difference between primitive and civilized cultures” there are a few short contributions which advocate a more serious consideration of societies which are not deemed to be civilizations. I argue that we need to consider social systems which are very different from one another in order to understand each one, and in order to understand the possibilities for future social transformations. This means close comparative study of stateless, classless societies and their intersocietal networks in order to see similarities and differences with
later, larger scale systems. The process of the rise and fall of chiefdoms exhibits an interaction of forces of centralization and decentralization familiar to students of the empire-feudalism cycle, but these processes are different because the basic institutions of cooperation and competition (and conflict) operant in the two contexts differ. Such comparisons can reveal much of interest to our understanding of rise and fall dynamics.

The debates considered in this volume are relevant not only to scholarly consideration of the past, but also to the contemporary processes of globalization, the rise and fall of core states, and potential, fundamental transformations (or termination) of our own civilization. As such it should be read by a wider audience, and the future efforts of civilizationists should be directed toward the broader comparisons suggested above, as well as toward explicit consideration of the relevance of civilizational studies to our own collective future.

Christopher Chase-Dunn