

How Chase-Dunn and Hall Got it Almost Right

**Review of Christopher Chase-Dunn
and Thomas D. Hall,
*Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems****

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At the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association in Toronto in 1997, Christopher Chase-Dunn was an invited critic in a session on Andre Gunder Frank's forthcoming book *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998), which argues the case for the dominance of Asia in the world-economy between AD 1400 and 1800. Chase-Dunn entitled his talk, 'How Gunder Frank Got it Almost Right'. A similar title seems eminently appropriate for a commentary on Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall's recent book *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems* (1997). Thus the title 'How Chase Dunn and Hall Got it Almost Right'. This title is a high compliment on their work, for in the social sciences no one gets it completely right, and few get it even half right. Most get it wrong (often completely wrong).

I read the very first draft of this book in manuscript in 1989. At that time Chase-Dunn was the sole author and he had written a very short manuscript of about 175 pages. I reviewed the book for a publisher, recommended publication, and thought the book would appear sometime in 1990, or by early 1991 at the latest. It didn't. Chase-Dunn had bigger aspirations for the book and asked Hall,

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with whom he was already working on related projects, to join him as coauthor. At the time I thought that was a very good move, and indeed it turned out to be exactly that. Chase-Dunn and Hall have worked extremely hard on this book over the intervening period, and they have produced a manuscript that is vastly superior to the one I read in 1989. The result is an excellent book that makes a number of important contributions to the study of social evolution.

One of these contributions is a real theory of long-term change. In 1992, at a session at the annual meetings of the Society for American Archaeology, I was an invited critic in a session in which Chase-Dunn and Hall overviewed their work and claimed that it gave us a theory of social transformation. I protested that they didn't really have a theory of change, but rather just a static comparison of types of world-systems. This is a problem that often appears in evolutionary theories, and Chase-Dunn and Hall are, like me, evolutionary in their thinking. I am happy to report that ever since I made this criticism the authors have been busy responding to it. They have been able to produce a genuine theory of change that can be compared to and contrasted with other such real theories.

The authors take as their point of departure the world-system theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, a theory that has had an extraordinary influence since its inception in 1974. They are among a growing legion of scholars who have tried to modify Wallersteinian world-system theory in order to make it suitable for the analysis of world-systems prior to the sixteenth century. Chase-Dunn and Hall propose that the world-system is the basic unit of analysis, not just since the sixteenth century, but for several millennia prior to it as well. In this regard they develop a very useful and informative typology of world-systems, in which they identify kin-based and tributary world-systems along with the modern capitalist world-system. In turn, tributary world-systems are divided into four different subtypes. They also make a very important contribution with their notion of a hierarchy of levels of intersocietal interaction: bulk goods networks, political-military networks, pres-

tige good networks and information networks. Also particularly impressive is Chase-Dunn and Hall's effort to trace out some of the most important features, from the point of view of their world-system framework, of the time period between 500 BC and AD 1400. The authors have learned a tremendous amount of history in writing this book. Their command of history is not only impressive; for sociologists, most of whom think history started in 1970, it is stupendous.

I would happily discuss these matters if I had more space, but, alas, space is short. Let me then without further ado turn to that issue in Chase-Dunn and Hall's work that I find the most interesting and important, and on which I feel most competent to comment. This is their causal theory of long-term social evolution. The authors develop their model at least to some extent in opposition to the general theory of social evolution that I presented in my book *Social Transformations*, which was published in 1995. The authors claim that I have not one theory, but three, one for each of the social transformations I seek to explain. There is no need to argue with this – they are right. On parsimony they have me beat. However, I will claim that my arguments, though less parsimonious, are more empirically accurate. The first great transformation I seek to explain is the Neolithic Revolution, which marked the transition, beginning about 10,000 years ago, from hunting and gathering to agriculture. I explain this transformation by relying on the population pressure model of Mark Cohen. The second great transformation is the emergence of civilization and the state, which began about 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Here I rely on Robert Carneiro's theory, which stresses population pressure, warfare, and what Carneiro calls environmental circumscription. However, I try to give a bit of a Marxist twist to the theory by looking also at relations of economic production, something Carneiro ignores. The final transformation I seek to account for is the rise of modern capitalism in Europe and Japan beginning in approximately the sixteenth century. Here I point to several basic similarities between Europe and Japan – their small size; their northerly

geographical location; their island nature, which led them to emphasize maritime trade over land-based trade; and their feudal politico-economic systems, which allowed for freer towns and greater latitude given to mercantile economic activity. These were preconditions that put Europe and Japan ahead of the rest of the world, but critical to this whole transformation was a long-term buildup of capital accumulation or commercialization, a process that had been occurring on a world scale for over four millennia. By sometime around AD 1500, or perhaps in the period between 1000 and 1500, the level of world commercialization had reached a critical mass that prompted a capitalist takeoff in those parts of the world most hospitable to capitalism.

So, I do have three theories, although all three are derived from the same general theoretical model. Chase-Dunn and Hall, by contrast, have but a single theory, which they use to explain the second and third transformations that interested me, although, of course, they see these transformations in world-system terms. Their model is a demographic and ecological one that is, as they note, derived from the work of the anthropologists Marvin Harris, Robert Carneiro and Mark Cohen. In Chase-Dunn and Hall's formulation, this model holds basically something like the following: population growth leads to environmental degradation, which then leads to population pressure, which then leads to emigration, which leads to circumscription, which in turn leads to conflict, hierarchy formation, and intensification. In this model, emigration, conflict, and intensification all work to reduce population pressure. To make this model a little tighter and make some of the relationships a little more logical, I would reformulate it as follows (and I don't think this violates Chase-Dunn and Hall's basic argument): population growth and consequent population pressure lead to environmental degradation. This then leads either to emigration, or, if that path is blocked by circumscription, to social conflict, hierarchy formation, and intensification. The authors call their version an iteration model, because the process cycles back on itself again and again to continue to produce evolutionary changes.

Now this model will do a fairly good job of explaining the first transformation the authors look at – the transition to state-based world-systems – but it will not work for the capitalist transition. Not only will it not explain that transition, but it will not, despite what is claimed by the authors, account for the continued evolution and expansion of the capitalist world-system over the past 500 years. In fact, even Chase-Dunn and Hall themselves, in a later discussion of the rise of capitalism in Europe, partially abandon the model in favor of another emphasis. They tell us that

the key to the emerging ... predominance of capitalism was ... the context of feudalism – a very decentralized, weak tributary mode of accumulation – embedded in the market forces of the Afroeurasian [prestige goods network] that allowed capitalism to displace the tributary mode of accumulation.

They go on to say that it was the continuance of strong bureaucratic states in Asia that prevented capitalism from first emerging there. I quite agree, and say precisely the same kind of thing in the formulation of my theory, but where in their abstract model is this kind of notion? I cannot find it there.

The authors do go on, however, to use their iteration model to understand the continued evolution of the capitalist world-system once it emerged. They say that

both environmental and social circumscription are even more important contextual stimulants to transformation in the modern system than they have been in earlier regional systems. Furthermore, though some tributary states (such as Rome) needed to expand in order to survive, capitalism intensifies this systemic feature to a new level. The realization problem is the need to expand markets in order to realize the profits of more and more commodity production. Capitalism handles this by geographical expansion.

But this is not circumscription as intended by Carneiro. Indeed, it is something else entirely, and exactly the kind of thing I emphasize as the engine of the evolution of the modern world-system – ceaseless capital accumulation.

In short, the modern capitalist world is driven by the desire of capitalists to accumulate capital, and population pressure and ecological degradation have little to do with it. In fact, from a capital-

ist point of view population growth is actually desirable because it increases the number of consumers of commodities. Once we are within a capitalist system, the rules of the game change, and Chase-Dunn and Hall's model does not allow for this. More than one theory is needed. If I could have made do with one just one theory I would have, because no one is more committed to parsimonious explanation than I am. But empirical accuracy cannot be sacrificed for the sake of parsimony.

However, the last word has hardly been spoken on world-systems and the evolution of human social life. The important thing is that, despite my disagreement with some of their formulations, Chase-Dunn and Hall's recent book is an extremely important contribution to both the world-systems literature and the literature on social evolution.

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