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Long-Term Processes in the History of Humanity

Johan Goudsblom *

Abstract: »Langfristige Prozesse in der Menschheitsgeschichte«. “Humanity” is no longer an ideal but a reality. Its history does not date back a few hundreds of generations, as was still believed in the 18th century; it encompasses many tens of thousands of generations. A synthesis of historical, sociological, anthropological, archaeological, and biological approaches is now possible. An attempt in this direction is made here in the form of a few simple overall “process models.” The three major ecological transformations brought about by humans serve as benchmarks: the domestication of fire, the rise of agriculture, and the “industrial revolution.” Each new stage in control over nature signalled a simultaneous increase in dependency on that which was being controlled. Against this background, secular trends of growth, concentration, specialisation, organisation, and stratification of human populations have been dominant over the last ten millennia.

Keywords: History of humanity, ecological transformations, process models, control and dependency, agrarianisation, dominant long-term trends, regimes.

1. Towards a History of Humanity

1.1. Over the last five hundred years, contacts between people in different regions of the world have increased at an accelerated pace, in numbers and intensity. When we now talk about “humanity,” we are no longer just dealing with a biological category, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, or with a lofty ethical ideal. The existence of one “humanity” has become a hard, undeniable reality, of which everyone who reads a newspaper or follows the news on television is reminded daily. The citizens of Western Europe, the power holders in Washington and Moscow, the masses of poor people in Asia and Africa – they are all linked by mutual dependencies, which determine to a large extent their current ways of life and their chances of survival. Global interdependence

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today is stronger than ever; but it has a long history. This raises the question of how far we can go back to find traces of one worldwide human history, one global process of socio-cultural development.

1.2. Not only the geographical horizon, but also the time perspective has vastly expanded in the past few centuries. For scholars in Europe as recently as at the end of the 18th century, the book of Genesis and the works of Homer were the oldest sources of knowledge about the human past; nor in China and India did historical awareness extend beyond a few thousand years (Rüstow 1950, 23; Butterfield 1981, 43). Recent advances in palaeontology, archaeology, and prehistory now allow us to gain a picture of the biological evolution and the related socio-cultural development of mankind over a period of at least a million years. The trajectory during that period is far from being fully mapped. What is certain, however, is that the human past does not cover just a few hundred generations, as Voltaire and Goethe still believed, but rather tens of thousands of generations.

1.3. The development of humanity across the globe and over a period of several hundred thousand years – that looks like a topic that we, as sociologists or historians, would do better to stay away from. We have learned to take it almost for granted to divide this field into parts, and to focus on separate nations, societies, cultures, or periods as the object of – sometimes comparative – research. Yet in the social and historical sciences, several moves towards a more comprehensive approach have been made already. The days when historians were almost exclusively concerned with the history of nations or the lives of individuals is certainly over (Carr 1961; Braudel 1969), and in sociology too national societies no longer constitute the obvious units for research and theory building. Moreover, there is a resurgent interest among sociologists in long-term processes; this is testified by the success of textbooks such as those by Wilterdink and Van Heerikhuizen (1985), Hurd (1986), and Lenski and Lenski (1987). The big question is to what extent the attempts already made by “generalists” in various fields as yet lend themselves to an even more far-reaching synthesis.

2. Impulses from Different Disciplinary Fields

2.1. Historians have long been familiar with the ideal that the history of humanity as a whole could be described from one summary point of view; this ideal has been known from classical antiquity, and it has never been completely lost (cf. McNeill 1987). But only in our time are the data becoming available that are needed to move beyond the familiar trajectory “from Mesopotamia and Egypt to contemporary Europe” (Kaegi 1977, 98-123). And even in the present age, there have been only a few scholars who have dedicated themselves to this task; among them the Dutch historian Jan Romein deserves

to be mentioned (see for instance Romein 1987 [1954]), as well as, above all, the historian who was acknowledged by Romein as his master in this respect, Arnold Toynbee. Besides admiration, Toynbee's magisterial *A Study of History* (1934-61) also deserves some reservations; particularly the author's view of the cyclical character of history and his strong tendency to moralise do not merit emulation. On both these points, the work of his main successor as "world historian," William McNeill, is to be preferred (see especially McNeill 1963, 1976, 1980, 1986). I am afraid, however, that his oeuvre, too, though considerably more modest in size and tone than Toynbee's, is still viewed by most historians with the same suspicion, and that it more often serves as a target of criticism than as a source of inspiration. Yet, in addition to McNeill's work, a small corpus of literature on world history has been gradually formed (see, e.g., Jones 1981, 1988), including useful overview and reference works such as those of McEvedy and Jones (1978) and Barraclough (1978). In these overviews too, a certain reluctance to systematic theory construction is notable.

2.2. Sociologists traditionally devote more attention to theory than do historians. But while 19th-century sociologists like Comte and Spencer included the development of humanity in the discipline's field of study without any reservations, later generations have become predominantly concerned with contemporary problems and short-term processes (Elias 1987). Those who still practice "historical sociology" show particular interest in the emergence of capitalism and the industrial revolution in Europe. Some more anthropologically minded authors (such as Wallerstein 1974, 1980; Wolf 1982) extended the field of study to the entire world, but in their work too the time perspective still remains limited to the period after the European Middle Ages (see also Skocpol 1984; Tromp 1988).

However, there are important exceptions. Partly inspired by Marx and Weber, sociologists such as Sjöberg (1960), Eisenstadt (1963), Parsons (1966), Lenski (1966), Anderson (1974), and Elias (2012 [1939], 2007 [1992], 1987), and historians such as Adams (1966), Gottwald (1979), Hopkins (1980), and De Ste. Croix (1981) have studied social developments further back than the European Middle Ages from a sociological point of view. Their writings are somewhat isolated, however, and even their references to each other's work are scarce. Moreover, they are mainly focused on societies with writing, or, in other words, societies that date from "historical" times. This also applies to the ambitious attempts to broaden historical sociology to a global scale recently undertaken by British sociologists John Hall (1985, 1987) and Michael Mann (1986).

2.3. Since the 19th century, anthropologists, faced with the question of how to explain the great diversity of cultures of illiterate peoples, have designed general models in the vein of Comte and Spencer, with the help of which every culture could be "placed" as belonging to a particular evolutionary stage in humanity's development. The best-known classification was that of

Morgan, according to which mankind successively passed through the stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilisation. As the naming already shows, this was a classification full of normative valuations; this has undoubtedly contributed to the fact that most anthropologists today are very sceptical about an evolutionist approach in their profession (Harris 1968).

Yet, as a general orientation, it has never completely been abandoned. There is a long line of authors such as Ralph Linton (1955), Leslie White (1959), Elman Service (1975), Marvin Harris (1977, 1987), and Conrad Kottak (1982), who have continued to work from the evolutionist point of view. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to underpin this viewpoint with historical data, so that one often has to rely more on “logical” than “chronological” arguments. The argumentation is then vulnerable to the criticism that an “endogenous dynamic,” from which certain “necessary” developments would have resulted, is assumed too easily (cf. Nisbet 1969).

2.4. Archaeologists are more focused on chronology. Since the introduction of physical dating methods, such as the radiocarbon method, they can determine dates even for a very distant past with great precision. The rough classification of the development of humanity into Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age has thus become largely obsolete for specialists; instead, it has become usual to divide the Stone Age into a Palaeolithic, a Mesolithic, and a Neolithic period (with a subdivision within the Palaeolithicum), which does more justice to the long prehistoric period before the invention of metallurgy. Modern archaeological research leaves no doubt that a socio-cultural development over subsequent phases took place, which can be assessed on the basis of, among other things, the nature of the objects that people used and the size and shape of their settlements (Wenke 1980; Johnson and Earle 1987; Maisel 1987).

2.5. Very far-reaching recent attempts to map in orderly ways the development of humanity from the earliest times to the present have been undertaken by palaeoanthropologists and biologists (for example Darlington 1969), and also by authors from other disciplines who have been inspired primarily by the biological theory of evolution, such as psychologist Leon Festinger (1983). These contributions are particularly important since they remind us clearly both of the full length of the time period at issue and of the ecological dimension of the whole process: the changing relationship of humanity to its environment and especially to other living species.

2.6. The most glaring gaps in the knowledge of human history concern the factual information regarding the earliest past: where and how human groups lived then, how they communicated with one another, how and when they spread over the continents, and so on. As we come closer to the present, the amount of available data increases almost exponentially. But also for more recent times, it is particularly the *connection* between developments and

events in different places and at different times that is often still far from clear.

Both the development of humanity itself and, more particularly, the development of human knowledge make the exploration of these connections possible and worthwhile. It is precisely in an age when the ongoing global interweaving of peoples and states is happening faster and faster that the history and the long antecedents of this interweaving process are becoming more visible. It appears more and more clearly that the development of humanity as a whole for what is already a very long time provides the framework for the more specific processes and events that are the study objects of sociology, history, and the other social and historical sciences. Our representations of this wider framework are still vague; to make them sharper we need detailed knowledge. All detailed knowledge, however, even if very precise, keeps some arbitrariness and remains “up in the air” as long as the connection with this larger framework is missing.

As McNeill (1986, 44) has remarked, historians can only make a responsible choice from the vast amount of data at their disposal by using a theory of social processes. Sociologists, for their part, should, in the words of Michael Mann (1986, 173), be guided by a sense of “world historical time” in all their comparative research. It is precisely on the plane of the history of humanity that the connection between the two disciplines makes itself strongly felt: historians attain here the highest level of generalisation, and sociologists cannot escape the requirements of chronology.

3. An Ecological-Historical Model: The Three “Transformations”

3.1. Using a human history perspective implies that we start with the biological-ecological dimension of human existence and recognise that it, like the socio-cultural aspects, appears to be subject to change over time. Very early on in the development of our ancestors – as early as *Homo erectus* – a process of increasing differentiation in ways of living between humans and other closely related species took shape. As to most biological properties – anatomical as well as physiological and biochemical – humans still exhibit many more similarities with chimpanzees than chimpanzees do with, for example, zebras. Because of their way of living however, humans have succeeded in subjugating almost all other mammals, so that chimpanzees and zebras today are equally visible behind the bars of a zoo.

The process in the course of which humans have been transformed from “ecologically secondary” to “ecologically dominant” (Forni 1984) must have been one of the most striking aspects of the development of human societies

for a long time. Towards the end of the Palaeolithicum, this process was probably already very far advanced. And although various kinds of power struggles between humans and other animals still take place every day, the power balance between species has changed everywhere strongly in favour of humans; hegemony over other animals belongs, as it were, to the infrastructure of any human society. The implicit matter-of-factness with which this is accepted today illustrates how aspects that were very prominent at an earlier stage of development may shift to the background at a later stage.

3.2. The power balance between species has been strongly influenced by three ecological transformations that humanity has brought about in the course of time: the domestication of fire, the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry, and the large-scale use of inanimate energy for industry. Through these three revolutions – the “fire revolution,” the “agricultural revolution,” and the “industrial revolution” – not only have the relations of people to other living species changed dramatically, but also the relations between and within human groups, and the whole way in which people individually arrange their lives (Goudsblom 1984-88, 1992).

These three ecological transformations have been so profound that they can serve to mark the most important stages in the socio-cultural development and the history of humanity. On the basis of these milestones, four successive stages can be schematically distinguished: 1) a stage without control of fire, agriculture, industry, and (?); 2) a stage with fire control, but still without agriculture, industry, and (?); 3) a stage with control of fire and agriculture, but without industry and (?); and 4) a stage with control of fire, agriculture, and industry, but without (?).

The question marks serve to indicate that perhaps a fourth ecological transformation of equal weight as the three previous ones will take place, or that it may even have begun already. In any case, there is no reason to assume that humanity with the fourth stage is at the end of its development.

3.3. Elsewhere I have written at length on the process of domestication of fire (Goudsblom 1984-88, 1992); I now add the note that the whole development of fire control can be formally summarised in the following three statements:

- a) there must have been a time when there were no human or hominid groups that had control over fire;
- b) then there must have been a time when there were groups with control of fire and groups without control of fire;
- c) after that, the time came in which there are only human societies with control of fire.

This triplet of statements is a simple example of a *process model*. On the face of it, only three static states are mentioned; however, these are interrelated by a process, and that is what matters: the transition from (a) to (c) via (b). This transition consists of the development of a form of control of nature that

was entirely absent before, the domestication of fire, plus its spread across all societies. The problem that is stated with the three statements is how to describe the development from (a) in such a way that the genesis of (c) is explained as clearly as possible.

3.4. The example of control of fire is interesting in itself, but it is methodologically somewhat debatable. After all, from archaeological and anthropological research we can only be sure about the reality of stage (c), while for (a) and (b) we rely on hypothetical reconstructions, which may be quite plausible but cannot be regarded as based on empirical evidence.

Let me therefore give three other statements of the same type, which concern the much later period of “agrarianisation,” the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry, about which we are much better informed:

- a) there was a time when there were only human societies without agriculture;
- b) subsequently, there was a time when there were societies with agriculture and societies without agriculture;
- c) we have now reached a time when all human societies directly or indirectly are dependent on agriculture.

These three statements are better supported by empirical evidence than those about control of fire; however, the tenor is the same. And, clearly, instead of “agriculture” all kinds of other things can be filled in, such as “iron” or “writing” or “money,” without changing the principle of the process model. Again and again, we have a sequence from “only without” through “without and with” to “only with.” The problem is always how these developmental sequences, rendered in such simple formulations, actually took place, and how this can be explained. The process model directs our attention to this problem.

4. The Interplay of Control and Dependency

4.1. By highlighting the three ecological transformations as the major turning points in the socio-cultural development of humanity, I stress the great importance of these transformations. However, this is not to say that I wish to regard them as “the causes” of development. The ecological transformations have undoubtedly acted as catalysts in many ways, by which other developments were triggered or accelerated; but these other (demographic, socio-geographic, *et cetera*) developments have in turn influenced the course of ecological developments. Working with process models means that we abandon the idea that the goal of research is the discovery of monocausal determinants. Searching for immutable causal principles is not the appropriate way in the study of social change processes (cf. Elias 1987).

4.2. The observation that the developments we study lend themselves poorly to monocausal analysis does not mean that they are “indeterminate.” On the contrary; but the relationships by which they are determined are always at least “bi-causal” and in most cases “multi-causal.” If we find that a development *a* had an impact on development *b*, we may assume with a high degree of certainty that *b* also had an impact on *a*. This mutual influence occurs very clearly in processes that are crucially important for our field of study: processes of increase or decrease in control and dependence of human groups with respect to their natural environment.

An interesting point of similarity between the three ecological transitions is that all three can be described in the same terms, namely as a process in the course of which initially wild, untamed forces of nature are “domesticated,” “tamed,” and “incorporated” into human society. This “taming” means an increase in “control”: forces of nature are to some extent used for, and subordinated to, human purposes. However, in contrast to what an all-too-simple logic would suggest, increasing “control” did not go together with a correspondingly decreasing “dependence,” let alone that the one would be the “cause” of the other. On the contrary, by attuning their lives to a certain level of “control” (of fire, of plants and animals, of fossil fuels), people had to rely more, and therefore became more dependent on, that which they came to control. This interconnectedness of increasing control and increasing dependency shows itself in human history again and again.

4.3. The increasing control of extra-human forces “in nature” such as fire did not make human existence merely more pleasant and easier. While the words “control” and “dependence” suggest a contradiction, the actual relationship between the conditions to which we refer with these words is more intimate and more complex. As remarked, with increasing control, dependence also increased in most cases – dependence on that which was controlled, and thereby on the means of control. This was already obvious in the case of control of fire: for example, as people became more accustomed to eating cooked food, they had to rely more on fire and therefore on the fuel needed for it.

In the case of agriculture, the connection was even more compelling. More food became available thanks to increasing control of plants; this led to a growth in the number of people; in order to feed them all, even more food was needed; to this purpose, new land was cultivated; as a result, the amount of waste land for hunting and gathering became ever smaller; and that made people even more dependent on agriculture – on its products and therefore on the means of agricultural production.

4.4. The subtle intertwining of control and dependence – a relationship that cannot be captured unilaterally in terms of cause and effect – works its way through into almost all long-term social processes, making their course in general “blind” and “unplanned.” As to increased control, we may assume

that it was consciously wanted in most cases, at least in the short run; the increasing dependency that was inevitably linked with it, however, probably occurred almost always unintentionally and without planning.

This last observation is one of very large scope, but it is not a “law” that can be specified in a fixed formula. Rather, it is a sensitising insight, drawing attention to an important aspect of long-term processes in social reality – whether these processes are related to control of fire, agrarianisation, or industrialisation.

5. The Dynamics of Agrarian Societies

5.1. The rise of agriculture in the late Paleolithicum, between twenty and ten thousand years ago, can be considered a continuation of the long-established pattern of development in which human groups succeeded in extending their hegemony over other species. The introduction of agriculture accelerated this process.

Where, when, and how the rise of agriculture took place; in which cases this occurred “spontaneously” and in which cases through adoption and diffusion; and what the connections are with other developments (for example demographic and military) – these are all problems about which ongoing sociological-historical research is undertaken (Johnson and Earle 1987). The rise of agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as control of fire, can be regarded as a socio-cultural “mutation” that became a dominant condition. The question then is, how the process of becoming dominant has evolved and how it can be explained.

5.2. Agriculture (to limit myself to that; the same applies to animal husbandry) amounts to the deliberate intervention by human groups in the natural selection between and within species. Species and specimens wanted by humans are protected and cultivated, unwanted species and specimens are weeded out as much as possible. We call the activities required for this purpose work; its result is called production. Through labour, farmers increased the yield of food from the soil.

However, as we now know only too well, with this control, dependency also increased. In the case of agriculture, this can be aptly expressed by the words productivity and vulnerability: the life of farmers was more productive than that of gatherers and hunters, but it was also more vulnerable in many ways – to natural disasters, to looting, to mismanagement (Goudsblom 1988).

In order to answer the question of how this mode of existence could have become dominant it is probably counterproductive, again, to look for one main cause. For a long time, it was assumed that the benefits of increased productivity were so obvious that humanity, once the necessary techniques were invented, took advantage of them without hesitation. All sorts of other

developments then followed almost automatically (see for instance Childe 1956). In response to this view, which was strongly coloured by a belief in progress, the idea has emerged in recent decades that agriculture was not a beneficial invention at all, but an emergency solution into which people were forced by overpopulation and food shortages (Sahlins 1972; Cohen 1977). Both lines of reasoning, which I summarise here in their simplest form, are basically monocausal; both also reflect (as is more often the case with monocausal reasoning) an ideological *parti pris*.

This latter observation raises the question of whether it is possible, without taking an *a priori* position in this debate, to consider how the development of agrarian societies actually took place, which trends appeared to be dominant in this development, and how this can be explained.

5.3. Since the beginnings of agrarianisation, I think, a configuration of trends has been characteristic of human history, which can be empirically assessed in their course and theoretically understood in their interconnect-edness. The concentration and increase of food production on protected fields led to a long-term *increase of the human population* and to an increasing *concentration* of this population in permanent settlements. Within and between these settlements there were both processes of *specialisation* as to social function and processes of *organisation* in larger social units, such as states, markets, and religious cults. Closely connected with increasing specialisation and organisation were growing differences in power and wealth, or, in other words, processes of increasing *stratification*.

The five italicised trends can be partially reduced to the processes of integration and differentiation that Spencer already identified as the key features of evolution in general. The growth, concentration, and organisation of human population may be seen as reflecting increasing integration; specialisation as reflecting increasing differentiation; and stratification as reflecting both. In view of the close interrelations among the five trends, it is probably futile to try to identify one of them as the “prime mover.” It makes more sense to chart the course that the trends have actually taken and then to seek an explanation for their overall dynamics, including fluctuations and stagnations.

5.4. The five trends have proved to be dominant – which is not the same as “universal.” It is not difficult to point to agrarian societies, or periods in the history of such societies, in which these trends did not occur, or in which even developments in the opposite direction occurred; think, for example, of Western Europe in the centuries after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. But even if the cases of stagnation or reversal appeared to outnumber those in which the five trends did proceed, the remarkable fact remains that in the long run, the dominant trends have been decisive everywhere.

“The long run” is crucial. It is extremely unlikely that when we study any period of time, we would find only data on short-term changes that are all in

the direction of the five trends. Such a uniform and unilinear movement is not plausible both for logical and sociological reasons. An uninterrupted steady continuation of population growth, population concentration, specialisation, organisation, and stratification is hard to imagine. There is strong evidence, moreover, that social developments always provoke counter-reactions; we should therefore be continuously alert to signs that indicate a setback in one or more of the dominant trends.

However, this need not detract from our expectation that since the beginning of agrarianisation, despite all the odds, long-term progression in all these five directions is observable. Embroidering on an idea by Rein Taagepera (1978), I would like, therefore, to advance the following hypothesis: when we randomly select a number of years from the last ten thousand years, it is to be expected that in each chosen year both the total human population and its largest concentration at any location will be greater than a thousand years before; and that also specialisation, organisation, and stratification will be further developed in the most advanced society of that year (according to these same criteria) than in any society a thousand years before. Perhaps we are still lacking sufficient empirical evidence and the appropriate means of operationalisation to test this hypothesis effectively; but it may at least help to order our thoughts about long-term social processes and to make us familiar with the idea that sensible propositions about them can be made.

5.5. An important question is to what extent the dominant trends can be explained from a general “endogenous dynamics” of agrarian societies. The first thing to bear in mind here is that these trends have been found to be dominant but not universal. As far as we know, they emerged spontaneously in only a few societies, and spread from there over ever larger areas. The known cases of stagnation and setback show that we cannot simply assume that agrarianisation inevitably always brings about the five dominant trends. Perhaps new stages in these trends’ trajectories can best be conceived as “mutations,” whose emergence and, more importantly, whose continuation was the result of a constellation of special circumstances. Often, in line with Malthus’s views, population growth will have only been a handicap for the further development of an agricultural community (cf. Harris and Ross 1987); but where demographic growth went together with certain forms of specialisation and organisation, the resulting combination proved to be viable and, more than that, in the long run irresistible.

5.6. Key to this success was probably the development of *regimes*, forms of control to which people learned to submit themselves, each other, and their natural environment to some extent. They had known a fire regime for hundreds of thousands of years; on top of that, an agrarian regime now emerged: a set of restraints that enabled people to grow crops, to preserve the harvest, and to distribute it within their community with a minimum of conflicts. To the extent that the share of agricultural produce in the diet became larger, we

may expect that the agricultural regime became stricter. Presumably, priests initially played a leading role in this process, until the coercion exercised by them as *Fremdzwang* increasingly gave way to the inner discipline of the farmers themselves, a form of *Selbstzwang* that was praised, for example, by Hesiod (Goudsblom 1988).¹

5.7. Besides religious-agrarian regimes, personified by priests, military-agrarian regimes emerged. It was the fate of peasants that their economic productivity went together with military vulnerability; this created opportunities for the emergence of groups that specialised in the military skills, combining destructiveness and defensive force. Presumably the warriors, like the priests, originally came from the peasantry; in later times, nomadic peoples from surrounding areas also produced formidable warriors.

It was the fundamental and, one may say, fatal, connection of productive and vulnerable peasants with destructively and defensively forceful warriors that brought about the type of society I call military-agrarian, within which the five dominant trends took their course for several millennia.

5.8. The many particular forms that human culture takes can distract attention all too easily from the fundamental similarities in social structure appearing in all military-agrarian societies. These similarities become well observable only when we do not conceive of them as static but recognise their dynamics.

Viewed in this way, a first characteristic of military-agrarian societies is the tendency towards monopolisation of the main means of violence by one or a few groups. Subsequently, we can observe in most cases an alternation of periods in which “centripetal” forces prevailed and large empires were established, and periods when “centrifugal” forces prevailed and the empires disintegrated (Elias 2012 [1939], 213-399). This alternation exhibits not only a “cyclical” but also a developmental pattern: the dominant long-term trends of growth and concentration and of increasing specialisation and organisation of the population all worked in favour of centripetal forces and promoted the eventual formation of ever larger military-political units.

Again, population growth was not continuous; periods of rising and falling numbers of people alternated. But the growth process was dominant; in the long run it was decisive. Associated with this process were migratory movements, which also exhibit mixed cyclical and developmental traits. In these movements, which tended to swell in size with population growth, two recurrent opposite currents are observable: one from rural and peripheral areas to urban centres, and one in the opposite direction. Much of the history of the last millennia, as McNeill (1984) notes, has evolved in the context of these mass migrations.

¹ Translator’s note: The German word *Fremdzwang* means “external constraint” or “constraint by other people”; *Selbstzwang* means “self-constraint.” The terms are derived from Norbert Elias’s work on the civilising process (Elias 1997 [1939]).

5.9. The life course of individuals, too, the civilising process at the personal level (Goudsblom 1987), takes place within the context of larger structures such as the military-agrarian society. The combination of productivity and vulnerability on the one hand and destructiveness and defensive force on the other, constituted a fundamental and inescapable condition under which people in military-agrarian societies had to live. Insight into this condition does not, of course, offer a complete explanation of all biographical details; but it does clarify the background against which many aspects of individual lives become understandable, which otherwise would be very difficult to explain and might even go unnoticed (see also Rüstow 1950; Wichers 1965).

5.10. The processes of population growth, concentration, specialisation, and organisation accelerated considerably after the beginnings of industrialisation. Regarding stratification, the picture is less unambiguous (cf. Lenski and Lenski 1987, 89-90, 331-3). One of the tests for the usefulness of the perspective outlined here will be whether it also sheds light on the major trends that have come to the fore during the last five to ten generations.

6. Concluding Remarks

6.1. The argument in this paper confirms, I hope, in all its tentativity and incompleteness, the idea that it is possible to discover a structure in the socio-cultural development and history of humanity, and that there is no good reason to espouse what Wittfogel (1957, 7) aptly called “developmental agnosticism.” If we want to explain the structure, it is first of all necessary to refrain from any inclination to think about these problems in monocausal, teleological, and normative terms. That fact that the development has gone on in a certain direction over many millennia does not mean that it is determined by one cause, nor that it is attuned to a goal, nor that it corresponds to an ideal. In these three respects, agnosticism is indeed a proper attitude.

The aim should be to develop a conceptual framework that is free of normative valuations to the largest possible extent, and broad and flexible enough to allow a wide variety of anthropological, archaeological, and historical data to be ordered in a comparative design. The terminology used here has been chosen with this in mind. In each specific case that we study we are dealing with a society in a chronologically defined time period (here, Michael Mann’s phrase “appreciation of world historical time” is relevant), which is characterised by a particular ecological regime with corresponding balances of dependency and control, productivity and destructiveness, vulnerability and resilience. Only by gaining insight into the general constellation to which a society or a historical episode belongs we can assess how this particular case compares with others, what is distinct about it, and how this might be explained.

Sociology and history are so complementary here that ideally speaking they could merge completely. In actual fact however, this is rarely realised successfully. This undoubtedly has to do with the diverging, historically developed, and sociologically explainable group cultures that create such difficulties in the relationship between historians and sociologists (Burke 1980; Lepenies 1985). The lack of an intellectually convincing synthesis in the form of a common theory is in part a consequence of the many professional frictions that prevent better integration of both disciplines; but, as so often in social and cultural processes, the “effect” also operates as a “cause”: the lack of a bridging theory reinforces the separation of the two groups.

There is therefore every reason to continue the efforts towards the formation of a common theory. This requires ambitiousness regarding the scope of the project, and modesty regarding the results to be expected in the near future. In view of the latter, we should also beware of setting the expectations that the word “theory” may evoke too high. Theories may be regarded as didactic models: summaries of the present state of knowledge, aimed at transmitting this knowledge as efficiently as possible (cf. Kuhn 1970). The task will be to formulate and order our insights in such a way that this purpose is met.

6.2. Didactic models only make sense if they are filled with empirical content. In the words of Norman Gottwald (1979, 17): history without sociology is blind, sociology without history is empty. To use a model of developmental stages that works with concepts such as “ecological regime” and “military-agrarian society,” one should possess some knowledge of the history of the main agrarian societies of humanity. The spread of this kind of knowledge leaves a lot to be desired. For instance, I fear that in the Netherlands it is still possible to graduate in history or sociology without even having ever heard of any Chinese dynasty.

Now I certainly do not want to say that one can only be a good historian or sociologist if one knows the names of all Chinese dynasties with the corresponding dates. It does seem desirable, however, that one is able to relate the development of Europe to that of other parts of the world: that one has an eye for structural similarities and differences and knows something about the interdependencies that already existed between different continents long before the modern era. What matters, again, is the combination of, on the one hand, a general understanding of the structure of the type of military-agricultural societies that included large parts of both China and Europe for many centuries, and on the other hand, knowledge about the main turning points in the history of China, Europe, the intermediate steppes area of Central Asia, and the like.

Precisely by keeping the theoretical perspective, at least for now, flexible and settling for sensitising concepts and insights, this combination can be achieved. We should not aim for a system that is conclusive in all respects

and that, like an SDI shield, could withstand all problems. But we are not empty-handed either.

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