Expanding World Commercialization: The Link Between World Systems and Civilizations

Stephen K. Sanderson
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From the rise of the first states around 5,000 years ago until the last few hundred years, the dominant form of social organization has been the agrarian state, or what Collins (1990, 1992) has called agrarian-coercive societies, Kautsky (1982) traditional aristocratic empires, and Marxist-oriented scholars the tributary mode of production (Amin 1976; Wolf 1982). Regardless of their various differences, agrarian societies share at least four fundamental characteristics. First, they are characterized by a class division between a small landowning (or at least land controlling) nobility and a large peasantry. The peasantry is compelled on threat of violence to pay tribute in the form of rent, taxation, labor services, or some combination thereof to the nobility for the latter’s economic benefit. This relationship is one of naked exploitation backed by military force. Second, the noble-peasant relationship is the principal economic axis in the society, and it is a relationship of production-for-use rather than production-for-exchange. Production-for-exchange exists to some degree, but it is subordinate in importance, often greatly so, to production-for-use. Indeed, the social actors who dominate production-for-use, the urban merchants, were typically looked down upon by the aristocracy as money-grubbing individuals who dared to dirty their hands with the soil of commerce. Merchants sometimes enjoyed great wealth, but their social status was almost invariably low. Third, despite the class division between nobles and peasants, there is no overt class struggle carried on between these two classes (Kautsky 1982; Giddens 1985). There is, of course, a marked conflict of class interest, but this does not manifest itself, other than in the most minimal and sporadic way, in deliberate actions by one class against the other. Finally, agrarian societies are held together not by any sort of ideological consensus or common world-outlook, but by military force (Giddens 1985). Agrarian societies are virtually always highly militarized societies, and such militarization is essential to the aims and ambitions of dominant groups. Military might is devoted to the twin aims of internal repression and external conquest.

Agrarian societies have been most intensively studied by historians, and especially by those historians who think of themselves as
“civilizationists,” many of whom claim allegiance to the works of Arnold Toynbee (1934-61) and Pitirim Sorokin (1957). Civilizationists can be identified by a number of characteristics, but two stand out. First, they exhibit a tendency to think of the agrarian civilizations in a mentalist or idealist sense. Civilizations are defined and bounded by their cultural themes or motifs, which include such things as philosophies, art styles, religions, and other abstract systems of thought and feeling. Civilizationists have paid some attention to the political features and dynamics of agrarian societies, but they have given little attention to the economic side and certainly have not given it any prominent role in civilizational dynamics. Second, unlike most historians, civilizationists have searched for patterns or regularities in history, the patterns identified usually being cyclical in nature. Thus we have Toynbee’s notion that all civilizations tend to go through a life cycle containing four stages — genesis, growth, breakdown, and disintegration — and Sorokin’s famous idea that civilizations exhibit a cyclical alternation between ideational, idealistic, and sensate forms. In contrast to most historians, civilizationists have therefore adopted a nomothetic rather than an idiographic stance. Nevertheless, the cyclical nature of their nomothetic view has seemingly excluded from consideration the type of linear developmental patterns stressed by those other students of agrarian societies (and all other types of societies), viz., social scientists who espouse an evolutionary view of history.

I would like to suggest that civilizationists need to pay more attention to economics and to developmental rather than cyclical patterns. (I am not rejecting the notion that there may be cyclical patterns, but only asserting that there are developmental or evolutionary patterns of profound importance.) In recent years a number of social scientists have begun to study agrarian and other types of preindustrial societies from a very different point of view, one that does in fact emphasize both economics and long-term social development. These are scholars who identify with the world-system perspective originally developed in the 1970s by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1979, 1980, 1989). The success of this perspective in interpreting the nature and dynamics of modern capitalist civilization has led to the notion that it may have more general utility — that there may have been other historical world-systems that can only be properly understood from a holistic point of view rather than by considering the parts of the system in relative isolation. The pioneers of this view have been, inter alia, Jane Schneider (1977), Kajsa Ekholm and Jonathan Friedman (1982), Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall (1991, 1993), and Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills (Frank 1990, 1991; Gills and Frank 1991, 1992), some of whom have contributed articles to this issue.
My initial reaction to the attempt to apply a world-system perspective to precapitalist and preindustrial societies was rather mixed (Sanderson 1991). One of my initial objections concerned the attempt to apply a perspective focusing on relations of economic exchange to societies in which production-for-exchange was clearly subordinated to production-for-use. My argument was that precapitalist societies, agrarian societies included, contained so little production-for-exchange that it would be difficult to apply a world-system perspective to them. Or, to the extent that such a perspective could be applied, it would apply to only a tiny portion of economic action, and thus be of very limited use. However, I had an open mind and continued to read and study the works of the “precapitalist world-systemites,” hoping that a payoff would eventually be realized.

I did not have long to wait. I gradually came to accept the view, argued most forcefully by Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills, that agrarian civilizations had much more commercialism in them than had generally been recognized, and that in fact there had been a long-term process of the growth of commercialism beginning around 3000 B.C. Frank and Gills have referred to this process as one of capital accumulation and have suggested that the rise of modern capitalism after the sixteenth century was only a quantitative extension of the process, not a qualitative shift from a “feudal” to a “capitalist” economy. I break with them on this particular point — it seems to me a considerable overstatement — but I regard their argument for the gradual growth of commercialism over the last 5,000 years as basically sound. Since I see this process prior to A.D. 1500 as having occurred within essentially noncapitalist, tributary societies, I prefer to refer to it as one of expanding world commercialization rather than capital accumulation. Before A.D. 1500 the growth of commercialism occurred within societies in which early forms of capitalism (perhaps best called “protocapitalism”) existed, but capitalist relations were not yet dominant in the economy. For me, expanding world commercialization is a historical process of tremendous significance that we are only perhaps now coming to appreciate, and it is the link (or if not the link, then at least a link) between the concerns of traditional civilizationists and the new precapitalist world-systemites. This is, or at least can be, a common focus for both groups of scholars.

As I see it, the process of expanding world commercialization is one that can be assessed primarily in terms of growth in the size and density of trade networks. Some trade existed prior to the rise of the first civilizations in 3000 B.C., but its scale began to increase substantially after that date. Early trade was primarily local or confined to relatively small regions, but in due time it expanded to include much larger regions, and then eventually true long-distance trade emerged to link East with West. It is possible to
mark off three major stages in this process (McNeill 1982; Curtin 1984). The first stage begins around 2000 B.C. and ends around 200 B.C. During this phase trade was largely local or, at best, regional in scope. By 200 B.C. there emerged the first truly long-distance trade with the establishment of a trade axis that ran all the way from China to the Mediterranean. After about A.D. 1000 there was another big leap forward in which trade networks expanded and deepened, especially in the period between 1250 and 1350.

It is interesting to note that the emergence of a long-distance trade axis after 200 B.C. corresponds fairly closely to Rein Taagepera’s date for a sudden surge in the size of agrarian empires (600 B.C.). Taagepera (1978, 1990) has studied changes in the size of agrarian empires over approximately the last 5,000 years. He shows that there has been a significant increase in empire size during this time and marks off three phases of empire growth. The first phase begins with the rise of the state itself. Before this time there were no political units with a size greater than 0.1 square megameters (one square megameter = 386,000 square miles). During the first phase of empire building the single largest agrarian empire seemed to maintain a size of at least 0.15 square megameters and to have at least occasionally attained a size of about 1.3 square megameters. A second phase of empire building was inaugurated around 600 B.C. After this time the single largest empire was never smaller than 2.3 square megameters, and the maximum imperial size attained was 24 square megameters. Obviously, then, there is a substantial increase in the size of empires after 600 B.C. Taagepera believes that the increase in empire size during the second phase probably resulted from increasing sophistication in the art of power delegation, especially through impersonal bureaucratic roles rather than personal relationships. But it is also likely that the size increase was made possible by important developments in the areas of transportation and communication, as Taagepera himself notes. Empires could not become effectively larger until the means were available for controlling and integrating much larger areas. Expanding world commercialization and the growth of empires are undoubtedly causally related, for as E.L. Jones (1988) has argued, truly long-distance trade networks only became possible with the rise of very large empires. Only empires of that size had developed the technology of communication and transportation needed to facilitate worldwide trade.

Philip Curtin (1984) has described some of the basic characteristics of the worldwide trade network that was in effect between 200 B.C. and A.D. 1000 (cf. Chaudhuri 1985). As he notes, during this period trade became regularized between the Red Sea/Persian Gulf region and India, between India and Southeast Asia, and between Southeast Asia and both China and Japan. In the middle Han period, Chinese merchants traveled to the west
through central Asia and established an overland trade route between East Asia and Europe. Chinese trade with India had become extensive by the first century A.D., and Chinese goods were being sold widely in the Roman Empire. During Roman times trade between India and the Mediterranean was carried on through three different routes: an overland route through Parthia, the Persian Gulf combined with an overland route, and the Red Sea combined with an overland route to Egypt or some part of the Fertile Crescent region. Maritime trade flourished in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal, with Canton being an important port for trade to the south.

William McNeill (1982) has described what he regards as a new and major burst of world commercialization beginning around A.D. 1000, and centering heavily on China. It was during this time that China had by far its greatest burst of economic activity prior to modern times, one that lags behind only late medieval Europe and Tokugawa Japan in scale and scope. Mark Elvin (1973) has referred to this as an “economic revolution,” most of which occurred during the period of the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960-1275). Elvin sees the Sung economic revolution as involving agriculture, water transport, money and credit, industry, and trade (both domestic and foreign). He argues that improvements in agriculture gave China by the thirteenth century the most sophisticated agricultural system in the world, and one that provided a foundation for major thrusts in commercial activity. Commercial activity was also greatly aided by improvements in water transport. These improvements involved both the construction of better sailing vessels on the one hand and the building of canals and removal of natural obstacles to navigation in streams and rivers on the other. Industry flourished, especially the production of steel and iron. The economy became much more monetized. There was a much greater volume of money in circulation, and the money economy even penetrated into peasant villages. Foreign trade, especially with Southeast Asia and Japan, flourished. Markets proliferated and became hierarchically organized. At this time China was the world’s most economically advanced society, and many observers have suggested that it was on the brink of the world’s first industrial revolution. However, beginning sometime in the fourteenth century China began to decline and stagnate economically and gradually to withdraw from foreign trade. It became increasingly isolated and inward looking, a process that had become fairly complete by the middle of the fifteenth century. The reasons for this economic downturn are still very imperfectly understood today.

McNeill sees the enormous economic growth in Sung China as part of a larger picture of world commercialization. As he says, “China’s rapid evolution towards market-regulated behavior in the centuries on either side of the year 1000 tipped a critical balance in world history” (1982:25). And
he elaborates (1982:50-54):

Though the capitalist spirit was . . . kept firmly under control, the rise of a massive market economy in China during the eleventh century may have sufficed to change the world balance between command and market behavior in a critically significant way . . . . Moreover, the growth of the Chinese economy and society was felt beyond China’s borders; and as Chinese technical secrets spread abroad, new possibilities opened in other parts of the Old World, most conspicuously in western Europe . . . .

What seems certain is that the scale of trade through the southern seas grew persistently and systematically from 1000 onwards, despite innumerable temporary setbacks and local disasters. Behavior attuned to the maintenance of such trade became more and more firmly embedded in everyday routines of human life . . . .

What was new in the eleventh century, therefore, was not the principle of market articulation of human effort across long distances, but the scale on which this kind of behavior began to affect human lives. New wealth arising among a hundred million Chinese began to flow out across the seas (and significantly along caravan routes as well) and added new vigor and scope to market related activity. Scores, hundreds, and perhaps thousands of vessels began to sail from port to port within the Sea of Japan and the South China Sea, the Indonesian Archipelago and the Indian Ocean . . . .

As is well known, a similar upsurge of commercial activity took place in the eleventh century in the Mediterranean, where the principal carriers were Italian merchants sailing from Venice, Genoa, and other ports. They in turn brought most of peninsular Europe into a more and more closely articulated trade net in the course of the next three hundred years. It was a notable achievement, but only a small part of the larger phenomenon, which, I believe, raised market regulated behavior to a scale and significance for civilized peoples that had never been attained before . . . .

It was precisely in the eleventh century, when China’s conversion to cash exchanges went into high gear, that European seamen and traders made the Mediterranean a miniature replica of what was probably happening simultaneously in the southern oceans. . . . These separate sea networks were then combined into one single interacting whole after 1291.

Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) has picked up the story where McNeill left it. She describes in great detail for the period 1250-1350 the structure and operation of a vast worldwide trade network from western Europe to East Asia. This huge network contained eight overlapping subsystems that can be grouped into three larger circuits centering on western Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. She claims that this world trade network (1989:353) was substantially more complex in organization, greater in volume, and more sophisticated in execution, than anything the world
Sophistication was evident in the technology of shipping and navigation, the social organization of production and marketing, and the institutional arrangements for conducting business, such as partnerships, mechanisms for pooling capital, and techniques for monetization and exchange.

Additional corroboration for the notion of expanding world commercialization throughout the agrarian era comes from research on trends in world urbanization. Using data compiled by Tertius Chandler (1987), David Wilkinson (1992, 1993) has shown that urbanization is a striking trend in world history. Of course, commercialization and urbanization cannot be strictly equated, but it is likely that urbanization is more a function of increasing commercialization than of anything else. Cities may grow and expand to fulfill important political functions, of course, and certainly for various other reasons, but commercialization seems to be the main driving force behind urbanization (Bairoch 1988).

The accompanying table presents data on world urbanization trends from 2250 B.C. to A.D. 1500. It is clear that urbanization has been a striking feature of agrarian social growth over a period of nearly 4,000 years. A particularly large leap in urbanization occurs in the period between 650 and 430 B.C. During this period the number of cities of 30,000 or more inhabitants increased from 20 to 51, and the total population represented by these cities increased from 894,000 to 2,877,000, a more than threefold increase. It seems very noteworthy that this period marks the early beginnings of Greco-Roman civilization and is the same period that Taagepera has identified as being associated with a major increase in the size and scope of political empires. There is another major urbanization spurt between 430 B.C. and A.D. 100, during which the number of cities of 30,000 or more inhabitants increased from 51 to at least 75, and also during which the total population of these cities expanded from 2,877,000 to 5,181,000, an 80 percent increase. This period is essentially the same period that McNeill and Curtin refer to as involving the emergence of the first truly long-distance trade network between East Asia and the Mediterranean.

It cannot escape attention that world urbanization suffered a setback between A.D. 100 and A.D. 500. There were fewer large cities (those with 30,000-40,000 or more inhabitants), and the total population of these cities fell from 5,181,000 to 3,892,000. This was, of course, the period of the decline and eventual collapse of the Roman Empire. However, world urbanization and commercialization suffered only a minimal and quite temporary setback. By A.D. 800, the total population of the largest cities (5,237,000) had regained the level achieved in A.D. 100. It took longer for
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. largest cities</th>
<th>Pop. range of largest cities</th>
<th>Estimated tot. pop. of largest cities</th>
<th>Civilizations represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2250 BC</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>c. 30,000</td>
<td>240,000</td>
<td>Mesopotamian, Egyptian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600 BC</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24,000-100,000</td>
<td>459,000</td>
<td>Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Aegean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200 BC</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24,000-50,000</td>
<td>499,000</td>
<td>Central, Aegean, Indic, Far Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>650 BC</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30,000-120,000</td>
<td>894,000</td>
<td>Central, Aegean, Indic, Far Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>430 BC</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>30,000-200,000</td>
<td>2,877,000</td>
<td>Central, Indic, Far Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 100</td>
<td>75*</td>
<td>30,000-450,000</td>
<td>5,181,000</td>
<td>Central, Indic, Far Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 500</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40,000-400,000</td>
<td>3,892,000</td>
<td>Central, Indic, Far Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 800</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>40,000-700,000</td>
<td>5,237,000</td>
<td>Central, Indic, West African, Far Eastern, Indonesian, Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1000</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>40,000-450,000</td>
<td>5,629,000</td>
<td>Central, Indic, Far Eastern, Indonesian, Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1300</td>
<td>75*</td>
<td>40,000-432,000</td>
<td>6,224,000</td>
<td>Central, Indic, West African, Far Eastern, Japanese, Indonesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1500</td>
<td>75*</td>
<td>45,000-672,000</td>
<td>7,454,000</td>
<td>Central, Indic, West African, Far Eastern, Japanese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Central civilization is Wilkinson’s name for the expanded civilization originally centered on Mesopotamia and Egypt. By 200 BC it had engulfed Europe.

An asterisk denotes the upper limit on the number of cities set by Chandler (1987).

the number of large cities to return to the level reached in A.D. 100 — there were 70 such cities in A.D. 1000 and 75 or more cities in A.D. 1300 — but not that much longer. Moreover, after A.D. 1000 the scale of world urbanization was clearly very large and continuing to grow, and, as already noted, the period after A.D. 1000 has been seen by McNeill and Curtin as involving another major leap in world trade networks.

What are the implications of recognizing a historical process of expanding world commercialization over the period from 3000 B.C. to A.D. 1500? I see at least two. First, this process requires strong qualification of what has long been the standard sociological wisdom on agrarian societies: that they exhibited thousands of years of lethargy and stagnation and had no impetus to fundamental social change. This is a view that dates all the way back to the eighteenth century. Its proponents have included Max Weber ([1896/1909] 1976), Gerhard Lenski (1970), John Kautsky (1982), and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), among many others. It is not completely erroneous, but it is one-sided and misleading. While agrarian societies have generally lacked any strong evolutionary impetus — any tendency toward fundamental structural transformation into a new form of society — it is clear that agrarian societies in A.D. 1500 were different — some might even say profoundly different — from what they were like in 3000 B.C.

We might put the matter this way. A useful distinction can be drawn between social growth and social evolution. Social growth occurs when there is a quantitative change in one or more dimensions of a system of social organization. Increases in, say, the size of a population, military might, technological efficiency, or political power may be regarded as social growth so long as they do not lead a society into a structurally new mode of organization. This is essentially a distinction between quantitative change (social growth) and qualitative change (social evolution), or between something new rather than something greater. The crucial question is, of course, Was there much social evolution during the so-called agrarian era? The answer is no, there was not. But there was considerable social growth. In addition to expanding world commercialization this included two correlative forms of social growth: growth in the size of political empires and in the concentration of political power (Taagepera 1978, 1990; Mann 1986), and technological advance (Lenski 1970; Mann 1986). However, I believe that the growth of commercialism was the most important form of social growth during the long agrarian epoch.

The second implication of acknowledging a process of expanding world commercialization is perhaps even more important. Assuming that the movement out of the stage of agrarian society was going to be a movement into a specifically capitalist system of social and economic life — and
historically, of course, this is the way things have worked out — it needs to be stressed that the emergence of capitalism could not be some sort of sudden leap forward to be achieved in a few dozen or even a few hundred years. It was an economic transformation that required a long period of time because of what might be called the “threshold effect.” Because of capitalism’s requirement for extensive markets (both foreign and domestic), and because of the general hostility of agrarian elites to it, it could only emerge slowly, and as such would require a lengthy period of incubation before it could reach a kind of “critical mass” essential to a tipping of the balance of economic power in its favor. In retrospect we know that the time period actually required was approximately 4,500 years from the beginning of the first agrarian states. In another work (Sanderson 1994) I have attempted to develop this implication at some length by way of formulating a new theory of the rise of modern capitalism.

In conclusion, I feel compelled to say that this essay is only a bare beginning toward understanding the worldwide growth of commercialism over the past 5,000 years. This process cries out for understanding in much greater detail, and many important questions remain to be answered. What was the extent to which earlier forms of capitalism were “rationalized” in the Weberian sense? Were ancient merchants profit maximizers? What was the importance of financial arrangements in earlier forms of capitalism? What was the relationship between technological advance and commercial expansion? What role did the state play in ancient capitalism? Now that we have begun to recognize that there was an important long-term process of expanding world commercialization, these questions and many others await civilizationists, world-systemites, and all other inquisitive parties.

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University of California Press.