The Historical Evolution of World-Systems
The Historical Evolution of World-Systems, edited by Christopher Chase-Dunn and E.N. Anderson (2005)


Abstract

This book analyses the historical evolution of world-systems. The chapters consider various aspects of the rise and fall of great powers as seen in particular cases from early time periods. Taken together, they advance our understanding of the regularities in the dynamics of empire and economic expansion since the Bronze Age.

The authors all share a world historical systems perspective on large-scale social change. They analyze the expansion and contraction of cross-cultural trade networks and systems of competing and allying states. In premodern times, these ranged from small local trading networks (even the very small ones of hunting-gathering peoples) to the vast Mongol world-system (Genghis Khan’s empire and the much larger area it affected deeply). Within such systems, there is usually one, or a very few, hegemonic powers (again, the range is from the overwhelming dominance of the Mongols under Genghis down to such things as the brief and tenuous hold of the Portuguese on power at the start of the modern world-system).

A great deal of scholarship has been engaged in recent years on the questions of how such systems change, and how certain powers achieve varying degrees of dominance within them. The chapters in this book review several recent approaches and present a wealth of new findings. Two of the chapters address the rise of the West and the recent debates over why the European powers were eventually able to outpace the complex societies of South and East Asia. And one of the chapters addresses the political ecology of hegemonic competition within the modern world-system.

The book is aimed primarily at scholars in history and the social sciences, but may also have a broader appeal. It will be of interest to those who care to understand the rise and fall of empires and the regularities in historical processes over space and time; it could thus have a wide readership. It should also prove useful in advanced college courses in world history, world-systems theory, and human ecology.
The Historical Evolution of World-Systems

Edited by
Christopher Chase-Dunn
and
E. N. Anderson
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>The Rise and Fall of Great Powers</td>
<td>E. N. Anderson and Christopher Chase-Dunn</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Eurasian C-Wave Crises in the First Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>William R. Thompson</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>From Harappa to Mesopotamia and Egypt to Mycenae: Dark Ages, Political–Economic Declines, and Environmental/Climatic Changes 2200 B.C.–700 B.C.</td>
<td>Sing C. Chew</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Power is in the Details: Administrative Technology and the Growth of Ancient Near Eastern Cores</td>
<td>Mitchell Allen</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Power and Size: Urbanization and Empire Formation in World-Systems Since the Bronze Age</td>
<td>Christopher Chase-Dunn, Alexis Álvarez, and Daniel Pasciuti</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Lamb, Rice, and Hegemonic Decline: The Mongol Empire in the Fourteenth Century</td>
<td>E. N. Anderson</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>The Rise of European Hegemony: The Political Economy of South Asia and Europe Compared, A.D. 1200–A.D. 1500</td>
<td>Eric Mielants</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

Eight  Contentious Peasants, Paternalist State, and Arrested Capitalism in China’s Long Eighteenth Century  
       Ho-Fung Hung 155

Nine  Space, Matter, and Technology in Globalization of the Past and Future  
       Stephen G. Bunker and Paul S. Ciccantell 174

Index 211
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

2.1 Chernykh’s seven great migration crises 22
2.2 Origins and dates of overseas artifacts found on Crete, 1110–600 B.C. 28
2.3 Eurasian interland turmoil in the long first millennium B.C. 43
3.1 Cool and Warm Periods: Anatolia and Adjacent Regions 63
5.1 Mesopotamian largest empires and cities 99
5.2 Regional correlations between city and empire sizes 102
5.3 Temporal correlations among largest and second largest cities 107
5.4 Partial correlations for largest and second largest empires controlling for year 108

Figures

1.1 Emergence of the Central Political/Military Network 8
1.2 Rise and Fall of Large and Powerful Polities Within Regional Interpolity Systems 13
1.3 Unicentric versus Multicentric Core 14
2.1 Meat Consumption in Languedoc, 800–1 B.C. 30
5.1 Southern California/Northwestern Mexico Conurbation 97
5.2 Largest Mesopotamian Cities and Empires 100
5.3 Largest Egyptian Cities and Empires 101
5.4 Largest Cities and Empires in Mesopotamia 103
5.5 West Asian Largest Cities and Empires 104
5.6 Largest Cities and Empires in Europe 104
5.7 Largest and Second Largest Cities in East Asia 105
5.8 Largest and Second Largest Empires in East Asia 105
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Daniel Pasciuti is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. He is conducting research on the population sizes of the world’s largest cities over the past 3000 years.
Earlier versions of the chapters of this book were presented at a conference on “hegemonic declines: past and present” held at the Institute for Research on World-Systems, University of California–Riverside in 2002. The conference focused on the decline of power in “hegemonic” states (states that exercise a highly disproportionate share of control over trade and politics within a world-system). The conference examined the rise and decline of great powers in the modern world-system, especially comparing the current era with the earlier Dutch and British periods of international ascendance and decline. Several sessions were devoted to the study of world power in pre-modern world-systems, as well as studies of global elites, indigenous people, the environment, globalization of labor, terrorism and East/West issues.1

The chapters in this book consider various aspects of the rise and fall of great powers and the historical evolution of world-systems as seen in particular cases since the Bronze Age. Taken together, they advance our understanding of the dynamics of empires, the rise and fall of cities and states, and the historical evolution of world-systems.

The perspective employed in most of the chapters is that of the world-systems perspective made famous by Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Samir Amin. The world-systems perspective is a strategy for explaining social change that focuses on whole intersocietal systems. The main insight is that important interaction networks (trade, alliances, conflict, etc.) have woven polities and cultures together since the beginning of human social evolution, and so the explaining of social change needs to take intersocietal systems (world-systems) as the units that “develop.” Intersocietal interaction networks are termed “world-systems,” but only in very recent centuries have any of them actually involved the whole world; in premodern times, they ranged from small local trading networks (even the very small ones of hunting-gathering peoples) to the vast Mongol world-system (Genghis Khan’s empire and the much larger area it affected deeply). Within such systems, there is usually one, or a very few, hegemonic powers (again, the range is from the overwhelming dominance of the Mongols under Genghis down to such things as the brief and tenuous hold of the Portuguese on power at the start of the modern world-system).
The world-systems perspective looks at human institutions over long periods of time and employs the spatial scale that is required for comprehending whole interaction systems. Single societies have always interacted in consequential ways with neighboring societies, and so intersocietal interaction must be studied in order to understand social change. This does not mean that all the important processes causing social change are intersocietal, but rather that enough of them are so that it is usually disastrous to ignore intersocietal relations.

The world-systems perspective is neither Eurocentric nor core-centric, at least in principle. The main idea is simple: human interaction networks have been increasing in spatial scale for millennia as new technologies of communications and transportation have been developed. Since the emergence of ocean-going transportation in the fifteenth century the multicentric Afroeurasian system incorporated the Western Hemisphere. Before the incorporation of the Americas into the Afroeurasian system there were many local and regional world-systems (intersocietal networks). Most of these became inserted into the expanding European-centered system largely by force, and their populations were mobilized to supply labor for a colonial economy that was repeatedly reorganized by the changing geopolitical and economic forces emanating from the European and (later) North American core societies.

This whole process can be understood structurally as a stratification system composed of economically and politically dominant core societies (themselves in competition with one another) and dependent peripheral and semiperipheral regions, a few of which have been successful in improving their positions in the larger core/periphery hierarchy, while most have simply maintained their relative positions.

This structural perspective on world history allows us to analyze the cyclical features of social change and the long-term trends of development in historical and comparative perspective. We can see the development of the modern world-system as driven primarily by capitalist accumulation and geopolitics in which businesses and states compete with one another for power and wealth. Competition among states and capitals is conditioned by the dynamics of struggle among classes and by the resistance of peripheral and semiperipheral peoples to domination and exploitation from the core. In the modern world-system the semiperiphery is composed of large and powerful countries in the Third World (e.g. Mexico, India, Brazil, China) as well as smaller countries that have intermediate levels of economic development (e.g. the East Asian NICs). It is not possible to understand the history of social change in the system as a whole without taking into account both the strategies of the winners and the strategies and organizational actions of those who have resisted domination and exploitation.

It is also difficult to understand why and where innovative social change emerges without a conceptualization of the world-system as a whole. New organizational forms that transform institutions and that lead to upward
mobility most often emerge from societies in semiperipheral locations. Thus all the countries that became hegemonic core states in the modern system had formerly been semiperipheral (the Dutch, the British, and the United States). This is a continuation of a long-term pattern of social evolution that Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall (1997) have called “semiperipheral development.” Semiperipheral marcher states and semiperipheral capitalist city-states had acted as the main agents of empire formation and commercialization for millennia. This phenomenon arguably also includes organizational innovations in contemporary semiperipheral countries (e.g. Mexico, India, South Korea, Brazil) that may transform the now-global system.

A great deal of scholarship has been expended in recent years on the questions of how such systems change, and how certain powers achieve varying degrees of dominance within them. The chapters in this book review several recent approaches and present a wealth of new findings. They show, among other things, that periods of empire building and periods of disunion (“dark ages”) are roughly correlated over all Eurasia, with the possible exception of the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, such periods alternate on a cycle of 500–600 years. The papers chronicle these and advance various explanations. Finally, since the medieval period, trade increased worldwide, but only Europe developed full-blown capitalism—an anomaly that has obsessed many writers. The chapters in this book consider new findings on that problem in the light of the cycles of rise and decline.

The book is aimed primarily at scholars in history and the social sciences, but will also have a broader appeal to those who are interested in the rise and fall of empires and the regularities in historical processes over space and time.

In chapter 1, the editors (Anderson and Chase-Dunn) explicate Ibn Khaldun’s theory of the rise and fall of states and discuss other factors that have influenced the growth and decline of states, empires, and world-systems.

Chapter 2, by William R. Thompson, shows that Soviet archaeologist E. N. Chernykh’s theory of long cycles of union and disunion works for Eurasia during the first millennium B.C. This chapter sets the stage for the rest of the book, much of which treats of these cycles of rise and decline, or—put another way—centralization and decentralization of power. During centralized periods, large empires with large cities control vast areas. During the times of disunion, migrations involve vast numbers of people; cities are small, and some are deserted; centers of power are diffuse and shifting (often with the migrations). The classic stereotype is of “nomad invasions,” but the reality is more complex.

Chapter 3, by Sing Chew, is titled “From Harappa to Mesopotamia and Egypt to Mycenae: dark ages, hegemonic shifts, and environmental/climatic changes 2200 BC–700 BC.” Sing Chew’s thesis is that “dark ages” ensue when a system reaches environmental limits within its existing economy and cannot find ways to adapt fast enough to prevent a systemic decline. Often, if not always, system decline results in part from overuse or
mismanagement of key natural resources. Dark ages then provide a respite, especially for overstretched ecosystems—the land and water can recover from heavy use. The economy can then, ultimately, recover. The chapter summarizes Dark Age chronologies in major Eurasian areas, tracing out synchronies.

In chapter 4, Mitchell Allen holds that “Power is in the details.” Allen argues that the Assyrian Empire developed a number of innovations in the art and science of ruling, including several that allowed it to make use of trade systems, networks, and institutions. Assyria was able to hold the Levant and parts of Arabia, and to expand power there, by drawing on existing know-how among traders, and by using them as implements of rule while taxing their trade (to the hilt) as a way of maximizing revenues.

Christopher Chase-Dunn, Alexis Álvarez, and Daniel Pasciuti, in chapter 5, look at “Power and size: urbanization and empire formation in world-systems.” They study the temporal relationships between urban size and empire size in several different regions of Afroeurasia. In several regions cities become large during the same periods in which empires do. And their research shows that largest and second largest cities (and empires) in each region grow and decline in the same periods, indicating that regions go through phases of general growth and contraction.

In chapter 6, “Lamb, rice, and Mongol hegemonic decline,” E. N. Anderson deals with the representation of hegemonic rise and decline in food ways. The Mongol Empire, even after its breakup into khanates under Genghis Khan’s heirs, consciously reflected its world domination through great feasts that displayed foods from the entire Mongol world. With the decline of Mongol power, local regionalisms reasserted themselves.

Chapter 7, by Eric Mielants, concerns “The origins of European hegemony: the political economy of South Asia and Europe compared (ca. A.D. 1200–A.D. 1500).” Mielants discusses possible reasons for the failure of South Asia to develop capitalism, or at least something similar, when Europe did. Cultural explanations (caste, ideology) are shown to be inadequate. Difficulties of conquering and holding empire, problems with foreign invasion, and other factors may be relevant. Chronic and critical, however, is the tendency of rural landowning nobility to rule and control, suppressing merchants and urban development and dooming much of the country to chronic war and plunder. Broader questions of the rise and nature of capitalism are observed through this lens.

Chapter 8, by Ho-Fung Hung, brings us to the questions of “Contentious peasants, paternalist state and arrested capitalism in China’s ‘long eighteenth century.’” China is another case of the nondevelopment of capitalism. China had, according to some authors, “sprouts of capitalism” as early as A.D. 1000, but the sprouts never grew tall. The eighteenth century saw the overwhelming dominance of the Qing state—imperial power triumphant and successful. By joining with the working classes against the nascent middle or gentry class, Qing was able to survive, flourish, and even
win considerable popular support, but in the process it inhibited mercantile dynamism. A highly centralized, landlord-based empire arose, hostile to seafaring and not supportive of trading.

In chapter 9, Stephen Bunker and Paul Ciccantell examine “Matter, space and technology in past and future hegemonies.” This chapter is a comprehensive survey of the procurement and transportation of bulk raw materials from the seventeenth century onward, under Dutch, English, American, and Japanese power. The chapter renews interest in this basic, often-forgotten aspect of world trade and the control thereof by leading powers. The bottom line for any aspiring hegemon is its ability to get and ship large amounts of raw material cheaply. Constraints on future increases in returns to scale in mining and transportation have important implications for the future of hegemony. Perhaps we have seen the last of the hegemons.

Christopher Chase-Dunn and E. N. Anderson

Note


Bibliography