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FORUM*

OIKUMENES

Oroon K. Ghosh

This communication has been prompted by two articles of David Wilkinson ("Cities, Civilizations and Oikumenes," CCR No. 27 and No. 28) and one of Andre Gunder Frank ("Latin America at the Margin of World System History," CCR No. 28.

It appears to me that there have been several attempts at oikumenes. Most of these were destroyed by militarism, some by cut-throat competition. In two instances (China and India), antimercantile ideologies were partly responsible.

For the present purpose we can divide the world into Eurasia, Africa, and the New World.

WEST EURASIA: The first oikumenes were created by the Levantine Syrians (Phoenicians) from about the 27th century B.C. and the Cretans from about the 26th century B.C. Both serviced Egypt. The Cretan in the Eastern Mediterranean was sacked by the Dorian in about 1000 B.C. The Levantine-Syrian went to Carthage and Spain, and even traded with Britain. It circumnavigated at least the western part of Africa. It was struck down by Rome; the eastern end being overpowered by Alexander and the Hellenes before this.

The Amber Route from North Europe to Greece from about 1500 B.C. was another oikumene. In its path brilliant cultures grew up, including the Urnfield Metallurgical Culture (1300-700 B.C.), the Hallstatt culture (700-450 B.C.) and the La Tene culture (from 450 B.C.) This last was snuffed out by the Romans. The mantle of Crete fell on the Athenians, and their successors, the Hellenic oikumene. After Alexander this had links with Central Eurasia (West and Central Asia) and also South Eurasia (India). It was taken over by the Romans.

The Romans inherited the Hellenic oikumene although the traders were mainly Greeks, Phoenicians and Persians. it developed links with China, through the Silk Route, across Central Asia, from the 3rd Century. Rome

*The Forum section of Comparative Civilizations Review is intended to encourage discourse among the readership. Those readers interested in submitting material to the "Forum," should address their correspondence to Wayne M. Bledsoe, Department of History, University of Missouri-Rolla, Rolla, MO 65401.

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fell due to various causes, including Germanic sacking in the 5th century A.D.

The Byzantines inherited the Roman oikumene, with Constantinople as centre, from the 3rd century A.D. It traded also with the Russian lands in the north, more than had been done by the Hellenic Greeks. The Turks began to nibble at the Byzantine Empire from the 11th century. The coup de grace was given by Mehemet II in 1453.

Meanwhile the Viking pirates from Scandinavia terrorised West Europe and Russia from the 9th century A.D., but also laid the foundations for a West European oikumene from the 11th century A.D. This had links with Byzantium also. The Turks blockaded the Eastern Mediterranean from the 15th century. The West Europeans then turned to other routes to the Spice Islands, India and China. Technological discoveries and inventions enabled them not only to circumnavigate Africa, and strike across to India, but also to open up the Atlantic. The discovery of the new World by Columbus in 1492 was a landmark in world history. It was a great bonanza for West Europe economically and demographically. There was cut-throat competition between the Atlantic nations, Portugal, Spain, France, Britain and the Netherlands. Technological superiority after the Scientific Revolution in West Europe enabled these nations to establish colonies all over the world. This led to a globalisation of trade, basically without rules, the law of the jungle prevailing. This was the basic cause behind World War I.

Russia, opened up through West European assistance, withdrew from the oikumene after the Communist Revolution and is now making its way back.

After World War II the USA took the lead. And mainly under its auspices the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) has recently been signed. This lays down, inter alia, the rules for trade behaviour and modes of adjudication.

**SOUTH EURASIA:** The Indus Valley Civilization and Sumeria had trade links from the 3rd millennium B.C. The Aryan conquest of the Indus Valley circa 1800 B.C. disrupted this. But later, Buddhist India, including the Mauryas, had trade links with Babylon. And later, with the Hellenes and Romans, and the Chinese via the Silk Route.

It also developed links with South East Asia, and also China, from the 1st century A.D. This was mainly by sea. The Arabs, with their lateen sails overtook the Indians from the 8th century A.D. The Brahmans, fearful of “dangerous thoughts,” successfully prohibited crossing the seas, and so oceanic travels.
The Turkish conquest of India in the 13th century snapped land trade route links with West Eurasia and China. Mercantile revival really came under British auspices from the 18th century. Following the Soviet model there was a partial withdrawal from the global oikumene from 1947. It is now slowly limping back again.

CENTRAL EURASIA: The roles of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Hellenes and their successors have been mentioned. The Arabs were a great mercantile people from the 6th to the 15th century A.D. Their range of activities included Africa, India, South East Asia and China. The militaristic Turks disrupted this from the 13th century.

EAST EURASIA: The Han Silk Route from China to the Mediterranean, from the 3rd century, if not earlier, created an oikumene. The T'ang and Sung were successors. And this went on, in a weakened manner, due to successful Arab rivalry, till the Mings. From then on the feudalistic mandarins had the upper hand in thwarting the merchants.

Japan was an outlier, although it traded with China and South East Asia, especially from the Muromachi period in the 14th century. Trade was conducted along with piracy, in Korea, Vietnam and China.

AFRICA: After the 11th century an Islamic-Negro oikumene grew up in West Africa. There was much trans-Saharan trade with Europe, with Timbuktu as an important centre.

In East Africa coastal cities grew up from the 7th century, stimulated by the Arabs. Swahili was the lingua franca. The Indian Ocean was an oikumene, the trade being conducted by Arabs, Persians, Africans and Indians. The whole of Africa fell to West Europeans, commercially and later politically from the 16th century.

AMERICA: The role of America (USA) after 1945 has already been mentioned. It was marginal to West Europe, especially Latin America, until the USA forged ahead after World War I. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is a great break-through. the whole of the Pacific area may soon be included within the ambit of the USA in some form or other. The idea of the Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC) has already taken concrete shape.

FUTURE TRENDS: Besides APEC, South America is likely to become a part of the American oikumene.

The European Community is an oikumene. The Commonwealth of

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Independent States may grow up into another.
If Africa is divided vertically, the western portion may have powerful links with the European Community and the New World. The eastern portions may have such links with the Indian Ocean countries and West Asian ones.

The Indian Ocean (Erythraean Sea to the Greeks) was an oikumene from the 1st century A.D. It may grow again and include not only the Indian sub-continent, and East and South Africa, but also South East Asia, Australia and New Zealand. The latter two will also have links with the APEC countries.

West Africa can become another great oikumene.

Politically and military rivalries, with a 19th century mindset, in West and South Asia (bar Israel) prevent the emergence of a true globalization, which the world deserves, in the 21st century. However, GATT is a hopeful pointer.

Calcutta, India