State Systems in Harmonious Conflict

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A state system is a group of autonomous political entities that interact politically with one another. Western political scientists usually consider “the” international system as having originated in Europe in the fifteenth century, but various civilizationists have been aware that there have been such systems in other civilizations. Since they have involved city states as well, civilizationists have referred to state systems rather than international systems.²

The civilizationists have expressed some agreement that state systems recurrently enter periods of extended violence that often terminate in the creation of an imperial system: an empire that absorbs the embroiled states. Oswald Spengler (1932, II: 416-431) refers to these periods of heightened conflict as an “age of gigantic conflicts” or a “time of contending states,” the latter term taken from the well documented period preceding the formation of the Han Dynasty. Arnold Toynbee (1946, 151-158 Table V f. 567) similarly observed a “time of troubles” and Carroll Quigley (1979) referred to an “age of conflict”.

If such periods of heightened violence existed, it would seem that they must have been preceded by more tranquil periods, periods in which the states, though often in competition and occasionally at war, existed in comparative harmony. These “normal” periods in the histories of state systems have been neglected, perhaps, in comparison to the crisis periods when the existence of the systems is threatened by the possibility that one state will conquer all the others.

I will consider the work of these civilizationists to ascertain how they perceive these normal periods, why the state system enters a violent crisis period, and whether such crisis periods lead inevitably to the termination of the state system. I shall conclude by attempting to apply their collective wisdom to our own time.

David Wilkinson (1983) provides an initial list of civilizationists concerned with state systems: Toynbee, Quigley, Robert Wesson, Martin Wight and Matthew Melko. To these I would add Spengler, Pitirim Sorokin, Quincy Wright and Wilkinson himself.

It should be noted that all of these civilizationists are Westerners. All the civilizationists probably read Spengler. Quigley, Wight, Wright, Wilkinson, and Melko were influenced by Toynbee, Wilkinson also by Quigley. That the Americans, Wilkinson and Melko, should between them select five native born Americans in
this list of nine may smack of ethnocentrism, or it could be that the later Americans were strongly influenced by the German American, Hans Morgenthau, who restructured the study of international relations in America with his pathbreaking *Politics Among Nations* in 1947. Martin Wight was also strongly influenced by Morgenthau and Melko was a student of both Morgenthau and Wight.

For Westerners, state systems are normal, empires are exceptional. There has not been a true empire in Western history since the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. For Japanese and Chinese, on the other hand, empires seem to the normal form of political entity, and state systems appear only during periods in which one empire is in decline and another is in revival.

So this presentation may have a Western bias. It may be that state systems have not caught the attention of East Asians, but they should interest South Asian and African scholars, who could find plenty of examples in their own histories.

*The Views of Nine Civilizationists*

Spengler (1932, II: 361-385) does not see the state system as ever existing in a time of peace. Peace comes only in the imperial phase, the winter of civilization when everyone is weary. But in the springtime, when the nation is flourishing, military action is healthy. The state retains its form, and it doesn't seem to matter much what the outcome is, so long as the youth are out dying for the idea. “War is the Creator of all great things”.

Spengler is more interested in the state than in the system in which it is embedded. The state is the “affair of man” in a period in which its culture has become apparent, but man develops his honor and self-respect in the process of thwarting attacks, foreseeing dangers and “above all, the positive aggressiveness which is natural and self-evident to every life that has begun to soar”. So this state is being defended against attacks that must come from other states, and if it is really healthy, it is also attacking those states. In fact, in italics: “a people is only really such in relation to other peoples”.

The period at which the state, and therefore the state system, appears to reach its peak of harmony, in the sense that the men (people) of that state are in harmony with the state itself, is the time in which the state is dominated by the nobility. For it is only the nobility that associates its own interests with that of the state, that serves in the military and administration as an honor and a duty. No question for the first estate about the validity of their occupation, no question about the worth of the state, no need for artificial patriotism. Earlier, the nobility is engaged with its own peasantry, still a feudal period. Later, other classes arise, classes whose own interests are not identical with the state. As for women, what do they care about a victory if the price is the victory of a thousand childbirths?

So for Spengler, the period of greatest harmony is that following the feudal
period and preceding the challenge of other classes, particularly the bourgeoisie. A challenge by women for political power would certainly indicate that the optimum period long had been passed. States in which particular classes rule are the only states. Earlier, in the feudal period, you have the state in the process of becoming. Later, with the rise of the middle class, you have the state in decay. Real world history is, and always will be, state history.

Certainly, this springtime of the state is not a period of peace. War is one of its major activities. But the state is so healthy, so in balance with its destiny that this warfare only serves to strengthen it, to encourage its economic development, its creativity. People are killed, to be sure, but the state thrives.

For Toynbee (1934-1961, III: 128-154; 301-304), however, there does seem to be less military conflict during the earlier period of the state system. The energy of the civilization seems to go into cultural flourishing, which comes to an end when military expansion begins. Why is there a relative absence of military activity? Because statesmanship has developed into an art of its own, and within the state system these superior statesmen are adept at checking one another, so that little can be done to advance the military power of any one state.  

Toynbee observes a number of cases in which the geographical expansion of a civilization corresponds with a decline in social development. The social growth of these civilizations takes place in a period in which there are no remarkable political transformations. In many cases there are several states holding one another off, or simply not attacking one another. The great periods of cultural achievement in the Sumerian, the Hellenic, and Sinic civilizations are those of such state systems. There are others, to be sure, like the Egyptaic, Babylonic and Minoan that do not seem to have clearly developed state systems, so such internal development is possible without the political form.

In harmonious periods, civilizations influence external areas by radiating their culture evenly, so that outlying areas gradually adopt it and voluntarily become involved in its activities, trading more frequently, copying the styles and the technology. The technology includes weapons, but in the harmonious period these are added gradually, so the outlying areas, if they become involved in warfare, do so in an acceptable, limited manner. Perhaps they simply acquire the capacity to defend themselves against further outlying barbarians. In any event, they do not threaten the existence of the inner states of the civilization. It would appear that when a civilization is culturally developing, there are so many opportunities and possibilities that there is not likely to be an excessive focus in any one area, including that of military development. This is not to say that this is a period without conflict, but the conflict is in proportion to other aspects of cultural development.

Sorokin (1937-1941; III; 363-396; 1957: 78-100, 534-570) is very systems oriented, and seems to have developed his line of thinking independently from
Spengler and Toynbee. He sees the system as going through long periods of alternate emphasis on the material world and the world of ideas. The transitions from material to ideational are likely to be extremely violent, more so than when the ideational or material phases have "crystallized". But ideational and material (sensate) phases may be either peaceful or violent, though the causes of war in the two kinds of societies may differ. The crystallized sensate forms seem to correlate with state systems in Classical Society and Western Society, so it would appear that Sorokin would think of these as periods of possible but not certain violence, though not periods of extreme violence.

The reading of Sorokin's data gives a somewhat ambiguous result. While Sorokin clearly thinks that the 20th century is a period of transition from late sensate to early ideational times, a period accompanied by maximum violence, he repeatedly says there are no clear trends of war or internal conflict. He even declares that social growth and increase in war often go together. His data, however, do show periods of reduced war and violence in Hellenistic Greece and in the early period of Greek city states as well as in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. These are respectively the earlier periods of the Greek, Hellenistic and European state systems. These are also materialistic periods in philosophy and aesthetics, that is to say, they are periods in which if you classify art or philosophy as this-worldly or other-worldly, the percentage of this-worldly thinking and representation is likely to be relatively high. The implication would seem to be that if the world is more ideational, it is likely to get political forms that are more nebulous to the nominalist mind, ghost empires, or feudalism, or kinds of fealty that appear to be insubstantial. The state system, by contrast, would appear to be more appropriate in a world in which the political leaders are worldly, but in a balanced, proportional way. When they lose that balance, some of them are likely to become militaristic, and threats of conquest become more frequent.

For Quincy Wright, (1942: 119-125, 144-192, 743-766; 1965: 116-127) the key factor is the number of states participating in the system. How many states are really able to make a difference if they align themselves on one side or the other, or stay neutral? If there is a substantial number of states that can participate, as soon as one side becomes dominant, or wins a few battles, some of the other states will switch to the weaker side, and this will enable a settlement to take place. So wars take place, perhaps many wars, but no one of them goes very far before a settlement is made along with minor territorial adjustments. It is in the interest of the several major powers to keep the system that way. Relative parity of great powers and certainty about entry into the system also increase stability. Wright borrows Toynbee's term "time of troubles" to describe the entire state system, but makes it clear that he considers there are periods of stability and periods when the system is threatened by an aggressive internal power.
There are a number of factors that operate to perpetuate the system at this phase. As nations interact, they develop trade and cultural diffusion takes place. Systems of international law develop along with a perception of a common civilization. Nations in such a phase may be inclined to pursue the maintenance of the system itself rather than to focus always on the increase in their own power. War is severe, but indecisive.

This perception, of course, is similar to the balance of power theories developed by Hans Morgenthau (1947), Morton Kaplan (1957) and other international theorists. They see such systems as normal, and the possibility of domination by any one state is seen as a danger to the system that others, if prudent, will prevent. The international theorists, however, tend to see the Western system as their main subject of study and other systems, such as the Chinese or the Renaissance Italian as predecessors or forerunners. Though Wright is influenced by Toynbee, he is more international theorist than civilizationist.

As far as Wright is concerned, the stable period could continue indefinitely, particularly if reinforced by trade and international law. But state systems have proved to be mortal because there are so many things that can go wrong. A military leader of genius may come along to challenge the system; a change in technology may give one of the participants an advantage; alliances may be formed that reduce the number of states and make the system more vulnerable; a new religion may arise that gives a nation fanatical unity and makes it more powerful than its military capacity would indicate; a major power in a crucial situation may decide to remain neutral when it should have intervened on the side of the weaker party. With all these hazards, sooner or later the system will enter a crisis, and each crisis threatens the existence of the system.

Thus far we have been considering the civilizationists of the World Wars Period. Those that follow made their contributions to our conception of states systems since 1950.

Martin Wight, (Butterfield & Wight 1956: 149-176; Bull 1977: 21-72, 174-200.) was very familiar with Toynbee, but more a critic than a follower, and probably more involved with and influenced by the political scientists of the postwar period, particularly Morgenthau. He is more aware than the political scientists, however, that state systems do come to an end, and that the imperial system is more than a hypothetical alternative. He sees the state system as alternating between multiple and bipolar relationships, with each polar situation involving the possibility of war and termination. In this sense the state system is a cause of war, though statesmanship in a crisis may prevent the war from happening, or reduce its extent or duration. When state systems are not in crisis phases, they do possess a common culture, diplomatic exchange and something like an international public opinion. The common culture may be that of a single civilization, which was the case in Greece,
China and the West, or there may be an intercultural community among civilizations, as in the Hellenistic state system or the Hittite-Mesopotamian-New Kingdom system of the 14th century B.C. He makes a distinction between the Just War and the Holy War. The Holy War occurs between civilizations and has a crusade, no-holds-barred quality. The Just War is undertaken within the system, assuming that all parties have rights, and war is a means of penalizing violation of rights and insuring restitution. It is a juridical concept within a law that assumes the right of sovereignty for every state within the system.

There seems to be no limit in the length of time a harmonious phase can last, but, like Wright, he sees a number of hazards. Two that he thinks have occurred repeatedly are the rising of factions taking their ideologies so seriously that Just Wars are converted to Holy Wars within the system, and the rise of dominant powers, either two or three, that cannot be contained by the collective power or community influence of the system.

Both Wright and Wight acknowledged a debt to Toynbee and both focused their attention on state systems. Quigley (1979: 149-158, 165) acknowledged no predecessor, but I would have to agree with John Hord (1987) that he is also a follower of Toynbee or at least a developer or recapitulator of Toynbee’s paradigm. Unlike Wright and Wight, however, Quigley developed a total theory of civilization of his own, in which the state system does not play an explicit role.

Like Toynbee, Quigley sees a multiplicity of civilizations experiencing a series of phases. For him, the crucial concept in the development of a civilization is that each in its own way develops what he calls an instrument of expansion, a combination of elements that enables a civilization to accumulate and use surpluses for creative purposes. The period of growth ends with the institutionalization of the instrument, which happens when the users of the instrument become interested in perpetuating and developing it for its own sake rather than for the development of the civilization. Institutionalization of the instrument has rather the same effect as breakdown for Toynbee, and it can lead to an imperial phase unless a new instrument of expansion is developed. If that happens, growth can resume.

The harmonious phase of development, then, would be that which exists from the development of the instrument until its institutionalization, Stage 3 in Quigley’s scheme of seven stages. This is a stage of increased production, population and knowledge accompanied by geographical expansion. Is Stage 3 also a stage of state systems? It appears to be in the period of Sumerian and Akkadian history, in Greece before the Peloponnesian Wars, in the Western Mediterranean until the Punic Wars, and in the West three times: the medieval period until the 100 Years War, again the early modern period through the Thirty Years War, and once more in the Baroque and Victorian periods until the World Wars. He gives less attention to Asia, but he appears to discern such a period in Chou China, and again between the Han and
T'ang Dynasties, and in India before the Maurya. He also finds a Canaanite Civilization, which would include many of the powers Wight saw as sharing a common culture in the Mediterranean of the Amarna period.

These periods end when the priesthood, or knighthood, or commercial capitalistic system become institutionalized, which leads to a stage of conflict reminiscent of Toynbee’s Time of Troubles or Spengler’s Age of Gigantic Conflicts. A state system continues, because there are independent political entities fighting one another, but warfare becomes predominant, production declines and knowledge is replaced by irrationality.

Melko (1969: 102-107, 117-121) synthesizes other civilizationists, with perhaps a greater debt to Sorokin in that the internal logic of the system is stressed. He sees civilizations organizing in three possible systems: feudal, state, or imperial, with the progression in that order, but repeats and reversals possible.

Each system may either be in a crystallized phase—the adjective is also from Sorokin—in which it is in relative harmony, or in a transitional phase, when it is susceptible to metamorphizing into the next system. The crystallized state system would approximate the harmonious period and it is characterized by codified law, limited, balance of power, stable government, interstate trade, pragmatic and materialistic outlooks, realistic and form-conscious art. He seems to envision a well-organized, imperfect but functional world.

In later writing (1973: 41-53, 1981: 131-133, 159) he makes a distinction between the state and the system, noting that small and medium-sized states governed by able diplomats, and blessed with good luck, can sometimes negotiate the shoals of a crisis period while experiencing little or no violence whereas dominant powers, even in crystallized periods, can rarely achieve a century of internal peace, perhaps because the mechanics of the balance of power make them targets of external attack by coalitions of other states.

Harmonious periods end because of the internal logic of the system which, over time, loses its internal coherence. A crisis follows in which warfare increases, and one of the major powers challenges the system. A coalition of opponents arises, and in the bloody showdown that follows either the coalition wins and the harmonious phase is restored, or the challenger wins and an imperial phase begins.

Wesson (1978: 1-211) wrote the first, and so far only, study completely devoted to state systems. Like Wright and Wight he was a political scientist before he was a civilizationist, but his debt to Toynbee is peripheral and no other relevant works of the civilizationists, save Sorokin’s abridgement, are cited in his extensive bibliography. Wesson sees the state system as very much preferable to the imperial order, and accepts a certain amount of warfare as a price to be paid for a system that is healthier, livelier, more creative, and supportive of freer and happier lives for the general populace. Indeed, a system that permits creativity in art and science is going
to lead to creativity in warfare as well. And a certain amount of strife makes people valuable and promotes effort and cooperation. By contrast a pacified empire exhausts social surplus, makes people worthless, and soon becomes demoralizing and corrupting. Spengler might well have agreed.

The state systems, in Wesson's view, are much more durable than empires, several of them lasting 500 years or longer. When they are destroyed, it is because of their own success. Technological improvements make small states undefendable or increased communication between states leads to cosmopolitanism, an identification with the system itself and a concomitant unwillingness to die for one's own state. The expansion of the culture also leads to the increased power of larger peripheral states, which ultimately attack and defeat the older, more decadent central states.

There are many similarities to Spengler and Toynbee in Wesson's perceptions, but he seems to have come to parallel conclusions by an independent organizing and reading of historical data.

Wilkinson, whose published work has been more crisis and political science oriented (1975), in recent years has been developing a systems-oriented theory of states systems within his own civilizational framework (1979, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989). With background in both political science and civilizational perspectives, and a thorough familiarity with the relevant work of Toynbee, Quigley, Wight and Wesson, he would seem to be in a strategic position to carry forward the study of state systems in a manner that would be meaningful to international theorists.

He is only in partial agreement with Wesson about the nature of a state system. Individual states, he thinks, must of necessity promote their own language, history, ideologies, heros and symbols. This leads to cultural diversity, and there is no reason to suggest, as both Wight and Wesson do, that there should be cultural unity within the system. Also, contrary to Wesson, the typical state is likely to be closed, autocratic, and conservative, sanctioning state-approved painting, architecture, "boredom and megalomania". In this sense it is not very different from the empire. But he agrees with Wesson that the state system itself is likely to be much more pluralistic and creative because deviance is difficult to repress. Creative deviants can always go into exile and from time to time there even will be deviant states willing, at least for a time, to allow creativity without state sanction. Thus the system may have vitality, even though at any given time its component states are stodgy and repressive.

The state system itself is "relatively favored" by an open frontier and a mobile population, since creative individuals can move when threatened. But it is also favored when there is a limited technology of movement: no horsemen or tanks. Drawing from Quigley (1983), he accepts the idea that the system is best served
when weaponry and military techniques are cheap, easy to use, and territorially defensive. In those circumstances, amateur soldiers can be drawn from peasantry or citizenry as needed, and medium-sized states can defend themselves and even small states can make invasion unattractive.

Wilkinson agrees with Wesson that state systems are more durable than empires and more common in civilized history than imperial systems. During these histories, great powers, in Wight’s sense of the term, are common. Less common are dominant powers, those with the power to challenge all the others. Systems end when a dominant power successfully challenges the great powers. His perception here is similar to Melko’s, but he explores these terminations further, noting that by far the most important pattern is what he calls the “sitting-duck shoot”. This is a situation in which the dominant power challenges and assimilates first the weak powers, then the great powers, one at a time. The great powers continue to sit, either jealous of one another and willing to see them fall, or not willing to anger the dominant power by intervening.

The victory of the dominant power, however, is not entirely random. As time goes on, the developmental process of the state system is such that political unification becomes more and more “appropriate”. The earlier this happens, once the time is ripe, the better for production and wealth. But unification seldom comes easily, and the period during which it is perceived by some to be needed, but provincially resisted by others, becomes one of increasingly violent conflict. Therefore the earlier phases of a state system are likely to be peaceful, the later phases more violent.

**Agreements and Controversies**

What then are we to infer from this collective sequence of perceptions of state systems? The first problem is how to evaluate the civilizationists themselves. Should Wilkinson, as the most recent writer having the perceptions of the others at hand, be given more weight than the pioneer, Spengler? Not necessarily. Let us look for areas of agreement and division, and see what can be derived from those.

To begin with, all the civilizationists see the state system as accommodating violence during earlier decades or centuries, but rarely free of it. Spengler welcomes violence as producing positive ends in itself. Wesson accepts it "as an unavoidable consequence of the freedom of states to contend with one another." The others see it as a logical part of the system, one kind of creativity among others, or as a price to be paid for a system that has many positive qualities. All perceive that the violence does not threaten the existence of the system; the system is able to accommodate the violence.
There also seems to be considerable agreement that the system, in such a phase, has many positive qualities. Spengler and Wesson are enthusiastic about such periods. They are periods at which civilizations are at their best in terms of creative development and life in general for a large percentage of the population. Toynbee and Quigley similarly endorse the period's qualities, but happen to be more concerned with the crisis period that follows. Melko and Wilkinson are somewhat more reserved: Melko seeing limitations in the virtues of such a period, Wilkinson noting that individual states may not be so well off as the system as a whole. Sorokin affects a neutrality about all periods, and becomes enthusiastic only about ideational periods, but still his negative presentation of a sensate crisis makes the crystallized sensate period look pretty good by comparison. Both Wright and Wight appear to regard the normal functioning states system, with diplomatic apparatus and interstate law fully operative, as the optimum social condition. There seems to be unanimous agreement, then, that there is a period of harmonious conflict within the state system, though it is not the center of everyone's attention, and I don't know that all would endorse the adjective. If the conflict is not harmonious, at least it is not seriously detrimental to the system, regardless of its effects on individuals that perpetuate the state system. All of the civilizationists presume deep underlying causes, but for Wright, Wesson and Wight, the contributions of statesmanship, the acts of perceptive men and occasional women who understand that consideration for the system as a whole affects the well-being of their own state, can perpetuate the individual state, the state system, and relative peace. For Toynbee, Quigley, Melko and Wilkinson, explicitly or implicitly, there would appear to be times when alternate outcomes are possible, and therefore the actions of individuals must make a difference.

What are the factors that encourage the state system in its harmonious phase? There seems to be some spirit of cooperation, some recognition of the existence of the state system, some willingness to cooperate in maintaining it. Wilkinson thinks luck also plays a part. The dominant power can easily err, attacking a strong state too early, or overreaching and attacking too many states at once.

The presence of great powers must be normal in harmonious periods, since the great power is defined in relation to the system. It doesn't seem likely that there ever has been a system in which no power had sufficient strength to pose a latent threat to others, or in which there was no balance of power because there was no power to balance.

It is harder to generalize about the relation between the evolution of the civilization itself and the development of the state system. Phase of civilization is of major importance for Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin, Quigley, Melko and Wilkinson. Wright, Wight and Wesson take it as a recurrent phenomenon without trying to place it in civilizational contexts. Of those who consider the civilizational relationship, all

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but Spengler and Sorokin think the harmonious period of the state system is not limited in duration and (of the others) only Toynbee does not think it can recur after crisis, since the crisis would commence the breakdown of the civilization itself. But the harmonious phase, in Toynbee’s view, is one of growth, and that may continue until the civilization makes a fatal slip, by failing to respond to a challenge. Quigley, Melko and Wilkinson agree that a civilization, moving from a harmonious phase to a crisis, can revert to the earlier stage. For Quigley, this is a matter of finding a new instrument of expansion, a development that has occurred three times in the West and could occur again. Melko sees the reversion to the harmonious phase as always possible, but more likely in civilizations like Western or South Asian, in which pluralism seems preferred, less likely in those, like Byzantine or East Asian, in which unity has been the dominant form. Wilkinson also notes these preferences, but also suggests that there are times when the system will benefit from the defeat of the dominant power and continuation of the states system, and times when the civilization would be better off, in terms of production and creativity, if the dominant power won. But he does not go so far as the others in perceiving a time of troubles or an age of conflict that post-dates the harmonious period. So it would appear that all but two of the civilizationists considered would see the possibility of a harmonious phase continuing indefinitely. When the civilization enters a later phase, however, there is a shift of perception with the majority of civilizationists leaning with greater or lesser emphasis to the viewpoint that a stage is reached in which conflict becomes more severe and the likely outcome, sooner or later, is the triumph of a dominant power and the ending of the state system.

So much for the perceptions of our civilizationists. I would like, now, to propose a hypothesis about one aspect of their observations, namely the tendency for these systems periodically to produce a challenger that threatens the existence of the system.9

I think that Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin, Quigley, Melko and Wilkinson are right in presuming that there is a systemic mechanism at work here, and this is not just a matter of prudent statesmanship. But Wright, Wesson and Wight are correct in presuming that wise statesmen can recognize the nature of this threat, and act to prevent the termination of the system, though they are not likely to do so without considerable bloodshed. In fact, whether the challenger is successful or not, the challenge will produce a period of greatly increased conflict. If the challenger is successful, he will bring about the termination of the system, which will be followed by an imperial phase that for a century or more is likely to have less violence than the state system had during its normal, unchallenged phase.

If the challenger is unsuccessful, however, the state system will be modified by the conflict, with the power redistributed. The challenger, even losing, may be given a more important role since the challenge has indicated its power. This new
balance better reflects the actual power of the states, since this has just been demonstrated by the conflict. Now the system returns to a phase in which it is accepted as the normal condition, and the actions of statesmen take this system and the way it works as a given. Hence for a number of decades, all effective statesmen are prudent within their capacities, inclined to value reason over nationality, able to consider the goals of other states as a factor to be considered in policy, inclined to pursue limited objectives. This is a period in which war is less important and less lethal, in which the stakes are limited: control of a province or a delta island, trading rights, access to a port, nominal suzerainty over an autonomous minor state. There are conferences, tradeoffs, state visits, pledges of mutual friendship.

This period, which is the period of our concern, lasts a number of decades, and by that time new generations have arisen, new technologies have emerged, some able statesmen have built their states, some established states have lived too long on their reputations, and finally a leader or group emerges who consider their rising state excluded from its proper sphere by the present system. They make a major challenge, and either are not resisted or win easily in battle, and come to see the possibility of overthrowing and dominating the entire system. Often, as Toynbee (1934-61, III: 301-304) and Quigley (1979: 153-158) point out, the challenge comes from a power that is peripheral to the system. In any event, the normal period is at an end and another crisis is at hand, which again can be resolved either by the defeat of the challenger and a return to normality within the state system, or the victory of the challenger and the beginning of an imperial system. In either event, this will be a period of great conflict by comparison with which, the earlier normal period will be perceived as one of relative harmony and tranquility.

Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin might dissent from this synthesis to the extent that they would insist that the challenger will be victorious after a specified number of centuries because of the nature of the system. Sorokin and Wilkinson might not insist on a particular duration, but would suggest (Sorokin strongly, Wilkinson mildly) that social antibodies would be building up that would make a transformation increasingly likely.

This review of civilizationists who have been particularly concerned with state systems does not significantly change the position I held two decades ago when *The Nature of Civilizations* was first published. Political systems in civilized history may be classified in three forms: feudal, state, and imperial (1969: 47-53). Feudal systems usually come first and, as Rushton Coulborn observed (1956), recur when civilizations experience extreme crisis. State systems and imperial systems then alternate, with some civilizations seeming to have a preference for one or the other. Spengler’s insistence on sharply designated periods for each kind of system, already toned down by Toynbee, is generally soft-pedaled or rejected by later civilizationists.
Where Are We Now?

A final question: where are we now? Do we live today in a period of harmonious conflict? If our nine civilizationists were American Supreme Court judges, they would vote five to four that we do not.

“Now”, of course, concerns the latter half of the 20th century. Spengler died in the 1930’s; Toynbee, Sorokin, Quigley, Wright and Wight in the Sixties and Seventies. Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin were writing in the atmosphere of the World Wars, and saw this period of conflict as a sign of crisis. Spengler saw it as an age of gigantic conflicts like the Chinese period of contending states, or classical history in the period of the Punic Wars (1932, I: Table I following 428). It would end in the 21st century in the triumph of Caesarism, the victory of power politics over money, a decline of political involvement by the population, a decline to cruder despotism. The Decline of the West, in other words, the beginning of an imperial system.

Toynbee (IX: 473-641) was less definite about dates, but his analysis did not differ that much from Spengler’s. The breakdown of the West had occurred at one of several possible dates in early modern history, the latest being the Thirty Years War. The World Wars were a symptom of a time of troubles. The universal state could be expected to follow, if not in the 20th century, then certainly in the 21st.

Sorokin (1957: 622-628)—between protests that history was a series of fluctuations and nothing more—was certain that we live in an overripe, sensate period, well past the crystallized period and heading into a still bloodier period for which we already have weapons prepared. He even organized an institute of Altruism to help develop those ideas and outlooks that would begin to emerge when the crisis of bloodshed and materialism had exhausted itself and produced a mounting desire in Westerners for a world of spiritual peace and ideational values.

If I had only Quigley’s writings to go on (1979: 390-414), I might have counted him on the other side. There is no doubt he sees us presently in an age of conflict, but he insists that it is always possible for a new instrument of expansion to appear that would return us to a harmonious period, and this had already happened three times in Western history. Those of us who knew him in his last years, however, remember in his appearances and conversations at meetings of the ISCS that he felt very strongly that we have reached a point beyond recall in the age of conflict. Production stagnation, population leveling as a virtue, and most strikingly, a wild growth of irrationality in the latter half of the 20th century signified an impending crisis that could only end in disaster. He had little patience with those who thought otherwise.

Wilkinson (1983, 1985) writing in the last quarter of the century, partly concurs, but his vision is muted, and not entirely resigned. Unlike the earlier civilizationists, he sees civilization as having entered a global phase. A “Central
“Civilization” that once included only Mediterranean civilizations, but has now subsumed all, is currently in a global state system phase symbolized by the United Nations. The vitality is fading from the state system, the signs of empire are already upon us: cynicism, conformity, bureaucracy, impersonality, rationality. One is “justified in assuming,” he writes, “the likely future evolution of global civilization in the direction of predictability, toward a unitary, authoritarian, bureaucratic, peaceable, elitist and sterile world state....” When Jaroslav Krejci objected to his vision of the impending world state as “An American Dream,” Wilkinson replied that if Krejci considered his vision a dream “I don’t know what you mean by nightmare” (Melko and Scott, 1987: 340, 358).

This pessimism, however, is tempered by the observation that the tendency in recent centuries of states to cooperate against a dominant power is exceptional. One could infer that as long as this tendency persists, a duck-shoot is less likely, and world empire could be deferred (1989: 52).

Of those who appear to see the present as reverting to a period of harmonious conflict, Wright is the only one who was formulating his ideas while the World Wars were still in progress and undecided. A system with a multiplicity of powers had been restored. Diplomacy and internal law were again possible. In the last two decades of his life Wright paid little attention to civilizational problems, probably because he felt the threat had passed. He was concerned with the ways in which international law and diplomatic negotiations were developing, the normal problems one is concerned with during periods of harmonious conflict (1954).

Wight (Bull, 1977) maintained his interest in civilizational studies, for the postwar period was one in which he engaged in a series of debates with Toynbee that occur in the footnotes of the Study (1934–61, VII-X). But he also felt strongly that the war had given the world a new lease, did not expect an imminent universal state, and took considerable pains in his writing to show that the dominance of the United States and Russia was not an unusual phenomenon in the history of state systems, nor did bipolarity mean an impending crisis. He noted the continuities of the world international system and its European predecessors, but did not see a conflict between a single international system and a plurality of civilizations that might or might not include state systems within their territories.

Melko (1990) sees the World Wars as the third of a series of challenges to the Western state system, the earlier ones being the Thirty Years and the Napoleonic Wars. He argues that the present period has the look of an “age,” a period analogous to the Age of the Baroque or the Victorian Age, a period in which conflict could once again be accommodated, though he thinks it more peaceful than either of its two preceding ages. Like Wight he sees a multiplicity of civilizations continuing, and gives less credence to a world system of states, seeing the Western System in which the Soviet Union participates as being in harmonious conflict, but does not apply
this to East Asian, South Asian or African systems.

Wesson's (1978: 228-263) view of the present world does not seem much different from Wilkinson's. He perceives a world system with conventional East-West-Third World divisions without regard for civilizational complications. The multiplicity of states emerging undermined the bipolarity of the early post-war years and the relative strength of the two dominant powers soon declined as other states recovered. The gap between the rich and the poor seemed to be more of a problem for the system by the 1970's than ideological differences between East and West. Use of violence was declining, sovereign states seemed secure within their borders, and there was considerable cooperation among nations. Though he concludes with worries about the future, the preponderance of his analysis of the present system suggests that it has viability and real chances of working out serious problems. It is newer and bigger, but definitely a state system.

Civilizationists who study state systems, then, seem to be in agreement that such systems do have periods of harmonious conflict to be distinguished from system-threatening periods of crisis. They are not in agreement about the causes, nor about the inevitability of a shift from the harmonious to the crisis phase, nor about the possibility of the crisis phase reverting to the harmonious. Not surprisingly, they are not in agreement about our present situation. They do provide a different perspective that could enrich the study of international relations.12

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NOTES

1 The term “states system” was used by Martin Wight at least as early as 1964 in a presentation to the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (Bull, 1977: 1, 19, 46). He was then using it without explanation, so it is probable members of the Committee, which had been meeting since 1958, were already familiar with the term. Matthew Melko uses “state system” in the singular in The Nature of Civilization (1969), the manuscript of which was essentially completed by 1962. Robert Wesson uses State Systems as the title of his 1978 book, but the jacket of his 1967 Imperial Order indicates he was already planning to use that title. Wesson himself believes that the Germans were writing about “Staatensystem” before it was current in English (letter to Melko, 28 September 1983). David Wilkinson, who had uneasily gravitated between multistate and state system, switched to Wight’s plural term in 1985. For Americans the plural is tempting because our provinces are called states. My university along with several others, is part of the Ohio state system, and that is what Americans think of when they see the term “state system.” But the term preferred by Wight and Wilkinson does not seem to be grammatically correct in English. You would not, for instance, refer to your university system of computers as a computers system,
but rather as a computer system. So, for this article, I shall stay with the singular form preferred by Wesson.

2 I don't want to overdraw the distinction between political scientists and civilizationists. Political scientists such as Hans Morgenthau (1947) and Morton Kaplan (1957) are aware of the existence of other state systems, but generally see them as forerunners of the Western system which, having its origins in 15th century Europe, is often perceived to have become a world system in the 20th. Several of the civilizationists—Quincy Wright, Robert Wesson, Wilkinson, Melko—by training are political scientists. Wight's field was international relations, which in Britain is a separate discipline from political science. In this article I am going to refer to scholars who focus on the European-World system of the past five centuries as international theorists, though Wright (1960) might not have approved.

3 The concept of a "normal" period as distinguished from a crisis period borrows from Thomas Kuhn (1962) who, in turn was anticipated by the Russian American sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin (1937-41) and the American anthropologist A. E. Kroeber (1944).

4 Toynbee’s best exposition on the development of the state system (1934-61, III: 301-304) is a digression on Machiavelli which Somervell dutifully cut out because it was a digression. Somervell’s logical mind did not always serve Toynbee well, because Toynbee is at his best when you forget his argument and enjoy the insights of the digression. Elie Kedouri once remarked that everyone should read The Study in the original every thirty years (as bedtime reading?).

5 Sorokin’s abridgment, on the other hand, is usually an adequate substitute for the original, though it leaves out some of the saltier footnotes. Sorokin did the abridgment himself, after asserting that the four-volume original was so compact that it could not be abridged. It seems probable that Toynbee and Sorokin both developed their ideas about cycles before reading Spengler, though Christopher Dawson, also an early cyclist (1933), but later reformed, once told me that all three had read Flinders Petrie’s Revolutions of Civilisation (1911).


7 Communication with Melko, 5 July 1990.

8 It is possible that such a system exists in what Toynbee calls the stage of articulation, e.g. China before the Chou period or archaic Greece. The states are in the process of formation and their level of interaction is low (Toynbee 1934-61, III: 301).

9 Is it acceptable to play both the roles of civilizationist and civilizationographer? When "I" make a summary of this sort, am I somebody different from Melko, the civilizationist considered here? Sorokin (1950) and Kroeber (1957) did civilizationographies in which they left themselves out, and it seems probable in retrospect that that was a loss. If I have erred in
weighing, we'll hope the other living states systems-oriented civilizationists, Wesson and Wilkinson, have redressed the balance. Both have read this article at an earlier stage.

10 One reason that Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin may see inevitability in the transformation from state system to empire is that they consider all the cases in which this happens, so from that perspective the chances are 100 percent (Melko, 1991). But they do not consider all the cases, such as World War II, when one or two world empires might have emerged, but did not.

11 Wesson thinks the modern world may have to live without international violence. If so, a lot of people will “miss the idea of foreign danger very much” (Communication with Melko, 27 June 1990).

12 This article is a modification of an address presented at the annual meeting of the Japan Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations at Kokugakuin University, Tokyo, December 1990.
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