Confusion Worse Confounded: Through the Looking Glass of Matt Melko in Wonderland

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COMPARATIVE CIVILIZATIONS REVIEW

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To the question “have you stopped beating your wife?” my answer is that I am not married. It is even more difficult to answer Melko who confuses and confounds so many imaginary wonderland enemies to engage in Faustian looking-glass battle.

1. Melko valiantly comes out against modernizationists, with whom he confuses world system theorists. But none of the latter I know is one. Certainly not Wallerstein, Chase-Dunn or myself. We all began with a dependency perspective, which itself did battle with modernization theory. We certainly did not develop our world system analyses now to promote the modernization theory that we, like Melko, have combatted for decades. On the contrary, Wallerstein has been most explicit in critiquing Westernizing modernization, which he contends has meant a setback and indeed absolute immiseration for the majority of the world’s people. Wilkinson (1993:235) sees an “even less cheerful story” regarding modernization. I have myself insistently inveighed against Eurocentrism and have insisted on a “unity in diversity” world system perspective as an antidote both to Eurocentrism and to the now popular “multicultural” alternatives which claim “equal time” for the “political correctness” of each and any ethnic identity (Frank, 1991; Frank and Gills, 1992, 1993). So Melko’s anti-modernizationist fire is clearly misdirected, at least regarding those of his friends, colleagues and others from whom he fears world systemic perversion of ISCSC. So what about his also laudable insistence on comparison?

2. Melko does come out valiantly for comparative analysis. So do Chase-Dunn and Hall, which is exactly why they insist on studying world-systems. Indeed, they are so anxious to do comparative work that they categorize not only all or parts of Eurasia, but also the Wintu Indians in California or “indigenous” Hawaii as “world-systems.” The more comparison we can manage, the better; and there is no impediment to doing so by also lumping different parts of the world into one world system if their interconnections are great enough to make them mutually and systemically interdependent.
That does not prevent comparisons among the members/parts of a system any more than among members within a family, nation, civilization, or whatever — or among any of these. However, for my part I prefer to use the term “world system” without a hyphen and to reserve it for as much of Afro-Eurasia, and later the “New World,” as can legitimately be viewed as sufficiently interconnected to have been parts of a single world system. This whole (system) is more than the sum of its parts. The characteristics of each part are influenced by its relation to the whole and to other parts. However, this relation and influence does not prevent our making comparisons among different parts or times within this world system. I just do not see what we gain by calling the parts (mini) world systems.

Wallerstein and Braudel stress the difference between world economy/system and world-economy/system. Wallerstein spells out the difference a hyphen makes: “Note a detail in word usage that distinguishes Frank and Gills from me.... They speak of a ‘world system.’ I speak of ‘world-systems.’ I use a hyphen; they do not. I use the plural; they do not.... For me there have been very many world-systems.... My ‘world-system’ is not a system ‘in the world’ or ‘of the world.’ It is a system ‘that is a world.’ Hence the hyphen, since ‘world’ is not an attribute of the system. Rather the two words together constitute a single concept. Frank and Gills’s system is a world system in an attributive sense, in that it has been tending over time to cover the whole world” (Wallerstein, 1993:294-95).

Braudel writes similarly: “The world economy is an expression applied to the whole world.... A world-economy only concerns a fragment of the world, an economically autonomous section.... Immanuel Wallerstein tells us that he arrived at the theory of the (modern) world-economy while looking for the largest units of measurement which would still be coherent” (Braudel 1982:20-21, 70). In Gills’ and my view, which on this score is shared by Wilkinson, this largest unit has long been much larger and older than the European centered “world-economy/system” of Braudel and Wallerstein (Gills and Frank, 1990/91, 1992; Frank and Gills, 1993b). Since Wilkinson (1987, 1993) emphasizes political coherence he sees “Central Civilization” as only starting in 1500 BC and spreading out much slower than the economic connections that he recognizes as being much earlier and more far-flung. Gills and I use the latter as a major criterion for the identification of the world system since at least 3000 BC and its much more rapid and wider spread throughout Afro-Eurasia (Gills and Frank, 1990/91, Frank and Gills, 1992, 1993; Frank, 1993). For that reason, Chase-Dunn and Hall usefully suggest that we refer to the “Central World System.” A major case in point is the incorporation of China, which we see around 600 BC. Interestingly, Chase-Dunn and Willard (1993) observe that since that time cyclical phases
of expansion and contraction of city sizes coincide between eastern and western Eurasia. Nonetheless, Wilkinson does not include China in “Central civilization” until the 19th century (Wilkinson, 1993). Nonetheless, be all that as it may, of course Gills and I welcome all useful comparisons promoted by Melko, Wilkinson, and Chase-Dunn and Hall (and indeed we do some ourselves) both within this “central” world system and between it or any part of it and other places. I simply think, and perhaps here Melko agrees, that it is both unnecessary and undesirable to call these other (small) places other “worlds” or even regard them as “world-like.”

Herein, the Chase-Dunn and Hall usage seems confusing and confounds Melko among others.

3. Melko sees cycles but not in the world system. Too bad, for whatever limitations world system analysis may have, the lack of a perspective on cycles is not one of them. Cycles and “conjunctures” were prominent in Braudel’s work. Long cycles are central to the (economic) world system of Wallerstein and the (political) one of Modelski and Thompson (1988) (for a good summary see Goldstein, 1988). I have myself always argued, like Schumpeter (1938), that cycles, unlike tonsils that can be extirpated, are the heartbeat of the (world) system. Gills and I have written books and articles specifically to identify world system-wide cycles (Frank, 1978, 1993, 1994a,b; Frank and Gills, 1993 a,b; Gills and Frank, 1992). The difference with Melko is that he sees cycles only in different parts of the system, and I see them both there and across the whole world system itself. Indeed, I have argued that the identification of simultaneity in cyclical ups and downs in “different” areas is at least prima facie evidence and an operational criterion for recognizing them to be different parts of the same world system (Frank, 1993, 1994a,b).

For instance, Han China, Kushan India, Parthian Persia, and Imperial Rome all rose and prospered at about the same time from 100 BC to 200 AD. Then from AD 200 to 500, all four and also Axum in Africa suffered near simultaneous apparently cyclical “decline and fall” of the kind that seems to interest Melko. Gibbon and others sought explanations for Rome in “internal” decay and barbarian invasions that came out of nowhere in Asia. Tainter (1989) reviewed dozens of cases and explanations of breakdown in complex societies also at other times and places, but all of them also focused only on internal causes and in some cases deus ex machina external invasion. Yet Teggart (1939) already noted correlation and mutual causation between wars and other events in Rome and China. Gills and Frank (1992) go a step further and suggest that all four societies (civilizations?) rose and declined in tandem as part of a long world system-wide cycle, of which the “internal” affairs of each were only parts. We did the same also for other times and places between 1700 BC and AD 1700, and I carried the
investigation back to 3000 BC in “Bronze Age World System Cycles” (Frank, 1993). Wilkinson (1992), Chase-Dunn and Willard (1993), and Bosworth (1992) have taken the trouble to test Gills’ and my cycle datings. As Goldstein relied on some of my post-1500 cycle datings for his own, I relied on Melko and Wilkinson (1992) for some of my pre-1500 ones (Frank 1993)!  

4. Melko has reservations about Sanderson, who is promoting this whole debate. Perhaps Sanderson pays too little attention to “culture” or “civilization.” However, I do not see the evidence for that charge against Sanderson, perhaps because I am equally amiss. On the other hand, Sanderson (1991) expressed reservations about Gills’ and my claim of world system-wide inclusiveness. However, Sanderson welcomes debate and as a result some of his reservations have recently been allayed by his acceptance of some of the evidence, including that adduced by Gills and Frank. So much the better for me, and so much the worse for Melko.  

5. Melko neglects to mention that Wilkinson introduced us at a cocktail party reception, which caused him so much dismay (and he does not quite clarify which part of this cocktail did the damage). Yet he ends his comments by promoting mutually supportive research between world system/s people and civilizationists. I join him in that wholeheartedly, and in my own conclusion here I am glad to express my agreement with all he says in his final three paragraphs. It’s high time for us to have another drink. Cheers!

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REFERENCES


