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Notes on the Contribution of Christopher Chase-Dunn
to World-System Analysis**

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**The Historical Sociology of Long-Term Social Change:
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Abstract

World-systems analysis emerged in the early seventies as a new approach to research on social change (more specifically, long-term social change). The main object of this paper is the evolutionary, comparative-historical perspective on world-systems analysis developed by the American sociologist Chris Chase-Dunn and his collaborators, among whom the American anthropologist Thomas D. Hall has perhaps played a major role. This perspective tries to compare the modern capitalist world-economy, emerged during the 16th century, with other social systems that preceded it. This comparison is used to identify patterns of reproduction and transformation that characterize all the world-systems, from the simple, stateless systems of the past to the current global capitalist system. The paper examines the approach developed by Chase-Dunn and collaborators, in order to highlight its main features and its usefulness for the analysis of social changes in the world of today.

Keywords: Historical Sociology, World-System Analysis, Evolutionary Theory, Long-Term Social Change

Introduction

World-systems analysis originated in the early 1970s as a new research perspective on long-term social change. This approach mixes classical elements, such as historical materialism or the school of the *Annales*, with new analytical categories. It tries not only to understand why and how the social world changes in a *longue durée* perspective, but also to critically examine the traditional structures of thought, and to contribute in the development of alternatives for a more democratic and more egalitarian society. As is well known, the “founding father” of this perspective is Immanuel Wallerstein who, together with some other scholars such as Gunder Frank, Amin, Hopkins and Arrighi, has provided the basic elements for the definition of this field of research (Wallerstein, 1979; Hopkins, Wallerstein et al., 1982; Amin, Arrighi, Gunder Frank, Wallerstein, 1982; Wallerstein, 1983; 1984; 1991; 1995; 2004).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the historical-comparative approach developed by the sociologist Christopher Chase-Dunn in the general framework of world-systems analysis (Chase-Dunn, Hall, 1997; Chase-Dunn, Anderson (eds.), 2005; Chase-Dunn, Lerro, 2013). This approach was developed during the late 1990s and aims to compare the modern world-system, based on the capitalist world-economy, with other world-systems that have preceded it over the centuries. This comparison is used to identify patterns of reproduction and transformation shared by every historical world-system. In section 2, we will discuss on the theoretical origins of the approach and its main features as they can be identified in Wallerstein’s work. In section 3, we will address the basic elements of the perspective developed by Chase-Dunn (mostly with T. D. Hall) on the pathway opened by Wallerstein. In section 4, we will debate on some main features of Chase-Dunn’s thinking, in order to show its critical relevance for a better understanding of long-term social change.

The World-System Analysis: Genesis and Original Features

In his more recent essay on the fundamentals of his perspective on world-systems analysis, Wallerstein (2004) maintains that this field of study emerged between the 1960s and 1970s. The approach is based on some developments that deeply innovated both traditional disciplines – economics, sociology, political science, but also anthropology and oriental studies – and the newborn field of Area Studies. The latter had emerged in the post-World War II era as a tool of both scientific knowledge and political rhetoric in favor of the West and in particular the United States, which had by now acquired a hegemonic role (*ibidem*: 10-11).

The first change was a growing intermingling among different research fields and academic disciplines. In turn, this led to a growing awareness of the artificial nature of the distinctions among the fields of knowledge regarding the social world and human cultures (Wallerstein, 1991). The second one was the appearance of some debates that highlighted the need for a new way of thinking about the social world in its spatial and temporal coordinates. The first of them was on the

concepts of *core* and *periphery* developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) and their elaboration by dependency theory. Together with the debate among Marxist scholars on the utility of Marx's concept of "Asiatic mode of production", they gave a strong contribution to the overcoming of the unilinear evolutionism on which the previous theories of development were based. The third debate which Wallerstein refers to is the discussion among Western historians on the transition from feudalism to modern capitalism. It contributed to the idea that the unit of analysis to be used in the research on social change is not the single State, but the complex system formed by all the cultures or polities among which there is a stable division of labor. Last but not least, there was «the debate about "total history" and the triumph of the *Annales* school of historiography in France and then in many other parts of the world» (Wallerstein, 2004: 11). This debate gave an important contribution to the overcoming of idiographic historiography in favor of research on long-term continuity and change models in broad social contexts, defined as "world-systems". To all these influences, we can add the seminal work by Karl Polanyi «on the distinction between three forms of economic organization which he called reciprocal (a sort of direct give and take), redistributive (in which goods went from the bottom of the social ladder to the top to be then returned in part to the bottom), and market (in which exchange occurred in monetary forms in a public arena)» (*ibidem*: 17).

In the conflictual political context and the effervescent intellectual climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems approach proposes a new way of understanding the social world and its change. The starting point of the world-systems approach may be identified in an epistemological claim. The appropriate unit of analysis to explain the events occurring in the social world cannot be obtained *a posteriori* on the basis of historical events. The latter often draw artificial boundaries among interdependent cultures. In accordance with historical materialism, Wallerstein therefore maintains that the unit of analysis must be identified following the spatial contours of the division of labor ruling the most part of human subsistence and social reproduction. These spatial contours can coincide with the geographical limits of a culture; or they can go beyond, so as to include a plurality of cultures and polities (Wallerstein, 2000: 71-105).

When the division of labor does not go beyond the boundaries of a single culture and the economic and political relations among cultures are discontinuous, we have *mini-systems* – this is the case of geographically isolated hunting, fishing and gathering societies. On the contrary, when the labor division involves many cultures, then a second-order system appears – this system is called *world-system*, even if it does not cover the whole world (*ibidem*).

According to Wallerstein, in order to understand the structure and dynamics of this system, it is therefore necessary to develop an approach that can view it as a totality in itself. He maintains that human history has witnessed the birth, development, decline and disappearance of many world systems (*ibidem*; see also Ellwell, 2006: 73-78).

For Wallerstein and his followers, the basic principle of structuring the whole system is either political or economic. In the first case, we have *world-empires*, that is political domains emerging around a culture showing basically a military force capable of imposing itself on satellite territories. In the second case, we have *world-economies*, that is transnational mercantile networks associated with interstate systems. Among these states there is a continuous “cooperative competition” which usually ends in the relative dominance of the most powerful one. In a geographical perspective, world systems show also a competition among central, semiperipheral and peripheral areas which produces a hierarchy of dependence on systemic dynamics. This tripartite structure and its internal dynamics is also the basis of some of the structural changes producing a vertical mobility among the involved areas. Two examples of this are the growing importance of the eastern part of the Roman Empire in its last centuries of life, on one side, and the rise of East- and South Asia in the modern capitalist world economy, on the other (Chase-Dunn, 2006; Sanderson, 2006).

As for the developmental logic of these two kinds of world-system, the approach maintains that every world-empire is subject to a dilemma. On the one hand, it strives to ensure the standard of living of the imperial elite and the upper classes (the courtesans, the military, the bureaucrats, and the landowners). On the other, it is constantly forced to protect itself against the risks coming both from lower classes and subject peoples (internal opponents) and from the enemies outside its boundaries. In addition, world-empire rulers must keep under control the upper classes, which may have aspirations for political autonomy or even claims to the supreme authority. Sooner or later, therefore, the world-empire is forced to face a military and/or a fiscal crisis, which in turn can result in a decline or even a collapse.

World-economies, instead, appear where there is a systemic balance based on a “competitive cooperation” among the polities that are part of them (chiefdoms, city-states, monarchies, etc.). The world-economy grows insofar this balance is preserved, but when the balance is broken by the growing power of a state or by the invasion by a neighboring empire, the system collapses. The only exception to this rule is the world-economy of Western Europe that emerged in the 16th century. It was based on colonialism, imperialism and a “balance of powers” that lasted long enough to allow its expansion to the whole world (Wallerstein, 2000: 71-105; a discussion on this point is in Turner, 2003: 174-181). From this point on, Wallerstein focuses on the analysis of the modern capitalist world-economy. As is well known, Wallerstein’s analysis has been criticized¹, but his attempt to create a new “world-historical social science” has strongly contributed to the reinvigoration of historical sociology (Robinson, 2011) and attracted a large number of scholars.

¹Theda Skocpol, for instance, suggested that, rather than focusing on a “single world-system” as a unique unit of analysis, it would be better to conceive this world-system as emerging from overlapping but relatively autonomous structures – class structures, trade networks, state structures, and geopolitical systems. Moreover, she maintains that Wallerstein’s argument is teleological: «Repeatedly he argues that things at a certain time and place had to be a certain way in order to bring about later states or developments that accord (or seem to accord) with what his system model of the world capitalist economy requires or predicts» (Skocpol, 1977: 1088).

World-Systems Analysis and Long-Term Social Change: Chase-Dunn's Approach

Differences among world-systems scholars relate to many analytical dimensions, such as: the relative importance of the dynamics involving core areas; the role of political actors as opposed to economic actors; the importance of ecological, demographic, or technological variables in defining the fundamental structure of the whole system; or even the number of world-systems historically identifiable. In this latter “continuist-transformationist” debate (Straussfogel, 1998), which developed during the 1990s, two basic views emerged. Scholars like Frank and Gills insisted that in human history there has been only a single world-system, basically a trade network who lately developed as a division of labor and an interstate system (Frank, Gills, eds., 1993). Other scholars were instead more prone to highlight the discontinuities among the social formations emerging as a result of the agricultural and urban revolutions, together with some continuities with simpler, more archaic, social formations. On this latter side of the debate we find Chase-Dunn's approach. We refer in particular to *Rise and Demise* (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997)², in which the theoretical contours of what the authors define as *institutional materialism* are outlined (see also Chase-Dunn, 2006).

For Chase-Dunn and Hall a world-system can be defined as «an inter-societal network in which interactions – e.g., trade, war, intermarriage or information – are important for the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affect the changes that occur in these local structures» (Chase-Dunn, Hall, 1997: 28). Like in Wallerstein's thinking, the spatial configuration of world-systems is based on the categories of core / semi-periphery / periphery. However, their internal structure is no longer identifiable with an inter-societal labor division, which allows to overcome a weakness in Wallerstein's approach. Moreover, for Chase-Dunn and Hall the system developmental logic (or mode of production) depends on whether there is a domination of the core on the periphery (that is, a hierarchy), or there is just a simple differentiation among areas. On this point, it has to be said that in the Chase-Dunn's thinking the role of the semi-periphery has a special relevance, as semiperipheral areas play the role of seed-bed of change (Bair, Werner, 2017; Moghadam, 2017). Among the types of world-system identified by Chase-Dunn and Hall, the oldest (and simplest) are the *kinship-based systems*. In this most basic kind of social systems, the most important inter-societal constraints are based on kinship, and there is a core-periphery polarization not leading to a stable hierarchical structure. Kinship-based systems are followed by *tributary world-systems*, in which a surplus is created and the core acts as its main collector via some kind of a tax system. For Chase-Dunn and Hall there are several (sub-)types of tributary world-systems:

²Chase-Dunn had already worked on the capitalist world-economy in a world-system perspective (Chase Dunn, 1998) and he had already developed the main structure of *Rise and Demise* when he associated himself with the anthropologist T. D. Hall, who contributed to its final release mostly working on same case studies related to kinship-based world-systems (Sanderson, 2002).

- (a) *primary world-systems*, based on the state, in which the relationship core/periphery is basically similar to city/countryside (e.g., the city-states of ancient Mesopotamia);
- (b) *primary empires*, or large-scale polities based on a common geographical and cultural background (e.g. ancient Egypt, the Chinese Empire);
- (c) *polycentric world-systems*, or networks among states, cities, and “backward” semiperipheral or peripheral regions (e.g., the Near East, the Aztec empire);
- (d) *state-based merchant world-systems*, featuring high levels of labor division and market production (e.g., the ancient Rome).

Finally, according to the authors, we have the *modern capitalist world-system*, mostly based on capitalist enterprise and market production, which gradually emerged between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century. This has spread throughout the world and its functioning logic is based on the unlimited accumulation of capital (*ibidem*: 41-56).

For Chase-Dunn and Hall, the ecological, demographic and economic factors are at the basis of both the rise and the fall of each world-system. On this point, they follow the work done by the American anthropologist Marvin Harris in his *Cultural materialism* (Harris, 2001). For Harris, the basis of any human social system is its ecological context, which imposes inescapable limits. These relate to (a) the availability of resources for survival and reproduction and to (b) its resilience to the environmental degradation which is mostly produced by human activity. These factors are also at the origin of the main processes of institutional innovation and vertical mobility in each kind of world-system. However, unlike Harris, who assume rational choice as the basis of innovation and cultural evolution, Chase-Dunn and Hall’s world-systems are based on a plurality of developmental logics – based on kinship, on the surplus gained by an imperial structure, on capitalist accumulation. Moreover, these different developmental logics affect the social self, the personality, and the substantive contents of the “rational choice” the actors practice in each social context (on this point see also Chase-Dunn, Lerro, 2013: 50-72)³.

Chase-Dunn and Hall’s typology of social systems is an interesting feature of their theorizing. However, even more interesting is their attempt at identifying a causal model which could be used in the comparative analysis of large-scale social change. They define it *iteration model*, because it is based on processes of circular and cumulative causation (Myrdal, 1957). These multiple feedback loops make possible the reproduction, but also the change of the peculiar institutional pattern shown by each world-system (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997: 99-117).

The iteration model shows that the fundamental path of systemic change has to be found in the interaction between a certain number of factors:

- (1) *population growth*, considered as a long-term trend in the human species;

³According to Chase-Dunn and Lerro, the social self is «an institution, an invention that is produced by the world historical action of individuals and the possibilities and constraints that larger social structures provide. As social structures evolve so does the social self» (2013: 1).

- (2) *intensification*, that is, the exploitation – due to population growth – of an ever-increasing amount of matter and energy for human and social subsistence and reproduction;
- (3) *environmental degradation*, which results from both resource depletion and environmental pollution;
- (4) *demographic pressure*, resulting from the increased costs of subsistence and reproduction induced by environmental depletion and pollution.

This basic loop leads to the alternative between

- (5)(a) *migration*, which has prompted humans to gradually populate the entire planet, and
- (b) *circumscription*, that is, the invasion, conquest and exploitation of other people's land⁴.

These latter processes produce

- (6) patterns of *conflict and domination* – from the reduction of strangers into slaves to the conquest and submission of the natives –, not excluding various patterns of *peaceful coexistence* if the groups succeed in developing complementary activities⁵.

At this point, we can see the formation and consolidation of

- (7) *hierarchical structures* concerning the production, reproduction, regulation and legitimization of both the whole system and its local, relatively autonomous, parts (local/regional/national “societies”) – in turn, these hierarchical structures may tend towards two basic pattern:
 - (a) *tributary world-systems*, and
 - (b) *capitalist world-systems*.

Another basic development made by Chase-Dunn and Hall on the way of rethinking the world-systems approach is their concept of world-historical *shortcuts*. The iterative character of the model above, in fact, does not imply the constant and invariable repetition of the same structures and dynamics, since the possibility of technological and organizational innovation is always open. These innovations can result in shortcuts introducing structural changes in the model. More specifically, shortcuts-producing innovations refer to processes of *State formation* and *capitalist development*. These create a more restricted circuit among

- (a) demographic pressure,
- (b) technological change, and
- (c) the production, reproduction and transformation of world-systemic hierarchies (see also Chase-Dunn, 2006; Sanderson, 2006; Sanderson, 2007: 214-218).

To summarize Chase-Dunn's argument, the main pathway of change in human history starts from demographic growth and the consequent imbalance

⁴The concept was firstly coined by the American anthropologist Robert L. Carneiro, who used it in order to explain the process of ancient State formation (Carneiro, 1970; 2012).

⁵On this point, Chase-Dunn and Hall's work has apparently been influenced by the Chicago school theorizing on human ecology.

between population and natural resources. This results into several unexpected consequences: migration, warfare, and above all technological and institutional changes in both economic and political domains. These major structural innovations result also in changes in the nature and mutual (mostly hierarchical) relationships among categorical and corporate units (Hawley, 1986: 67-72)⁶ which can be found at the meso level. In turn, these units act as an interface between the world-system as a whole and daily social interaction at a micro level.

However, this major path of large-scale social change has some shortcuts, as we have seen. These shortcuts are based on the State and later, also on capitalist enterprise. They are capable to move the ecological limits of the world-system forward. They also change the very nature of the fundamental relationship between population and resources. New factors, such as the ecological impact of production techniques and the degree and type of opulence in consumption, change the parameters of the basic relationship. Together with the global expansion of the modern capitalist world-system, these changes have led us to think as if those limits do not exist – or, this is the mainstream thinking on the subject still today.

Shortcuts, therefore, intensify their action insofar the world-system changes its fundamental structure and developmental logic, moving from a tributary production mode to a capitalist production mode (Chase-Dunn, 2006). This is the case of the modern capitalist world-system, in which there are increasing tendencies to reduce population pressure through the demographic transition. The latter is triggered by three major structural changes: (a) the ever-increasing use of non-renewable energy sources, which enormously extends the opportunities for production and distribution of goods; (b) the development of a labor market in which the working class and the middle classes (but also women) acquire some degree of power; (c) the introduction of increasingly effective and efficient contraceptive techniques, which tends to separate sexuality from procreation. On this point, however, Chase-Dunn note cautiously that these major changes seem to concentrate their effects above all in the central areas of the global system⁷ (*ibidem*).

Moreover, Chase-Dunn maintains that these changes produce two unprecedented problems on a world scale: increasing pollution, on one side, and the spread of opulent consumption, on the other. In the long run, according to Chase-Dunn, shortcuts cannot obliterate the wider circuit of cumulative causation, along which the modern capitalist world-system will meet its ecological limits⁸. On the point, Chase-Dunn and Lerro state that: «The main problem is that the

⁶According to Hawley, corporate units are defined by “symbiotic relationships” of mutual dependence among the actors that constitute them (for example: families, cities, organizations). Instead, categorical units are defined by “commensality relationships” among actors aware of their common interests (for example, classes or status groups).

⁷This statement is rather questionable. It is true that the trend to the exhaustion of non-renewable energies makes it impossible to spread their use on a global scale. It is also true that the other revolutions mentioned above are taking place in ever larger parts of the world (Sen, 1999).

⁸Before this happens, anyway, the inequality structures at work both at a systemic and a regional and local level may create environmental crises mostly in semiperipheral and peripheral areas, keeping, to a large extent, environmental problems away from the core (Jorgenson, 2004).

scale and scope of environmental degradation has increased so greatly that very powerful institutions and social movements will be required to bring about a sustainable human civilization. Capitalism may not be capable of doing this, and so those theoretical perspectives that point to the need for a major overhaul may be closer to the point than those that contend that capitalism itself can be reformed to become sustainable» (2013: 233).

On Chase-Dunn's Theorizing about Large-Scale Social Change

The attempt made by Chase-Dunn and his collaborators in developing a new perspective on world-systems is very complex. Our brief review allows us to highlight only a few aspects that make the thought of Chase-Dunn rather unique in the context of contemporary sociology.

First of all, Chase-Dunn is one of the few thinkers in today's sociology that qualifies his approach as *materialist*⁹. According to Chase-Dunn and Lerro, «Institutional materialism explains human sociocultural evolution as an adaptive response to demographic, ecological, and economic forces in which people devise institutional inventions to solve emergent problems and to overcome constraints. Institutional inventions include ideological constructions such as religion as well as technologies of production and power» (2013: 13). In this effort of explaining the social world and its change, institutional materialism includes theoretical and empirical contributions from almost every social science. This meta-theoretical option has been influenced not only by historical materialism but also by Marvin Harris' cultural materialism, and more indirectly by Spencer's and Sumner's thinking about change and evolution in human societies. Harris' attempt to merge Marxian and Spencerian thinking in an analytical model based on an ecological-demographic determinism provided a good, albeit questionable, foundation for the work made by Chase-Dunn and Hall, that can therefore be seen also as a better attempt at bringing the environment back in macro-sociological theorizing (Sanderson, 2007: 214-218; Maddaloni, 2015).

This leads us to a second main feature of Chase-Dunn's thinking on large-scale social change, its *evolutionary* character. Given the negative reputation generally attributed to the older *evolutionist* theories in the social sciences, it should be noted that for Chase-Dunn and Hall the word "evolutionary" is by no means synonymous with "evolutionist". On this point, for instance, they maintain that: «by "evolution" [we do not] presume a unilinear, progressive, continuous process of change from simple to complex society. History is usually discontinuous, conjunctural, and somewhat open-ended. Nevertheless, certain

⁹ However, he is not the only one, as evidenced by the flowering of a growing literature on "new materialisms" (see, for instance, the table in <https://simplysociology.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/overview-of-new-materialism-approaches3.pdf>. Last retrieval: February 3, 2019). Anyway, most of the work made by "new materialists" (mainly influenced by such thinkers as Deleuze, Guattari, Latour, Braidotti and so on) is more a development and a deepening of critical theory than an attempt at theorizing on social change on a sound methodological and empirical basis and in a more-than-local perspective.

long-run patterns are observable. We hope that an explanation of these patterns may improve our collective chances of survival» (Chase-Dunn, Hall, 1997: 3). They admit that some of these changes may be cumulative, resulting in more complex institutional frameworks. For instance, «human interaction networks have been increasing in spatial scale for millennia as new technologies of communications and transportation have been developed» (Chase-Dunn, Anderson, 2005: xi). Nevertheless, even these processes are included in patterns of uneven development which can only be explained by a multilinear, conjunctural and probabilistic model of large-scale social change. A model which is similar to those developed by evolutionary biology and anthropology in recent times¹⁰. Nor the evolutionary approach developed by Chase-Dunn and collaborators has anything in common with conventional ideas on “progress”. First of all, as Chase-Dunn and Lerro state, «Progress is not a scientific idea in itself, because it involves evaluations of the human condition that are necessarily matters of values and ethics» (2013: 11). Even if we can share some ideas about the desirable ends for the human action, however, we have to recognize that: (1) many innovations have positive effects on someone’s wellbeing but negative effects on someone else’s wellbeing – and the latter may be many more than the former, as occurred in the agricultural and urban revolutions (Harris, 2001); (2) as we have seen before, sooner or later every world-system will meet its limits, which could result in a societal collapse (Tainter, 1988; Diamond, 2005).

A third feature of Chase-Dunn’s thinking we can discuss here is its effort in developing a robust analytical *methodology* for historical social science¹¹. The first step on this way is his strong option for «The comparative method [which] allows us to establish causality, albeit less certainly than the experimental method» (Chase-Dunn, Lerro, 2013: 5). Together with the use of a probabilistic logic, the comparative method allows the definition of models of social change in which several causal tendencies can be properly identified. More specifically, a comparative and probabilistic approach is developed by Chase-Dunn and collaborators in order to deepen our understanding on the evolution of the intersocietal networks also known as “world-systems”. Moreover, his insistence on greater analytical rigor in world-systems analysis, and, more specifically, on explicit modeling as a research strategy (when data are available) has attracted an increasing attention from many scholars working in this perspective (Babones, Chase-Dunn, eds., 2012: 127-160). This turn in the evolutionary analysis of world-systems may lead this research field even closer to complexity theory (Grimes, 2017). Building mainly on Chase-Dunn’s work as a bridge between natural and

¹⁰On this point, we think that the contribution made by scholars such as Niles Eldredge, Stephen J. Gould or Elizabeth Vrba to the renewal of evolutionary theory should be considered as very important also by social scientists. Their concepts of punctuated equilibria, exaptation or hierarchical structures have changed our idea of evolution, turning it into an uneven and discontinuous bricolage, a «transformation of the possible, a variation on known themes, a skillful tinkering on the existing, a different use and regulation of the same structural information» (Pievani, 2008: 125).

¹¹Chase-Dunn's focus on clarifying the methodological aspects of his research work is widely reflected in the space devoted to conceptual definitions, working hypotheses and research techniques in his larger works (Chase-Dunn, Hall, 1997: 11-56; Chase-Dunn, Lerro, 2013: 1-72).

social/cultural sciences, the latter author maintains that we can now «use complexity to explain how entropy builds structures on a physical level, then how those same dynamics created life, drove evolution, and continue to drive social complexity from our nomadic roots to our current global strife» (*ibidem*: 678).

Finally, we have to mention another important feature of Chase-Dunn's thinking about world-systems – his *political commitment*. Always faithful to his political identity as a democratic socialist¹², he has constantly investigated on the possibilities to build a more democratic, more egalitarian international economic and political order (Chase-Dunn, Hall, 1997: 239-246; Boswell, Chase-Dunn, 2000; Chase-Dunn, 2006b: 92-102). Anyway, he remains aware that a global democratic order is just one possibility among many others. The future evolution (or de-evolution) of the modern capitalist world-system is open – and we cannot be reassured by any comforting belief that what we will find tomorrow will be better than what we have today (Chase-Dunn, Lerro, 2013: 362-367).

Some Final Remarks

In conclusion, a first question to ask ourselves is: do we still need “grand” theories on large-scale social change? We now live in a “post-modern” culture that seems to have dismissed the great narratives (Lyotard, 1984). In the same field of social sciences, approaches aimed at the local, micro level are largely prevalent today. Anyway, the same theory on the end of great narratives is itself a narrative. Moreover, if we work only at a micro level, and the macro level is left unguarded, we leave the field free for the defenders of the world as it is (like Francis Fukuyama, for instance: Fukuyama, 1992). Social sciences, therefore, should not easily dismiss the attempt at building a relatively stable cognitive framework in which even local events can find a better and wider understanding.

Others may find the attempt made by Chase-Dunn and his collaborators at re-bridging natural and social sciences through institutional materialism outdated and perhaps disturbing. In our “post-modern” academic world, reality is a social construction (Berger, Luckmann, 1966), and this statement is often understood as if we, as sociologists, no longer need any reference to human needs, to the real geographical and historical conditions under which they occur, and to the way they are met, resulting into systems of social inequality and power dynamics. Under this perspective, the only acceptable references to “the real world” are rather few. They concentrate on such matters as the symbolic dimension of everyday things (hence the renewal of the research field on “material culture”), or on the ways in which culture shapes nature, especially human nature (hence the endless debates on biopolitics)¹³.

Nevertheless, there are many scholars who have been attracted by Chase-Dunn's research program, in the more general context of world-system analysis. They usually do not think that reality “does not exist”, that everything must be

¹²The young Chase-Dunn actively participated in the protests against the Vietnam war, which culminated in what he refers to as “the world revolution of 1968” (Chase-Dunn, 2017).

¹³On this, see also note 9.

reduced to discourse, and “the most important thing to do” is to study the processes by which a cognitive order is formed. Rather, they insist on the continuing relevance of a critical perspective on really existing neoliberalism¹⁴ - a critical perspective based on the accumulation of knowledge produced by scientific practice. For these scholars, the attempt made by Chase-Dunn and his collaborators at merging world-system analysis and a renewed evolutionary perspective is a tempting option. It offers a broad and robust approach to research into large-scale social change. It may not be free from any criticism (see for instance Turner, 2017¹⁵), but it seems to us that it allows to overcome many shortcomings in early theorizing on world-systems, thus improving our understanding of the world we live.

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¹⁴By “really existing neoliberalism” we mean a mix of ideas and practices aimed at putting politics at the mercy of the economy, the economy at the disposal of finance (Gallino, 2011), and finance at the feet of a small transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2001).

¹⁵More specifically, Turner – another evolutionary sociologist – suggests that the world-systems paradigm no longer reflects today’s realities and provides what he retains as a broader conceptualization of social evolution based on inter-societal systems. According to Turner, «core, periphery, and semi-periphery are not consistently found across a broad range of inter-societal systems, beginning with those among hunting and gathering societies and moving to the current capitalist inter-societal system. Furthermore, the often-implied view that the current geo-economic global system has replaced geo-political systems is overdrawn because geo-economics and geo-politics constantly intersect and interact in all inter-societal systems» (2017: 639). Anyway, Turner’s criticisms are much more on the original world-system approach as developed by Wallerstein than on Chase-Dunn’s evolutionary world-systems perspective.

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