Civilizational Change: The Role of Nomads

Thomas D. Hall

De Pauw University

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

Recommended Citation
CIVILIZATIONAL CHANGE: 
THE ROLE OF NOMADS

THOMAS D. HALL

Unless you let us barter whenever we come, we will start killing again! response of an angry Tangut to a closed fair-place
(Szynkiewicz 1989, p. 157)

Introduction

Recently William McNeill in a thoughtful autocritique of The Rise of the West said:

...the central methodological weakness of my book is that while it emphasizes interaction across civilizational boundaries, it pays inadequate attention to the emergence of the ecumenical world system within which we live today.... Somehow an appreciation of the autonomy of separate civilizations (and of all the other less massive and less skilled cultures of the earth) across the past two thousand years needs to be combined with the portrait of an emerging world system, connecting greater and greater numbers of persons across civilized boundaries (McNeill 1990, pp. 9-10).

The emergence of this “ecumenical world system” is both real and problematic, as is the methodology to study it. McNeill's parenthetical remarks allude to an issue raised at length by Eric Wolf (1982), namely that constant attention to state level societies, or “civilizations” in one of the many meanings of that term. This neglect has led to the neglect of the roles played by nonstate peoples in history.

Nomads, in particular, have suffered from such neglect. They are seen as “barbarians,” and therefore “beyond the pale” both socially and intellectually. This attitude is harmful, not only because it is “bad taste” in these days of cultural pluralism, but also because it leads to systematic misunderstanding of processes of civilizational change. This is so for several reasons. First, it appears that sedentary social organization emerged from an entirely nomadic context (Nissen 1988). In other words, civilization arose from nomads originally. Second, nomadic groups fre-
quently play complex intermediary roles in the interactions among sedentary groups, especially states and civilizations. For instance, the rise and fall of the Mongol Empire played a major role in the collapse of the eastern circuits of the thirteenth century Eurasian world-system, yet the Mongols were exceptional in many ways to typical nomad-sedentary relations (Barfield 1989). Third, our “modern world-system” was “restructured from” the remains of the earlier Eurasian world-system (Abu-Lughod 1989, 1990). Hence, the role of nomads in such restructuring must be understood in order to understand origins of our world and past successions of civilizations. To do this it is useful to refine the language of discourse.

Conceptual and Theoretical Terms

“World-Systems” and “Core/Periphery Hierarchies”

Two concepts and their theoretical roots are central to this somewhat complicated argument: “world-system” and “core/periphery hierarchy.” A “world-system,” according to Immanuel Wallerstein, is a systematically linked interstate system composed of core, peripheral, and semiperipheral states. He calls this a “world” system because it is a self-contained division of labor, in short, a world. If the system is dominated by a central political actor, he calls it a “world-empire.” If there is no central political actor, but several competing states interconnected by trade, he calls it a “world-economy.” Core states are developed countries; peripheral states are un- or under-developed countries; and semiperipheral states have some characteristics of the other two types, and generally block polarization between core and periphery. Core development is fueled by exploitation of peripheral states. This exploitation is necessary for core development, and a major cause of peripheral underdevelopment. Semiperipheral states have a relationship to peripheral states that is similar to that between core and periphery, and they have a relationship to core states that is similar to that between periphery and core. Thus, they have a stake in maintaining the overall system, although their attempts to improve their position within the system sometimes lead to significant changes in it.

World-system theory was developed to explain the rise, and in
some versions the eventual demise, of the “modern world-system,” that is, the interstate system that developed in western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and which subsequently came to dominate the entire globe. This theory has generated both a good deal of new knowledge and a tremendous amount of controversy in several disciplines. Two of these controversies are relevant here. First, although in principle world-system theory should pay attention to the relations between state and nonstate societies, especially how interaction with and incorporation into the world-system has transformed the course of social change in nonstate societies, in practice it has not done so (Wolf 1982; Hall 1986, 1989). Second, deriving from both a concern with origins of the modern world-system and with its complex relations with nonstate societies, questions arise as to the generalizability of the theory to settings prior to the fifteenth century, that is to “precapitalist” settings.

The extension of world-system theory to “precapitalist” settings necessarily raises questions about the distinctiveness of the “modern world-system” with respect to “precapitalist” world-systems. First, there is no reason, a priori, to require that every world-system have a semiperiphery, or that it be limited to only one tier between core and periphery. The extent of the hierarchy should remain an empirical problem. Second, the precise boundaries of nonstate societies (especially nomadic societies) are theoretically and empirically problematic. On the one hand, nonstate societies—based on contemporary ethnographic studies and ethnohistory—do not have precise borders, but tend to “fade away” in decreasingly important kin relationships and other connections (Wolf 1982). On the other hand, just how much and what type of interaction between state and nonstate societies constitutes a significant connection also remains problematic. Trade in vital goods, trade in luxuries, trade in captives, alliances for frontier buffering, recruitment of nomads for armies, or endemic warfare with other nomads probably have different implications for the historical evolution of core/periphery hierarchies. Third, that which is evolving is not a self-contained social unit, such as a “tribe,” a “state,” an “empire,” or a “civilization,” but a larger unit, some type of “world-system” which has been labeled a core/periphery hierarchy (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991a, 1991b).

Within this broad framework, then, the problem is to examine
the role of nomads in the historical evolution of core/periphery hierarchies. I use the term "historical evolution" to denote a process subject to systematic explanation, one that can be explained, not by reference to abstract categories or teleological processes, but by examination of historical events. I explicitly reject all unilinear analyses. Even within such an openended and historically contingent approach to social change the origins of states, and of core/periphery hierarchies are germane to this discussion.

The Origins of States, Trade, Nomads, and Technology

In a discussion of the contributions of archaeology to understanding the origin of the state, Gledhill claims:

A regional focus seems of crucial importance . . . The 'nuclear areas' of ancient civilization were also characterized by intense interactions between nomadic and sedentary populations, interactions which linked farms to fishermen, gatherer-hunters and pastoralists" (Gledhill 1988, p. 23).

In other words, states, and hence civilizations, originated in systems of intersocietal interaction. Kohl argues that:

... even the earliest "pristine" example of state formation cannot be explained entirely as an internal process of social differentiation but must be viewed partly as the product of a "world-economy" at different levels of development . . . (Kohl 1978, p. 489).

The evidence, as is always the case with archaeological materials, is incomplete, and subject to revision based on new finds, nevertheless, the evidence is very persuasive. Trade between lowland Mesopotamia and highland Iranian plateau supplied goods used by state officials to support their claims to authority and legitimacy. The trade induced mutual dependency between the two areas, and constituted a world-system.

Kohl urges his archaeologist colleagues "to stop dismantling our tents and stealing away before history dawns," (1978, p.475) and to make full use of information available in the historical record using evidence on such things as:

... qualitatively novel developments in transportation, communication, and military technology associated with the domestication of the horse; the appearance of effective chariots; the spread or "democratization" of metal tools and weapons . . . (Kohl 1988, p. 30).
In other words, archaeologists should use historical materials in their quest to understand and explain these developments which occurred over long periods which usually straddled the boundary between prehistory and history.

Anthony (1986) points out that the domestication of horses greatly enhanced transportation and communication over land. Since simple iron making technology was very portable it could diffuse easily among horse riding nomads (Kohl 1987a, p. 22). With knowledge of iron making and possession of sizable horse herds it becomes readily apparent how nomads could sometimes dominate sedentary peoples, and how they may have been the originators of technological innovations. This could lead to an interesting situation where the “periphery” dominated the “core.” If one adheres strictly to Wallerstein’s definitions, this is logically impossible because his definition of core includes domination of the periphery. If, however, one uses core/periphery hierarchy and makes domination an empirical issue, reversal is possible. This then allows empirical investigation into the origins of the modern pattern in which the core always dominates the periphery.

Rather than pursue abstract discussions of these issues and problems, it is appropriate to turn to historical examples of nomad-sedentary interactions.

Nomad-Civilization Relations

China and Nomads

The importance of nomads in Chinese history is widely acknowledged. This account stresses only certain processes, drawing heavily from the work of Owen Lattimore and Thomas Barfield. Throughout early Chinese history agriculturalists who had moved to the steppe sometimes adopted other styles of making a living (e.g., herding) that were better suited to the local ecology. This pastoralism was not a case of “devolution,” but an alternative survival strategy (Lattimore 1980). Thus, the nomad-sedentary distinction is fundamentally one of livelihood, not race or ethnicity. That is, the difference between lifestyles remains, even though individuals may change from one to the other.
Since nomads produced little of interest or value to settled Chinese, nomads used threats of force to induce trade: trading and raiding were alternative means to the same ends. Sedentary Chinese eventually developed a cavalry to fight nomads. Indeed, some studies show that raiding correlated with changing conditions of trade and changing state stability (Szyrkiewicz 1989, p. 154; Barfield 1989). Chinese officials acquiesced to this trade as a way of controlling nomads. The trade was primarily in luxury goods used by nomadic leaders to shore up and symbolize their power. This interaction fueled changes both in China and among nomads. It helped in incorporating new lands. In times of state decline, nomadic leaders sometimes served as protectors of beleaguered areas. In times of state ascendance, unified Chinese response promoted wider unity among nomads. Nomads were as often a source of change as a receiver (Lattimore 1980, Barfield 1989).

Barfield (1989) analyzes the interconnections between the rise and fall of the Chinese empire and various steppe empires (see especially his chart p. 13). The two are intimately connected via the organizational system of the Chinese empire and the varieties of steppe politics and organization. A key feature in Barfield's analysis is the distinction between inner and outer frontier strategies. The outer frontier strategy is the more familiar. In this strategy a dominant steppe leader uses violent attacks to terrify Chinese court officials, alternates war and peace successively to raise tribute payments, and assiduously avoids taking over Chinese lands and the necessarily intendant entanglements in Chinese court politics (Barfield 1989, p. 49).

The inner strategy is more subtle, and is one that develops when a steppe confederation begins to disintegrate. Some contending steppe faction leader, typically of a weaker faction, seeks alliance with Chinese officials against his rivals. The Chinese officials acquiesce, since typically they favor using "barbarians against barbarians." The steppe faction leader sometimes uses the Chinese military to aid in the defeat of his rivals and uses favor at Chinese court to sever tribute flow between the Chinese and his rivals. Usually, this leads to success on the part of the Chinese allied faction. Once dominant, the steppe leader can either use the new power base to unify the steppe and return to an outer
frontier strategy or leave the steppe politically fragmented and seek to dominate a local region, monopolizing flow of tribute (Barfield 1989, p. 63).

This oscillation explains the rather long cycles of nomad-Chinese relations (Barfield 1989, p. 13). In particular, it explains the correlation of strong steppe polities with a strong Chinese empire. Only when the empire is strong can it be “milked” continuously via an outer frontier strategy. When the empire is weak, steppe leaders tend to favor an inner frontier strategy, making alliances with local “war lords.” The Mongols used both strategies, but with their own peculiar twists.

The Mongol Empire

Analysis of the relations between Mongols and sedentary states is doubly difficult. First, the entire Central Asian field of action must be examined (Morgan 1986; Allsen 1987; Barfield 1989; Kwanten 1979). This is a difficult task because of the way records were made and preserved. The interpretation of documents—nearly always written by and from the point of view of sedentary state officials—requires detailed knowledge of many local histories. Second, the Mongols were peculiar in many ways as a steppe empire (Barfield 1989). According to Abu-Lughod (1989, 1990) they played a pivotal role in the thirteenth century collapse of the Eurasian world-system and in the consequent rise of the European world-system.

Mongol success can be attributed to factors and processes occurring at different levels simultaneously (Sauders 1971; Morgan 1986; Lindner 1981, 1982). First, the states in western Asia were weak and thus vulnerable to attack and conquest. Their ecological adaptations were much more fragile. The Mongols, unaware of this, attacked with vigor. Whereas in China destroyed towns were rebuilt and repopulated, in southwest Asia such destruction often became permanent, especially when irrigation systems were ruined. Mongol refusal to take over local administration left no one capable of rebuilding destroyed systems (Barfield 1989, pp. 201-202). This was, of course, the familiar outer frontier strategy, but in this case applied against states which were politically weaker and ecologically more precarious than was China.

Second, continual warfare made a client relation with the Mon-
gols an attractive "bargain" given the alternatives. Places which accepted Mongol terms (Manchuria, Korea, Uighar oases) were not destroyed and often kept their own leaders. Places which continued to resist the Mongols or repudiated earlier treaties (Chin China, western Turkestan, and the Tangut kingdom) were punished and often destroyed. Chinggis was particularly intolerant of any perceived disloyalty. Punitive wars "were so devastating that they led to the overthrow of the ruling dynasties and, by default, their direct incorporation into the Mongol Empire" (Barfield 1989, p. 200).

The conquest of China and the founding of the Yüan dynasty were due to an overly vigorous pursuit of the outer frontier strategy of terror. This is one of the ways in which the Mongols differed from all previous Central Asian nomadic groups. They over pursued the outer frontier strategy. In the west they destroyed some states and were forced to incorporate and administer others. In the east they were ultimately trapped by their own vigor and success into founding a new Chinese dynasty.

A third factor in Mongol success was continued presence of pastoral nomads who maintained a flexible tribal/kin social structure which allowed them to recruit first other nomads, later even sedentary groups, into a larger and larger machine for conquest. Ninth was the presence of several leaders who were able to manage astutely the drive for conquest and plunder with the needs of administration. Specifically, Mongol leaders were able, for some time, to maintain a sufficient volume of plunder and tribute to insure loyalty of tribes that might otherwise be inclined to leave the confederation. In short they perfected the outer frontier strategy of "milking" sedentary states (with some exceptions noted above). Fifth, superior logistic ability of pastoral nomads in communication, transportation, and mobility was key to conquest of large territories, and even of sedentary states. This superiority was rooted in the pastoral way of life: availability of horses, intimate knowledge of geography, and ability to move their entire society (families and their resource base, their herds) with them. This same superiority was also a key to the collapse of the system.

All the great Khans—if only temporarily—have been able to put these processes in operation (e.g., Allsen 1987). First, capitalizing on the inclusive nature of pastoral tribes, conquered groups were given an honorable option of joining the group (the alterna-
tive was being put to the sword). This worked well with other pastoralist and poorly with sedentary peoples (unless they wanted to become pastoralists). Second, as in modern pyramid schemes, as long as the system kept expanding, new recruits (groups) could gain both status and wealth. Continued expansion also alleviated, if it did not solve completely, the problem of revenue by a constant inflow of booty. As long as this was successful, it distracted conservative elements from social changes which flowed from this strategy and minimized factional rivalry. Superior communications and mobility were used to amass troops and overcome enemies. However, this strategy was inherently unstable, that is, temporary.

The instability stems from two closely intertwined sources: political and technological. The political problem is the orderly succession of rulers. A "big man" comes to power on the basis of his personal skills, not the least of which is alliance-building. Among Central Asian pastoralists, this is typically based on military prowess. Hence, succession of rulership necessarily entails armed conflict. When there was only one son who had distinguished himself in battle, conflict was merely postponed for a generation until either there was no such son, or there were several. For the Mongols these problems were exacerbated by the competing, and at time conflicting, principles of lateral (older to younger brothers) and lineal (father to son) succession. The lack of clear priorities inevitably led to justification of succession by arms. Institutionalization of succession would have undermined the very basis of leadership. Thus, it is not only that the Mongol Empire did not institutionalize political control as Eisenstadt (1963) argues, but also that Mongols could not institutionalize leadership and remain Mongols. The same problems are inherent in political control and revenue garnering.

A key to Mongol success was communication and mobility of men and resources. These technological factors also contributed to instability because they made it impossible for any central leader to monopolize control of strategic resources as a means of coercing compliance. Hence, there was no way to insure that revenue collectors would forward revenue to the leader.

The same features that make tribes inclusive also make them divisive; what can be built quickly can equally quickly disintegrate. The material basis of this situation is the adaptation to plains/
steppe environment. This is the underlying limit of pastoralist expansion. They cannot effectively control territory beyond the plains/steppe without giving up their lifestyle, thus the edge of the steppe remains a permanent frontier (Lindner 1982; McNeill 1964).

Conversely, sedentary states could not conquer nomads—except by sedentarizing them. They could control them by a combination of constructing barriers and employing highly mobile troops, who could essentially beat the pastoralists at their own game—decisive hit-and-run victories (Lattimore 1962a, p. 485). Thus, Central Asian pastoralists, especially the Mongols, could build huge empires, but could not maintain them. Conversely, the Chinese could manipulate, but never conquer, their nomadic adversaries. According to several writers (Allsen 1987; Barfield 1989; Lattimore 1951, 1962d; Morgan 1986), this accounts for the convoluted quality of Chinese histories of these events. Chroniclers had to warn princes and emperors of the inherent impossibility of conquest, while never admitting that the "son of heaven" was not all powerful—a task that makes contemporary American "spin doctors" appear to be rank amateurs.

The Ottoman Empire

The formation of the Ottoman empire is of interest because it was built by the transformation of nomadic pastoralists into sedentary farmer-soldiers. According to Lindner (1983), nomads, particularly of the "tribe" of Osman, played a vital role in the founding of the Ottoman Empire. It was precisely the fluid, multi-cultural aspects of tribal organization that made nomadic "tribalism" an effective model for building a state. Once built, the needs of the new state led to the oppression and destruction of nomads by conversion into sedentary peasants.

The erstwhile nomads, now rulers of a large state, were compelled to sedentarize the remaining nomads. This was done by first shifting obligations of support of the state from contributions of manpower in fighting (nomad tradition) to taxes in kind and/or money, and later by levying taxes in early spring immediately after lambing time, counting all animals as adult sheep, and therefore taxable. This contrasts with the Mongol custom which exempted small herds so that they could continue to function (p.
In other words, the goal of Ottoman tax policy was to undermine nomad economy.

Two sets of state needs impelled this policy. First, the state rulers sought to avoid the "state within state" arrangement implied in tribal loyalty, in which the local chief administered his tribe with considerable autonomy. This required clear tribal boundaries, but tribal boundaries are highly permeable, membership changing with shifting economic and political conditions.  

The second set of reasons behind sedentarization were military. As the nature of warfare changed, especially as gunpowder came into use, the demand for mounted archers decreased, while the demand for infantry increased. Thus, nomads per se had less to offer the state in compensation for their political administrative liabilities. Additionally, more people—and therefore more fighting men—could be supported on the same amount of territory in a sedentary, agricultural adaptation than by nomadic pastoralism. The volatility of pastoral production due to disease and weather also made the greater certainty of sedentary production more desirable.

While the Ottoman Empire had clear nomadic origins, it became and remained a sedentary state which eventually destroyed its own nomadic foundations. In contrast, the Mongol Empire never made a successful transition to a sedentary state. The tribe of Osman did succeed, but only by ceasing to be nomads.

Spain, America, and *Los Indios Bárbaros*  
The comparison of Spanish and American treatments of various nomadic groups inhabiting what is now the American Southwest, what was long the northwest of New Spain, is useful in several ways. First, the region is the same in both cases. Second, the region was a frontier for both states—a "periphery of a periphery" (Weber 1982). Third, America and Spain contrast a rising capitalist state with the earliest phases of the capitalist world-system, more akin to an empire (Cipollo 1970, Doyle 1986, Eisenstadt 1963, 1967).

Spanish explorers first entered the region sometime in the 1530s, slightly over a decade after Cortez conquered Mexico. The region was not formally colonized until 1598. That colony col-
lapsed, due to the Pueblo Revolt, in 1680, and was re-established in the early 1690s. Thereafter it remained a tenuous, but relatively thriving colonial outpost whose fortunes waxed and waned with those of New Spain and the Spanish Empire in general. Both before the Pueblo Revolt, and for the half century or so after the reconquest, the region was marked by a state of endemic warfare with surrounding nomadic groups. In the early eighteenth century this warfare became so intense that the sedentary Pueblos, and erstwhile ousters of the Spaniards, formed a symbiotic alliance with the Spaniards. The late eighteenth century was marked by considerable local population growth and relative prosperity. In 1786 a lasting peace was established with several closely linked bands who became known as Comanches. This peace between Comanches and Spaniards lasted well into the American era. The Mexican interregnum disrupted this pattern and renewed the pattern of conflict with nomads common in the early phases of the colony.

Throughout the Spanish era, warfare with nomadic groups rose and fell with changes in the trade in Indian captives, with the need for local governors to impress the viceroy with their success in subduing “los indios bárbaros” or their desire for more money and troops, and with viceregal and crown concerns for protection of the borders of New Spain from rival European powers. It is the latter concerns that were the driving force behind first maintenance, then refounding of the colony (Bolton 1929). These concerns likewise shaped policies toward nomadic groups, at once a nuisance along the frontiers, yet simultaneously—especially after the Comanche peace—a singularly effective “border patrol” for scouting and controlling movement of European rivals.

The Bourbon reforms, instituted in New Spain in the late eighteenth century, were intended to increase state efficiency. These policies led to a general increase in prosperity throughout the Empire (Lang 1975) and in New Mexico. Subsequent Indian policy aimed at: (1) pursuit of peace in order to increase revenues; (2) use of frontier bands as buffers against foreign intrusion; and (3) lowering the cost of administration and defense. These goals gave rise to four strategies to control nomadic groups. First was the use of “gifts” to engender dependency upon Spaniards. Second, divide-and-conquer strategies were used to pit one group against other hostile groups. Third, nomadic groups were
pressed to form more centralized political structures, which gave rise to the "tribes" we know today. Fourth, the frontier provinces were reorganized, a line of forts was constructed, and highly mobile "flying companies" were used to control hostile nomads (Moorhead 1968, 1975; Griffen 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1985; Thrapp 1967).^{16}

American influence in the Southwest dates to the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. As trade increased, New Mexico became more strongly oriented toward the United States. The Mexican-American war (1846-1848) resulted in the annexation of the northern half of Mexico to the United States in 1848. California and Texas were the major goals of the conquest. New Mexico (which then included modern Arizona) was primarily a "land bridge" between California and Texas. Fighting with nomadic groups increased until the American Civil War (1860-64), spurred by increasing traffic through nomad lands and increased trade or encroachment on hunting territories. After the Civil War the American state began a major effort to control nomadic groups throughout the west (Utley 1984). The Comanche bands became a major internal nuisance instead of a buffer-border patrol. A major effort was mounted to force them, and subsequently the Apache bands, onto very limited reservation territories.

Comanches declined from "Lords of the South Plains" (Wallace and Hoebel 1952) to a handful of reservation dwellers (from between 20,000 and 30,000 in the early nineteenth century to between 1,000 and 2,000 in the late nineteenth century [Hall 1986, 1989]). Their territory shrank from the western half of Texas to a small reservation in Oklahoma (Indian Territory). They had become a barrier to internal trade in the United States, and their major resource, the buffalo, had become very scarce.

Apache groups fared better. Centuries of a "raiding mode of production" had perfected their survival techniques. Low interest in New Mexico and Arizona led to considerably lower pressure on Apaches. A combination of eastern sentiments sympathetic to the "vanishing red man," and lucrative contracts to be had for supplying first the army and later reservations, prevented complete genocide.

Thus, the American state succeeded in accomplishing in less than fifty years what Spanish administrators had not been able to
accomplish in nearly two hundred and fifty years—total sedentarization of nomadic groups.

Discussion and Conclusions

What, then do these brief cases suggest about the roles of nomads in civilizational change and the historical evolution of core/periphery hierarchies? I begin with some general remarks, then turn to some more specific conclusions.

While it is clear that I have not sampled the entire range of nomad-sedentary relations (for instance, there is no examination of wholly nomadic settings as a limiting case, nor of very early, pre-horse, nomad-sedentary relations), still, a tentative, schematic account of the role of nomads in the historical evolution of core/periphery hierarchies is discernible. This sketch is not intended as a definitive statement, but as an elaborate working hypothesis useful for guiding further research.

Once states domesticated horses and mastered the production and use of iron, they more commonly took the core role in core/periphery hierarchies, giving rise to other states, and unleashing interstate competition and expanding territorially. Expansion necessarily led to contact with, and frequently incorporation of, new groups into a core/periphery hierarchy.

As with Comanches, incorporation of new territories and peoples may promote social changes which produce more effective resistance and more formidable enemies on the frontier of civilization (Hall 1989; Gailey and Patterson 1987 1988). Hence, “civilization gave birth to barbarism” (Lattimore 1962d, p. 99, cited in Wallerstein 1974b, p. 98). Even the preceding brief account of Central Asian nomads indicates that, as with early marcher states (Chase-Dunn 1988), such “barbarians,” once engendered by adjacent states, could become relatively autonomous sources of social change.

When the degree of technological difference between nomad and sedentary populations was low, as it was in the early stages of the agrarian era (3,000 to 1,000 B.C., +/- 1,000 years), which group would dominate a core/periphery hierarchy was an open issue. Since stationary targets are easier to attack than mobile ones, nomads could readily defeat sedentary groups. Sedentary
agriculturalists could be forced to pay tribute or used as slaves. Since the wealth of nomads—usually in the form of animals—is mobile, they could avoid paying tribute. Conversely, they were inimical to sedentary life and difficult to make into slaves.

However, nomads could be induced into trade relations. Sedentary peoples typically have some surplus agricultural products, but a shortage of meat and/or horses. Nomads typically have a surplus of meat in the form of animals, but a shortage of vegetable and other resources. Thus, there is opportunity for trade. Where the terms of trade were not suitable, or where sedentary people were unwilling to trade, raiding became an alternative form of exchange. The Mongols perfected the threat (and use) of violence as a tool for improving the terms of trade.

Where large distances separated different states or core/periphery hierarchies, nomads could become middlemen in trade based on their superior mobility and superior knowledge of the “uncivilized” territory, as was the case for Central Asian nomads and for Comanches under the Spanish empire. When they could not be middlemen, nomads could either raid or extract “protection rent” (Lane 1973; Chase-Dunn 1989). Even in the case of strong states, nomads could maintain a considerable degree of autonomy if they could play one state against the other (Barfield in press, b). The many ways in which state systems dealt with nomads, in turn, shape their own administrative, political, and trade systems, as was clearly the case for both China and the Spanish empire.

Several more-or-less reasonable conclusions emerge from this discussion. First, formal systems (bureaucracies, in short, states) have a very difficult time dealing with informal, or acephalous, societies. This is true whether it is the Aztecs dealing with the “Chichimecas” (McGuire 1980, 1986; Mathien and McGuire 1986), the Romans dealing with Germanic and other “tribes” (Luttwak 1976; Dyson 1985), the Chinese dealing with Mongols or Turks, the Byzantine empire dealing with Turks and others (Lindner 1983), the Spanish empire dealing with “los Indios bárbaros,” or the United States dealing with various Native American “tribes” (Hall 1989; Utley 1984).

Second, nomads occasionally conquer states, but cannot rule them (for long) without becoming sedentarized. “As the Chinese pithily expressed it long ago, an empire could be conquered on
horseback, but not ruled from horseback” (Lattimore 1962b, p. 508). Comparison of the Chinese, Mongol, and Ottoman empires underscores this argument: empires require a sedentary base. Even the Mongols built a capital city, Karakorum.

However, under special circumstances nomads can extract some tribute from sedentary states. The outer frontier strategy of Central Asian nomads is such a case. The outer frontier strategy was not a monopoly of the Mongols. Nomadic Indians in the American Southwest, especially Comanches, were also adept at extracting tribute from the Spanish Empire. Assessment as to whether “gifts” from sedentary rulers to nomadic clients constitutes tribute or “trinkets” is a complicated matter. Relative worth is a significant component of the assessment. What may have been “mere trinkets” to state officials, may have been vital prestige goods to nomads. Evaluation of relative worth is not facilitated by the nearly universal tendency of contemporary writers (almost all from sedentary societies) to gloss such gifts as trinkets, even when the cost of those “trinkets” was bankrupting the state treasury.

Third, qualitative aspects of nomad-sedentary relations have shifted through time. The effect of nomads on states has lessened through time, while the effect of states on nomads has strengthened through time. This trend is due, at least in part, to a growing technological gulf between nomadic and sedentary populations. Thus, while relative dependency may be problematic for the Bronze Age, it becomes less problematic after the appearance of mounted pastoralists in Central Asia, and entirely clear by the seventeenth century of the Christian era.

These conclusions easily give rise to as many questions as they answer, and suggest a number of continuing research problems. The profound social changes that accompany changes in transportation technology suggest parallels between the nomad-sedentary distinction and the overland-maritime distinction elaborated by Edward Fox. Horses, like ships, enhance communication over broad, trackless areas. Nomads were important in the diffusion of ideas, technologies, and diseases. They transmitted the plagues to both Europe and China (McNeill 1976).

As with ships, horses do not readily facilitate amassing permanent, large armies. Horses and ships do, however, permit sizable temporary amassings for rapid attacks. A key feature of nomadic empires, like maritime states, is their relative fragility and instabil-
ity as compared with agrarian states and empires. The major differences seem to be that horses can be produced on the trackless area, where ships must be built on land; while ships facilitate bulk trade, horses (and camels and mules) are better used for (relative) luxury goods.

The inner and outer frontier strategies can be seen as strategies for advancement. Semiperipheral players can be either sources of stability or instability. This parallel warrants further examination. Is the semiperipheral social position always a locus of change? Does the role, or set of possible roles, of the intermediate tiers of a core/periphery hierarchy change systematically with the type of core/periphery hierarchy? Do the roles change with the type of social unit (sedentary, nomad, state, nonstate) occupying the position?

Whatever the answers to these questions, the evidence appears to be compelling that the study of social change must focus on core/periphery hierarchies and not on individual components (states, tribes, etc.) of the hierarchy. Within the hierarchy peripheral, and especially semiperipheral, units play highly variable roles, especially nomadic groups. The habit of pushing barbarians beyond the pale—a military and political goal that was seldom achieved by any empire for any significant period of time—is for intellectual pursuits at best misleading, and potentially disastrous for understanding civilizational change.

De Pauw University

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1988 and 1989 ISCSC meetings, and at the 1990 International Studies Association meeting. Discussions with many members of ISCSC helped improve the argument. Their efforts led to many improvements. The editorial comments of Wayne Bledsoe also sharpened the presentation. As is usual in such cases these people are not to be blamed for my refusal to take their advice.


3. Chase-Dunn (1988, 1990b) argues that change often originates in the “semiperiphery,” in marcher states. Kohl (1987b) makes a similar argument for Bronze Age South Central Asia. The argument that change frequently originates in fringe areas (semiperiphery or even periphery) has a long pedigree. Service (1975) sees evolution of civiliza-
tions coming primarily from outside forces. Teggart (1918, 1925) argued that major sources of change are contacts between groups. Champion (1989, p. 10) and Strassoldo (1989, pp. 47-48) trace this argument to Toynbee and Sorokin. This suggests yet another way nomads may be important in civilizational change.


6. Champion (1989, p. 8) builds on Schneider’s critique (1977) of Wallerstein’s emphasis on bulk or utilitarian goods as opposed to luxury goods, to argue that there really is a continuum of types of goods. The importance of the trade lies not in the goods themselves, but the social uses to which they are put. Rowlands (1987) makes a similar argument. McGuire (1989) presents an intriguing case supporting this interpretation.

7. The point of this admittedly infelicitous term is that it emphasizes some sort of ranked relationship between the center (core) and the fringes (periphery) without entailing all the theoretical assumptions made by Wallerstein. By dropping the “world” the confusion between a self-contained division of labor and domination of the globe is eliminated.


9. Barfield (in press, a) compares Central Asian and Middle Eastern nomads and finds this to be a key difference between them that explains why Central Asian nomads frequently conquered sedentary states, and Middle Eastern nomads did not. The latter did not have a clan structure which easily facilitated the building of larger and larger alliances.

10. According to Allsen (1987), Möngebke was able to implement administrative innovations by keeping conservatives occupied in (successful) battles giving him a free hand in the center. As Lindner (1981, 1983) notes, this is NOT a reversion to “great man theory” of history. Rather, it is a recognition that “tribal” systems are “big man” systems (Sahlins 1961, 1963, 1968), and hence are strongly affected by a “great,” “big man”!

11. See Barth (1969) on this, even though his studies are more or less contemporary, it is clear in Lindner (1981, 1982, 1983), Lattimore (1951, 1962c) and others that fluidity of membership and permeability of boundaries are the essences of pastoralism.
12. See Hodgson (1974, Book Five) for a summary of the massive changes brought about by the use of gunpowder throughout Eurasia.

13. Only minimal references for this discussion will be given here. Fuller documentation can be found in Hall (1986, 1989).

14. There is an important debate thinly hidden here over the nature and origin of capitalism. Whether capitalism became a dominant mode of production in the sixteenth century as Wallerstein argues, or much later as others argue. This debate is more than terminological, but for present purposes is not germane. Wolf (1982, Chap. 1) and Hall (1989, Chap. 2) summarize the issues and literature.

15. An important sociological point is often masked by writing conventions. When the term, “the Comanches” is used in conveys a sense of a unitary group which is historically false. Hence, in this account, and in Hall (1989) I use the terms, “Comanches” (without the article “the”) or “the Comanche bands” to convey a non-unitary political organization. This also applies to “Apaches,” who did remain fragmented in to several “tribes.”

16. Flying companies are quite old. Luttwak (1976) describes how the Romans used them and Lattimore (1962a, p. 485) discusses their use by the Chinese.


18. This distinction was developed by Edward Fox (1971, 1989), and elaborated by Hochberg (1985), Genovese and Hochberg (1989), and Tilly (1989).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


———. in press, a. “Tribe and State Relations: The Inner Asian Perspec-
tive.” In Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East, edited by Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner. Berkeley: University of California Press. (draft)

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol24/iss24/5


Luttwik, Edward N. 1976. The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the


Szymkiewicz, Sławoj. 1989. "Interactions between the Nomadic Cultures


