STATES SYSTEMS AND UNIVERSAL EMPIRES

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Contents

Summary

"Civilizations" and "world systems" are alternative labels for the largest macropolitical entities that have existed in human history. These historical civilizations/world systems may be seen as having two polar types of power structure, the "states system" and the "universal empire." Each form has certain characteristic accompaniments, which may promote it, be promoted by it, or both. For states systems, these are diversity, creativity, self-government and war. For universal empires, they are homogeneity, peace, repression. Universal empires tend to be late and short-lived formations, but also tend to recur. Each power structure also has its specific pathologies, which tend toward its transformation. States systems produce a great power oligarchy, out of which from time to time emerges a dominant power, which (again from time to time) establishes a universal empire. Universal empires, though preys to a variety of ills, tend to succumb because of a failed succession in the monarchic component of the state. A universal empire seems long overdue in the current global system; but which however shows signs of having "learned" how to prevent the birth of such an empire by conscious "balance of power" doctrines and policies of counterintervention, "grand alliance" and "general war." The destructiveness of modern warfare, as instanced most notably by nuclear weapons now challenges the viability of the balance-of-power doctrine, for which no clear substitute has yet emerged.

1. Civilizations and World Systems

"Civilizations" are city-level societies (of any size) each consisting of some number of cities (with their polities, economies, and cultures) strongly linked in a politico-economic, military-diplomatic network not a part of any larger such network; in this sense, any civilization therefore is also a world system (a politico-military network not a

part of a larger such network). It should be noted that civilizations/world systems may be, but need not be, of global scale; a society of global scale was indeed achieved in the 19th century, but all prior civilizations/world systems were of regional or even very local scope.

Civilizations considered in their political aspect (and as world systems, in their world-political aspect) may be seen as having in theory either of two available political structures: the states system and the world state). There are several alternative labels to "states systems" for systems of many independent states; Walker's is "multi-state system," Wesson's "state systems," Wight's "systems of states." Alternative labels for the world state are "one-state system" and "universal state" (Toynbee's term). Again one must note that, while a 21st century world state would of necessity be global in scale, past "world states" have never been global except in aspiration, but rather dominant in their own worlds small or large. Theoretically, a world state might be a cooperative construction with any political form—a constitutional monarchy, a unitary democracy, a federal republic etc. In historical fact, each past world state has been an empire, an ethnically diverse territory which has been brought by force under the rule of one country, that "metropole" usually itself under the rule of a single person. Hence empirical contrasts must be drawn between states systems, on the one hand, and, on the other, the only actualized world states, the "universal empires" (Quigley's term).

At the same time, "states system" and "universal empire" must be understood both as ideal types, typological terms to which actual power structures will more or less approximate, and as polar types, ideal types paired to highlight contrast. The characteristic features of these polar types of world order have been studied, most notably by Wesson, but also significantly by Toynbee, Quigley and Wight; the principles of their behavior have been particularly studied by Gulick and Wight. More detailed empirical and theoretical studies (e.g. Doyle on empire, Buzan and Little and Cox et al. on historical systems development) have since then advanced, without superseding, these original and seminal works, whose contentions on e.g. unilinear vs. multilinear and progressive vs. cyclical development remain subject to discussion.

This chapter will confine its attention to the world orders of ten fairly large civilizations/world systems. Table 1 indicates their names, along with the dates (conservatively calculated) between which they had an autonomous "world politics" with its own power structure. It should be noted that the "Central" system, which is discussed at greater length in another chapter in this encyclopedia, is the large multicultural world system which arose in the Middle East in consequence of the expansion, collision and fusion of the Egyptian/Northeast African and the Mesopotamian/Southwest Asian world systems c. 1500 BC. In civilizational terms, it is the union of the ancient, classical, Orthodox Byzantine and Russian, Western and Islamic "civilizations" (distinguished by Toynbee and his successors Quigley and Huntington, who emphasize cultural coherence rather than intense interaction as the prime criterion for defining civilizational boundaries) which despite cultural diversity and change in fact formed regions or epochs in the history of a single continuously strongly linked and interactive world system which still endures, and endures alone, having in its expansion and globalization process absorbed all those others with which it formerly coexisted.

System	Autonomous after…	Absorbed after…
Mesopotamian	-3000	-1500
Egyptian	-3100	-1500
Mesoamerican	-1100	1520
Andean	-200	1530
Indonesian	700	1550
West African	350	1590
Indic	-2300	1800
East Asian	-1500	1850
Japanese	650	1850
Central	-1500	Continues

Table 1. A Roster of Ten Civilizations/World Systems

Table 2 provides a list of the universal empires that have existed in and upon the ten selected systems; Table 3 gives the dates (pointing out uncertainties) and the principal states of their states systems, most of which lack proper names. Many of these states systems were absorbed into the Central system; several universal empires were likewise so absorbed, but thereby lost their status as universal empires, and became instead either states of the Central system, or provinces of conquering Central empires.

System	Empire	Span	Duration
Mesopotamian	a. Akkadian	-2350 to -2230	120
	b. Ur 3rd Dynasty	-2050 to -1960	90
	c. Babylonian	-1728 to -1686	42
Egyptian	a. Old Kingdom	-2850 to -2180	670
	b. Middle Kingdom	-1991 to -1786	205
	c. New Kingdom	-1570 to -1525	45
Mesoamerican	Aztec	1496 to 1519	23
Andean	Inca	1470-1533	63
Indonesian	a. Srivijaya	695 to 1290?	595
	b. Madjapahit	1293 to 1389	96
West African	a. Ghana	c. 930	?
	b. Mali	c. 1330	?
	c. Songhai	c. 1500	?
Indic	Maurya	-262 to -231	31
East Asian	a. Ch'in-Han	-221 to +184	405
	b. Sui-Tang	589 to 750	161
	c. Mongol-Ming-Manchu	1279 to 1850	571
Japanese	a. Taiho	702 to 1336	634
	b. Hideyoshi-Tokugawa	1590 to 1868	278
Central	a. Neo-Assyrian	-663 to -652	11
	b. Persian-Macedonian	-525 to -316	209
	c. Roman	-20 to +235	255

Table 2. Universal Empires of the Ten Systems.

Civilization	States System	Duration	Notable States
Mesopotamian	Pre-Sargonid to -2350	?	Uruk, Kish, Nippur, Ur, Lagash, Umma, Elam, Mari, Akkad
	Pre-Urnammu -2230 to -2050	180	Akkad, Guti, Ur, Lagash, Uruk, Elam, Assyria
	Pre-Hammurabic -1960 to -1728	232	Ur, Uruk, Isin, Elam, Lagash, Eshnunna, Larsa, Babylon, Mari, Kassites, Assyria
	Post-Hammurabic -1686 to -1500 (fused with Egyptian to form Central)	States system continued into Central	Babylon, Sea Lands, Kassites, Hittites
Egyptian	Pre-Narmer to -2850	?	Upper Egypt, Lower Egypt
	First Intermediate -2180 to -1991	189	Heracleopolis, Thebes
	Second Intermediate -1786 to -1570	216	Thebes, Xois, Avaris
Mesoamerican	Pre-Montezuma to 1496	?	Mayan city states, Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan, Azcapotzalco, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Tarascans, Tlaxcala
Andean	Pre-Huayna Capac to 1470	?	Cuzco, Charcas, Chimu, Quito
Indonesian	Pre-Srivijaya to 695	?	Srivijaya, Malayu, Kalah
	Pre-Madjapahit late 13th century	?	Srivijaya, Singosari, Madjapahit
	Pre-Engulfment 1389 to 1550	Continued into Central	Madjapahit, Malay states
West African	Pre-Ghana to 10th century?	?	Ghana. Songhai
	Pre-Songhai 11th century to 1325	?	Diara, Soso, Mossi, Manding, Songhai
	Pre-Mali 1433 to 1493?	60?	Manding, Songhai, Tuaregs
Indic	Pre-Asoka to -262	?	Magadha, Kodsala, Ujjain, Vamsas, Kalinga
	Pre-Engulfment -231 to 1800	Continued into Central	Magadha, Bactria, Sakas, Kushana, Andhra, Kanauj, Palas, Gurjara-Prathiharas, Pallavas, Chalukyas, Pandyas, Rashtrakutas, Cholas, Ghaznavids
East Asian	"Spring and Autumn"; "Warring States" -771 to -221	550	Ch'in, Chin, Han, Chao, Wei, Ch'u, Ch'i, Lu, Sung, Yen
	Pre-Sui 184 to 589	174	3 Kingdoms, W. Chin, 6 Dynasties, 16 Kingdoms, N. Wei, E. Wei, W. Wei, N. Ch'i, N. Chou, S. Ch'en, Sui, Annam, Champa, Nan-chao, Tu-yu-hun
	Pre-Mongol 750 to 1279	529	Uighurs, Tufan, Nan-Chao, Five Dynasties, Ten Kingdoms, Khitans (Liao), Hsi-Hsia, N.

			Sung, Jurchen (Ch'in), Ch'i, S. Sung, Annam, Khmer, Champa, Wu Yueh, Mongols, Koryo
Japanese	Pre-Hideyoshi 1336 to 1590	254	Ashikaga, Yoshino, Enryakuji, Ikko, various daimyo
Central	Pre-Assurbanipal -1500 to -663	837	Egypt, Mitanni, Hittites, Elam, abylon, Assyria, Urartu, Damascus, Israel, Tyre, Judah, Ethiopia, Media, Nubia
	Pre-Darius -652 to -525	127	Assyria, Armenia, Elam, Babylonia, Media, Anshan, Persia, Lydia, Egypt, Libya, Ionia, Judah, Tyre, Meroe
	Pre-Augustan -316 to -20	296	Syracuse, Carthage, Macedonia, Rome, Seleucids, Egypt, Pontus, Armenia, Parthia
	Post-Roman 235 to present	1770+	Rome, Persia, Byzantium, Arab Caliphate, Frankish Empire, Holy Roman Empire, Mongol Khanate, Ottoman Sultanate, Spain, Austria, France, Britain, Germany, Japan, Russia, America, China

Table 3. States Systems of the Ten Civilizations.

We might note that some states which have been regarded as universal empires were not so in actuality. For example, the Ummayad and Abbasid caliphates were regional rather than universal empires in the Central civilization, since they were at all times in contact and power competition with other states, notably the Byzantine Empire, itself for the same reason a regional rather than a universal empire. The Mongol Khanate is a universal empire only to the East Asian system (and there only once it had eliminated competing states in China); with respect to the Central system, before the Khanate lost its unity after the death of Kublai Khan in 1294, it firmly controlled Russia and Persia, raided Poland and Hungary, subjugated Anatolia and Syria, but never controlled Austria, Egypt, and points west.

2. The Character of States Systems

Certain conditions will favor states systems, other conditions will be favored by such systems. Examining the two sets of conditions should provide a sense of the peculiar ethos (character) of the states system.

2.1. Conditions Favorable to States Systems

Under what conditions are states systems more likely to arise and be maintained than universal empires? There ought to be answers suggested by examining the distribution of states systems and universal empires in space and time. A very considerable portion of the lifetimes of human civilizations have been spent under universal empires, but an even longer period has been spent under states systems—about twice as much: so whatever

conditions relatively favor states systems would seem likely to be more common than those that do not. Some civilizations—West African, Japanese, Indonesian and Egyptian especially—seem to have found unity to be their normal form, and have spent most or all their lives under a universal state. Others—Indic, Peruvian and Mexican in particular—seem to have been able to do without a universal empire for almost their entire duration. Any discussion of the preconditions and co-conditions of states systems must be consonant with these facts.

2.1.1. Geographic Dissection and Openness; Demographic Sparsity and Mobility

Wesson cites the value of geographic obstacles to domination by any state as of some importance to a states system. It would also seem that an open frontier and a mobile population (able to escape domination and refound viable states beyond the reach of existing empires) should favor the continuous formation of new states and therefore the stabilization and maintenance of a states system despite vicissitudes. A closed frontier and a correspondingly static population should favor the creation and maintenance of a universal empire.

2.1.2. Restricted Technology of Movement

Technological changes can reduce geographic obstacles to movement, uproot populations or fix them in place, and open new frontiers. Any system of rule associated with a technique of transport and communications (which must have some upper limiting speed) will find larger territories and populations on the whole more challenging than smaller, to some upper limiting size beyond which rule cannot effectively be exercised. For any technology, there will be some largest practicable state. If a world system is larger than this critical size, it cannot become or remain a universal empire.

2.1.3. Ethnocultural Heterogeneity

A world system which is highly homogeneous in a social and cultural sense—that is, for instance, having a single common language or a single common religion, or most of whose population identified itself with a single nation—is more favorable to the development or maintenance of a world state than is a civilization with a very diverse multilingual, multi-religious, multiethnic population.

2.1.4. Cheap, Easy and Defensive Military Technology

The prevailing military technology and technique may favor independence or consolidation, and therefore favor one or the other type of world political structure. Quigley finds from the Stone Age to modern times a systematic relationship between cheap, easy "amateur" weapons and political egalitarianism and democracy, and between costly complex "specialist" weapons and authoritarianism. Such a relation seems to hold for state size as well as for state structure. Expensive, complex, sophisticated weapons requiring a large organization of trained military specialists and a substantial revenue base to maintain them seem to favor the political unification of the system in which they appear. Cheap, simple weapons suited to individuals or small units, fighting techniques available to

rich and poor, ruler and subject, seem to favor the fragmentation of independent political units
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Wright related increases in offensive capabilities to regional hegemonies, wars of conquest, and Toynbeean universal states. "Offenses produce war and/or empire; defenses support independence and peace." (Quester). And Quigley finds another systematic relationship from 4000 B.C. to the present between offensive power and the "size of power areas." When defensive, territory-holding military technologies and styles—fortifications, militias, guerrilla warfare, anti-missiles, second-strike capabilities—are in the ascendant, life is a bit harder for would-be conquerors and centralized rulers, a bit easier for those who seek to maintain or to establish political independence.

2.2. Conditions Favored by States Systems

2.2.1. Ethnocultural Heterogeneity

In prudential terms, each member of a states system has an interest in its own continued survival and independence, and therefore in producing or maintaining a nation whose sole and unique state it will be, hence in distinguishing its language, religion, heroes, ideologies, symbols, history and other marks of identity from those of other states. It can do so by homogenizing its population, and by blocking, delaying or controlling trans-border fluxes of unassimilated people, thoughts and things. This produces boundaries, and sustains inhomogeneities, inside a civilization. The several states of states systems tend to establish different religions, languages, ruling houses, polities, economies, etc. to a significantly greater degree than do the several provinces of universal empires.

2.2.2. Political Freedom and Cultural Creativity

States systems are relatively more likely to foster cultural and political freedom, universal empires to foster cultural continuity and political stability and order. Functioning republics and independent commercial interests are more likely to be found in a system of states; the completion of the Roman universal empire also marks the end of the Roman republic. Republics were found within the states systems of Sumeria, Greece, and India. "[I]t appears that the major periods of civilization building have ben those of state systems" (Wesson). Japanese painting, gardening and drama blossomed between the decay of the Taiho imperial order and the rise of the Tokugawa. Chinese philosophies were many and diverse ("Hundred schools") before the Ch'in empire, which repressed most schools of thought, and again between the fall of han and the rise of Sui.

Sumerian writing predates Mesopotamian unification; and to Sumer are credited "host of inventions or innovations, including sailing ships, potters' wheels, wheeled carts and chariots, pottery vessels, dried and then baked bricks, temples with dimensions in hundreds of feet with arches and domes, cylinder seals…, water clocks, fresco painting and excellent sculpture" (Wesson). Greek painters, potters, philosophers, and dramatists, and Hellenistic scientists and engineers, created diverse and individualistic products within the multi-state system. Sung China's achievements in capitalism and trade were accomplished within a system of states which it could never completely control, because it always had great-power rivals (e.g. Liao, Chin, Yuan).

Wesson's work derives creativity and freedom from the operations of unbridled vs. bridled power. Empires are conquest-born, imposed, designed, willed, engineered. "Finding criticism inconvenient, [the imperial state] inevitably checks free expression; on the other hand, it finds it advantageous to propagate a suitable religion or ideology." Contrariwise, Wesson derives republicanism, pluralism, and free trade directly from the division of power inherent to states systems and judges states systems more likely to restrain their members' autocratic tendencies, because the ability of any state to impose its particular brand of repression—its law, its order, its religion—stops at its borders, and any attempt to impose its authority beyond those borders is likely to meet the jealous hostility and effective resistance of a neighboring state. "If dissenters can go abroad, it is difficult to repress dissent.... Hence rulers must act with restraint...."

This may be too optimistic: 20th century genocides and totalitarianisms occurred within a global; states system, whose rulers did not always act with restraint, and dissent is not difficult to repress within one's borders. But because the states in a states system are, as they have reason to be, by and large more hostile to each other than the provinces in a universal empire, they have a distinct rationale for welcoming, and a distinguishable tendency to welcome, each other's exiles, refugees and fugitives, from whom they may get information, contacts, auxiliaries, a friendly faction in a hostile state. The net result of such jealousy between states is that it is probably considerably safer to be a political, artistic, philosophical, economic or religious creator/dissident in a states system than in a universal empire because in a states system, when one becomes untouchable at home or has to leave town in a hurry, there may yet be some foreign state to offer safe harbor, whether out of real sympathy or simply to injure the rival state. In a universal empire, the troublemaker who flees to a neighboring province is likely to find there the very same repressive order, or a governor who ships him straight back.

Whether or not this is a minor point can perhaps be empirically settled by reference to the biographies of founders of philosophers, prophets, scientists, artists and writers. How many have been ignored by, or run foul of, their societies and rulers, and killed, jailed, otherwise silenced? How many have had to leave home, sometimes at short notice, to continue their labors elsewhere? How many of these have been welcomed, how many sent back, proportionally, before vs. after crossing the boundary of an independent ruler? We may anticipate that any such research would show that states systems have the unintended consequence of promoting creativity and freedom simply because their disorderly diversity interferes with thoroughgoing and complete system-wide repression, even while permitting it to any state.

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Biographical Sketch

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