World Systems Theory: A Faustian Delusion? I

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I was amused at the 1989 meeting at Berkeley when David Wilkinson brought Gunder Frank over to ask me if Wilkinson's viewpoint was typical of the ISCSC. Laughing, I responded that Wilkinson was generally perceived to be a maverick in that he was more interested in the relations between civilizations than he was in the civilizations themselves. Worse, he had an evolutionary view of history in that he saw the civilizations as gradually merging into a central civilization. In fact, from Wilkinson's perspective, the study of civilizations was a historical exercise that had little contemporary application. I did not then realize, because world systems were not in my paradigm, who Andre Gunder Frank was, or that to him the position I attributed to Wilkinson must have seemed normal, sensible, reasonable.

Perhaps because of this encounter, I became aware that there was a great deal of discussion at the meeting on "modernization." This was mildly threatening to me, because modernization implies a universal process that is world evolutionary, not a recurrent process in different civilizations. At one plenary meeting, after hearing the term once too often, I got up to ask, with more emotion than I expected, whether modernization was not a synonym for Westernization, and if we, as civilizationists, should not be cautious about assuming that what looks progressive to us is also seen as progressive by members of other civilizations.

The following spring, at an International Studies Association meeting in Washington, Wilkinson introduced me to Frank's coauthor, Barry Gills. I was much reassured by the conversation I had with him, because Gills was interested in the world system in history, particularly trade and information exchanges between civilizations. This is what, in the 1970s, the ISCSC's first American president, Benjamin Nelson, would have called the study of intercivilizational encounters.

It is ironic to legitimize the world systems enterprise by seeking a posthumous blessing from Nelson, because in the 1970s he represented, to me, the dominant paradigm of the ISCSC, which I tolerated because it tolerated the minority of comparativists, of which I was one. For the Nelsonians, each problem was studied in civilizational perspective, which included influences from other civilizations, but not isomorphic generalizations. For the comparativists, each civilization had its own character, and similarities and differences were the focus of the study. Both
paradigms agreed, however, on the value of studying intercivilizational encounters.

With Nelson’s death and Vytautas Kavolis’s becoming president in 1977, the majority of the sessions at ISCSC meetings became comparative, and many Nelsonians went elsewhere, though they still drop in to visit at meetings and occasionally organize a session or two.

**THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ISCSC**

But in the 1990s I see the systems view becoming more powerful in the ISCSC, not only avowed systems theorists like Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall, but many others taking an evolutionary view, becoming at least fellow travelers, turning into rhinoceroses as in Ionesco’s play. In 1992 I am not sure who has the majority, but the threat to the comparative paradigm could be a general movement in the society to an area perceived as more rewarding, one in which greater growth is possible, and more communication possible with other organizations such as the World Systems section of the American Sociological Association or the International Studies Association. From the perspective of a beleaguered comparativist, those holding a world systems perspective could be seen as viruses taking over a convenient host. They may be viruses from my perspective, but I suppose the host looks different if you happen to be the virus.

So the ISCSC, a major center of activity in my professional life, may turn into something else. Under the presidency of Chase-Dunn or Wilkinson the name may change to the Society for Systems and Civilizational Studies, the SSCS. By 2002, members will wonder why “Civilizational” is in the name, destroying the symmetry of those S’s. And the enterprise to which I gave so much of my time and energy will be remembered, if at all, as the curious presystems period, before the association found its purpose and focus.

What would be lost if that were to happen? Well, from my perspective, world systems could be a Faustian Delusion. Faustian is the name Spengler gave to Western Civilization. Faustians, like Faust, were hard driving, future oriented, never satisfied with their current position, meddlesome, restless. From the perspective of other civilizations, they were also superficial, insufficiently concerned about central values or inner experience.

To a great extent world systems theory seems materialistically oriented, inclined to generalize about the world as a whole. The great conflict about underdeveloped nations — the term is significant — is whether they have not yet experienced modernization or whether their development has been skewed by dependency foisted upon them by the developed nations. From the perspective of the civilizationist, these are two aspects of the same side
of the question. The other side is the extent to which other civilizations are in the process of absorbing and transforming Western technologies. In the same sense that China transformed Indian Buddhism so that it became more like Taoism, why wouldn’t China in the twenty-first century transform Western technologies and political ideas so that they were consistent with Chinese culture?

I have been using Stephen Sanderson’s *Macrosociology* (1991) for a social organization course. It is a wonderful book for that course, has great scope and clarity, and converts the majority of students to systemic materialism. But it has no place for culture. The culture chapter comes before the game plan, as if to get it out of the way, and art and literature are nowhere considered, while religion is seen purely as serving certain material purposes, keeping the lower classes quiet, providing ideological support for governments. The book is evolutionary but pessimistic. The industrial revolution has implications that would have made Spengler happy. Well, not happy. Not Spengler. But he might well have been in agreement. As a synthesis of systems theory, then, Sanderson is exciting, frightening, but lacking in cultural perspective and somewhat “civilizationocentric.”

**WHAT IF IT’S NOT A NEW AGE?**

Suppose we are not at the dawn of a new epoch, good or bad, but in a Hellenistic period? In 300 B.C. you might have thought that all the world would become Hellenized, as the glories of this culture were carried to India. But 300 years later, a quite different outcome was apparent. Three hundred years from now is it so obvious that there will be just a central, global civilization, or is it not possible that China, India, Africa, Islam, Hispanic America and Byzantium (Russia) will have developed within their own cultural patterns, retaining technological advantages from the West, but developing political, economic and cultural styles within their own cultures? And even Wilkinson concedes that this would be a happier outcome than a monocultural central civilization.

Studying civilization, by the way, is itself a Faustian enterprise. For the Faustian is basically outreaching, meddlesome, and curious about others. Using that perspective, what is so different about the current Western expansion? Extent of territory covered? Only a Faustian would make such a quantitative judgment. Superiority of our culture? But daily we ourselves are critical of it, of our loss of community, of our growing alienation, of our capacity for destruction. Is it not possible that other cultures may apply our science and technology in selected ways, maintaining community, worldview and culture?
When we worry about this, we worry about Japan using our methods to produce a more effective economic system. We are less inclined to ask how the Japanese are doing in terms of morals, ethics, values, culture. We have, of course, claimed cultural superiority, measuring it in our own terms. But we haven’t worried about whether other countries are getting ahead of us on some sort of ethical index. (Only a Faustian would seriously consider such a comparison!)

There is one other concern I have about systems theory that comes out of my own civilizational work. I have argued that civilizations experience periods that later are perceived as ages that can be characterized in terms of style. There was a T’ang style and a Sung style in Chinese civilization that are recognizably different but definitely Chinese. There was an age of Enlightenment and a Victorian Age that were different but clearly Western. I think our present age, still Western, is also characterizable in these terms, and one of the qualities that seems striking to me is a relational outlook, a concern about relationships between entities that is greater than concern about the entities themselves.

Systems theory is an illustration of this relational perspective. It isn’t that this isn’t a valid and useful perspective, and certainly it comes up with insights and answers that would not have been apparent to Victorians. But every theoretical perspective has its own limitations, and it is important in using any perspective to be aware of this. The world systems approach is an approach; it may develop some new perspectives, but it may also close some old ones. It is one thing to say, this is how the world looks from this perspective. It is something else to say, this is how the world is.

SYMBIOSIS?

In the first article of the first edition of the Journal of World History, William McNeill (1990) perceives that his book, The Rise of the West (1963), suffered from too much emphasis on separate civilizations, and not enough on their cosmopolitan interactions. He does not think he should have ignored civilizations, but that he needed a better balance between the entities and their interactions.

It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that world systems and civilizational research could be mutually supportive. The civilizationists can remind the world systems theorists of the kinds of concerns I have been expressing here. Be careful that by modernization you don’t mean Westernization. Keep in mind the culture and values of other civilizations; don’t be a civilizational boor. Try to look at the world from the perspective of other civilizations. Keep open to the possibility that the trends toward
merger and communication you have noted in the 20th century can be reversed in the 21st as civilizations reassert themselves, as they have before. Keep in mind that the world systems approach is an approach, and one that happens to be particularly congenial to historians and social scientists of the twentieth century.

Civilizationists can be reminded by world systemists that civilizations are not Spenglerian autonomes impervious to outside influences; that there are periods when external influences become of considerable importance, when one civilization challenges another or several others; that such interactions take place continually throughout history and need to be given consideration along with comparisons between civilizations; that economic interactions are important and always influence other kinds of development.

Each approach has its validity, and can serve as a useful corrective to the other. From this perspective, civilizationists could see systems theorists, not as viruses, but as salutary breezes. And if a civilizationist wanders into a meeting of systems theorists, he could be perceived, not as an outmoded nuisance, but as a preserver of perspective.

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