Incorporation into and merger of world-systems

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World-systems typically expand. Thus, they incorporate or absorb new peoples, new territories, or both. In situations where more than one world-system exists, sufficient expansion might lead to the merger or combination of one or more into a larger system. Alternatively, a merger might be seen as the incorporation of one world-system by another. The point of this article is to summarize and expand upon discussions of the concepts of incorporation into world-systems and the merger of world-systems. I also provide a brief account of how frontier zones fit into these discussions and conclude with some suggestions of possible directions for future research.

Wallerstein’s concept of incorporation

Immanuel Wallerstein developed the concept of incorporation over several publications (1974, 1989; Hopkins and Wallerstein 1987; Hopkins et al. 1987). His notion of incorporation was developed primarily to map the expansion of the modern Europe-centered system and to explain uneven development and what Andre Gunder Frank (1966) had called "development of under-development" in the Global South. Thus, Wallerstein focused on the process of peripheralization. He also distinguished between incorporated peripheries and regions that were outside of the modern system, which he called "external arenas."

Wallerstein’s key points regarding incorporation are:

The question we are dealing with now is the nature of the process by which a zone which was at one point in time in the external arena of the world-economy came to be, at a later point in time, in the periphery of that same world-economy. We think of this transition as a period of medium duration and we denominate it the period of “incorporation.” Hence, the model we are using involves three successive moments for a “zone” being in the external arena, being incorporated and being peripheralized. None of these moments is static; all of them involve processes.

(Wallerstein 1989: 129–30)

Despite continuing trade and some modifications of the local mode of production:

… the trade zone in which these particular processes are located must be considered to remain in the external arena of the world-economy, despite the existence of the trade links, and no matter how extensive or profitable the ongoing “trade” seems to be.

(Wallerstein 1989: 130)
Thomas D. Hall

In short:

... incorporation involves “hooking” the zone in the orbit of the world-economy in such a way that it can virtually no longer escape, while peripheralization involves a continuing transformation of the ministructures of the area in ways that are sometimes referred to as the deepening of capitalist development.

(Wallerstein 1989: 130)

Critiques of the initial formulations of “incorporation”

In the mid 1980s, Hall (1986, 1987, 1989a) developed a critique of Wallerstein’s concept of incorporation. In Hall’s studies of what is now the US southwest (approximately New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, California, and contiguous areas), he found that Wallerstein’s analysis gave too little attention to how incorporated peoples resist incorporation and tended to ignore indigenous peoples. Hall argued that incorporation:

1. begins almost with initial contact, much earlier than originally conceived;
2. includes the “plundering” of some regions that have been termed “external arenas”;
3. is actually a continuum from very weak to very strong;
4. has “fuzzy” or vague limits at the weaker pole;
5. has generally asymmetrical impacts, but not always to the benefit of core regions;
6. engenders resistance by those absorbed, albeit not always successful; and
7. is, especially at weaker levels, to some extent reversible, yet is “sticky” and usually tends eventually toward stronger incorporation.

Hall’s studies of European intrusions into the southwestern United States showed that even very weak incorporation can have drastic effects on incorporated regions and peoples (Hall 1989a; see Hollis 2005 for the southeastern United States). Thus incorporation is a continuum from weak to strong. In both theoretical and methodological aspects, it is significant that the “fuzziness” of weak incorporation is not a result of poor measurement. Rather, it reflects an empirical condition that is inherently vague. While there are impacts on both incorporated and incorporating areas and peoples, the impacts are generally asymmetric, to the net benefit of the incorporating agent. All levels of incorporation, typically more so the weaker the degree, engender resistance and attempts to control or negotiate the process. In short, incorporation is always an interactive process. While incorporation is to some extent reversible, over time it tends to strengthen. Changes in the degree of incorporation are seldom explained by only one or two factors.

It is no surprise that the merger of world-systems was not part of the original formulation of world-systems analysis (WSA), since there was only one world-system. Chase-Dunn and Hall (1991, 1997) later argued that there were many earlier world-systems whose mergers eventually gave rise to the modern world-system. Here I summarize only those aspects of their argument relevant to mergers.

If there were many world-systems then merger, and separation, were both possible. An underlying assumption, backed by empirical evidence, is that a key factor in change in societies was their context amid other societies. When this interacting group was virtually self-contained (almost no societies are completely isolated), it constituted its own “world,” which is how Wallerstein (1993: 294) defines the “world” in world-system. Chase-Dunn and Hall also argued that all world-systems pulsate, that is, expand and contract, or expand more before their expansion proceeds less rapidly. Pulsation is a manifestation of various cycles within the system and is one
drive to incorporate new areas and/or peoples. Occasionally, it results in mergers of formerly unconnected world-systems.

They also argued that there have been different types of world-systems driven by different modes of accumulation—kin-ordered, tributary and capitalist—each with its own internal dynamics. Thus, they reject Andre Gunder Frank’s (Frank and Gills 1993) claim that there has been only one expanding world-system for five millennia. More importantly, they argued that world-systems have four types of boundaries, demarcated by relative densities of interaction in different networks: bulk goods networks (BGNs), political-military networks (PMNs), prestige (or luxury) goods networks (PGNs) and information networks (INs). The PMNs are networks on polities that ally and/or make war with one another. This corresponds with what international relations theorists call “international systems.” These four sets of boundaries seldom coincide and are progressively larger in the order listed, though PGNs and INs are usually of the same order of magnitude. Thus, merger and incorporation can occur at any of these boundaries. For these reasons, studies of incorporation should specify which kinds of interaction are becoming linked. The strength of systemness increases as interaction comes to include political-military contact and the exchange of bulk goods.

While mergers clearly have occurred, the processes have not been discussed widely. In Afroeurasia the major world-systems were the eastern, centered on what is now China, southwestern Asia and the Mediterranean, centered on various empires, and the southern, centered on what is now the South Asian subcontinent. The emergence of the Silk Roads in the mid-to-late first millennium BCE merged the eastern and western systems at the prestige goods level, together with the southern system (Yang 2009). Continuing research suggests that Central Asian states and pastoral confederations played important roles in this and later mergers (Chase-Dunn et al 2010). The Mongol Conquest in the thirteenth century CE merged the eastern and western PMNs, but these broke apart when the Mongol Empire disintegrated. Finally, the modern Europe-centered system eventually brought all the other systems into a single globe-wide PMN by the end of the late nineteenth century.

Unsurprisingly, as world-systems began to merge, areas caught in the middle tried to resist, giving rise to contested semiperipheries and contested peripheries (Allen 1997, 2005). Indeed, it may well be that such contested arenas easily became semiperipheral by playing one system against another in order to gain a modicum of autonomy. This seems to have happened in Central Asia (Chase-Dunn et al 2010). Mergers are a topic needing further research, of which more has been done on incorporation.

**Incorporation: Recent developments**

Through the 1990s, Wilma A. Dunaway (1994, 1996a, b, c, 1997, 2000) pursued the analysis of incorporation processes in studies of the southern Appalachian region in what is now the United States, especially for the Cherokee Nation. She explicitly recognized the interplay of incorporation processes with both gender and ecological concerns. She furthered the emphasis on incorporation as interactive, “a dialectical historical process” (1996b: 467). She also noted that incorporation processes that attempt to impose cultural changes usually generate indigenous resistance. Dunaway examined how involvement in the fur trade had served to disempower Cherokee women, because it increased the relative power of men and developed a dependency on the goods acquired via the fur trade. These processes differed significantly from those in northeastern North America.

Jon Carlson (2001, 2002, 2011) has widened the continuum of incorporation even further to what he calls a “zone of ignorance” and modifies the concept of “external arena” with respect
to weak forms of incorporation. In this range there is a process of “grooming” in which an area and/or people are prepared for incorporation, and at times held somewhat at bay. By “zone of ignorance” Carlson means a “mythic domain, largely unexplored and unknown to the current members of the world-system” (2001: 241). This is an area where “the grooming process of conditioning the area toward capitalist exchange and production is initiated” (241). This is followed by another phase of “incorporation,” whereby an external area’s contact and involvement with the world-system is developed, ultimately producing ‘nominal incorporation,’ building toward ‘effective incorporation’” (242). During this process the zone of ignorance is transformed into an external arena: a region seen as still outside the system but interacting weakly with it.

This analysis “stretches out” the weaker pole of incorporation, encompassing the areas Hall had labeled “external arena” and “contact” peripheries. Carlson builds this analysis from an amalgamation of Wallerstein’s approach and the analyses of Hall and Chase-Dunn. Carlson’s close study of the history of the otter hide trade in the Pacific Northwest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean over the last millennium produced his conceptual refinements.

Carlson’s reconceptualization calls to mind Brian Ferguson and Neil Whitehead’s concept of “war in the tribal zone” (1992a, b). Ferguson and Whitehead use the term “tribal” in an ironic way, explicitly recognizing that “tribe” is a vague and often misleading term. The “tribal zone” is a transition zone, a frontier, beyond the boundary of state expansion into nonstate territories. They make several key points. First, when states expand, the effects of their contact ripple well beyond the area of direct contact. This spreading effect is driven by the efforts of indigenous leaders to gain access to state-produced goods which they can use to gain followers. Often peoples further from the contact zone try to bypass such middlemen and thereby come into conflict with them. An example is seen in the hoards of Roman coins found hundreds of miles beyond the limit of Roman expansion into Europe (Wells 1999a, b). In the US southwest, war could be generated by slave or captive trade (Hall 1989a). Similarly, diseases could spread far beyond the zone of immediate contact and new goods, such as horses, spread from the southwest far into the northwest. War in the Tribal Zone contains many accounts, both ancient and modern, of such effects. These accounts serve as a useful corrective to the mistaken assumption that capitalism is the only system that does this. Ancient systems also expanded, but not as efficiently.

A second consequence of the “tribal zone” effect is that the first literate observers did not see pristine conditions. Rather, they saw conditions already significantly altered by state contact. For instance, Lewis and Clark encountered indigenous peoples in the northwest who had had horses for generations, though they were the first Europeans to travel through that area (Fenelon and Defender-Wilson 2004). There were no horses in the Americas before the Spaniards brought them in the sixteenth century. Thus, many first-hand accounts of the “tribal zone” do not provide good evidence about the true nature of precontact societies.

Early phases of incorporation are very murky and fuzzy. First-hand accounts need to be used with a great deal of caution. Still, it is clear that those contacted often do succeed in shaping the interaction to a considerable degree.

Shirley Hollis (2004, 2005) examines what happened during the sixteenth century in the region that became the southeastern United States. She argues that incorporation began well before the early 1600s. This is an example of the “grooming” of a “zone of ignorance” discussed by Carlson. Hollis argues that these early contacts “not only contributed to the establishment of trade relations with other parts of the emerging world-system, but also led to the subsequent planting of European settlements on the North American continent” (2005: 122). Further, New World plantations were replacing declining plantations in the Mediterranean and the Canaries, where Europeans had already begun to develop the institutions of imperial exploitation.
She concludes that these refined concepts of incorporation are more useful for understanding the interactions with indigenous peoples than Wallerstein’s original concepts.

Caleb Bush extends the critiques of incorporation to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (2005a, b), thereby filling a gap that Hall (1987) recognized, but did not address. Bush argues that incorporation is a process that continues as more and more goods and relations are commodified, and more pressure is exerted on indigenous peoples, using the example of the Diné (Navajo), who assimilated further into middle-class US culture. In short, incorporation has not ended. Further, it does not end only with “dependent” peripheralization, but goes beyond material exchanges to include cultural assimilation.

Nick Kardulias (2007) develops a concept of “negotiated peripherality” wherein incorporated peoples succeed in negotiating the terms of their incorporation. He does this through a comparison of how ancient Cyprus adopted features from Near Eastern and Greek cultures with analogous processes between indigenous fur harvesters and European traders in northern North America. He uses this nuanced comparison to argue that negotiation processes are almost universal, but have features that are unique to each setting. Kardulias further argues that “cultural changes occur at an accelerated rate in contact zones” (55). His work underscores the importance of studying these “marginal” places in order to discover the nuances of processes of cultural contact and interaction. Kardulias transforms the problematic “tribal zone” into a zone of opportunity for a deeper understanding of world-systems processes.

**Frontiers are where the action is**

Frontiers are where incorporation takes place. Indeed, one could argue that areas where incorporation is highly active are one definition of a frontier. Wallerstein says very little about frontiers (1974). He uses frontier in the loose way it was used by many writers around that time. Yet he offers an interesting, teasing comment about frontiers. In commenting that the development of underdevelopment is more general than Frank originally argued, Wallerstein cites Owen Lattimore, who wrote “Civilization gave birth to barbarism” (Lattimore 1962: 93 in Wallerstein 1974: 98). Wallerstein goes on to note that societies on either side of frontiers shape each other. These comments prompted Hall to elaborate on his concept and to connect it to frontiers.

Hall has written extensively about frontiers (1989a, b, 1998, 2000, 2006, 2009). To summarize this work would require a separate article (see 2009); however, a few points are germane to this discussion. First, incorporation typically creates frontier zones that have some width, especially when studied in detail. Second, they are differentially permeable both with respect to what passes through them and to the direction of flow. Third, both sides—and many frontiers are actually multi-sided— influence and shape each other’s historical trajectories of change. Fourth, frontier zones are places where ethnicity and/or race are created, shaped, reshaped and occasionally eliminated. Fifth, and most significant with respect to incorporation, frontier zones are often the best, and some times the only places where these processes can be observed in any detail (1989b). Finally, much of what Hall (2009) argues about comparative strategies for studying frontiers, applies *mutatis mutandis* to the study of incorporation. The two topics—incorporation and frontiers—are closely connected, but not identical. Frontiers are concerned with the creation, transformation and elimination of boundary zones. Incorporation is about how new areas and/or peoples are absorbed into and resist absorption into a world-system.

**Future research problems**

There are many opportunities for comparative studies of incorporation and mergers. There can be multi-tiered comparisons, organized by world-systemic processes and contexts. Contexts
might include the following (e.g., Chase-Dunn and Babones 2006; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Hall 2009):

- types of world-systems (kin-based, tributary, capitalist);
- position in the world-system: core vs. semiperiphery vs. periphery;
- incorporation along the edge of each bounding network: BGN, PMN, PG, N, or IN;
- condition of the world-systems that are coming into contact (expanding or contracting);
- cyclical phases:
  - a- or b-phase in Kondratieff cycles (about 50 years)
  - rising or falling in hegemonic cycles (about 100 years)
  - rising or falling “long waves” (about 200 years)
  - rising or falling Ibn Kaldun cycles (about 300 years) (Turchin and Hall 2003)
- reason for incorporation: land, people, trade, access, etc.;
- types of people(s) or society/ies being incorporated: band, chieftain state, and sub types;
- level of core (or even semiperipheral) states competition for these peoples or territories.

One could add further conditions or qualifications. The point is to make intelligent comparisons that take conditions and properties into account. With a sufficient number of cases, a Boolean strategy (Ragin 1987) might be employed, similar to that used by John Foran (2005) in his comparative study of Third World revolutions. For cyclical processes, attention to the phase of a cycle is an important factor. There are significant differences between a rising (a-phase) and a falling (b-phase) of the Kondratieff cycle (e.g., Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000). Whether the evidence for the existence these cycles is solid or controversial, lack of awareness of cyclical processes can lead to flawed conclusions, especially for comparisons of processes occurring at different phases of a cycle (see Hall 2009: Fig. 2, p. 31 for an illustration).

Similarly, researchers could address the inherent fuzziness of incorporation, especially in its early or weak phases, in the formation of contact peripheries, or Carlson’s grooming of zones of ignorance for incorporation. Here, fuzzy set analysis (Ragin 2000) might be a useful tool. This might even be effective in addressing an issue raised in studies of globalization that claim that contemporary state boundaries and frontiers are becoming less important, and that transnational process are becoming more important.

These strategies of comparison might be fruitfully used in combination with what Philip McMichael calls incorporated comparisons, which entail three processes (1990, 2000). First, comparison is “internal” to historical inquiry, where process-instances are comparable because they are historically connected and mutually conditioning (2000: 671). Second, structure and context of units derives from their relations to the whole and each other. Third, comparisons can be made over time or space, or both.

All three of these strategies—Boolean, fuzzy set, or incorporated—facilitate comparisons that at first glance might seem inappropriate. One might reasonably argue that a comparison of Chinese incorporation of Central Asia steppe territory might be compared to Spanish incorporation of territory occupied by nomadic indigenous peoples either on far northern New Spain (now the US southwest) or far southern La Plata (see Guy and Sheridan 1998). While these instances occur at widely different times, on separate continents, involving different types of agrarian states and different kinds of nomadic peoples, they share slow expansion into territory occupied by nonstate peoples, with the goal of increasing land holdings. One might also note another shared condition: both seldom worked effectively, and when they did it was at great cost in military power and
treasure. Comparison between modern and ancient instances of incorporation will probably underscore what Ferguson and Whitehead (1992a, b) found: that states are a fundamental source of incorporation. It is not only capitalism; Chase-Dunn and Mann’s study of the Wintu (1998) show that even nonstate societies expand, albeit in different ways.

Through many such studies, a fuller understanding of incorporation can be achieved. Such comparisons should include closer attention to roles of gender, ecology, resistance (agency), counter-resistance, trade (volume, velocity, value, and substance), and many other factors. It is only through many such comparisons that analysts will be able to tease out the roles of the various contexts noted above.

There also needs to be more research attention paid to the impacts of newly incorporated areas on systems doing the incorporating, typically but not exclusively core states. The impacts of crops discovered in the New World and exported to Europe and Asia is a familiar example (e.g., Crosby 1972, 1986). As Hollis (2005) noted, newly incorporated areas are where states often develop new strategies of expansion, sometimes bringing those lessons back home. Yang (2009) shows how the incorporation of Yunnan into China over two millennia played a significant role in shaping modern Chinese culture and ethnic identities. Careful study of the consequences of incorporation may well reveal many very important, but often unnoticed, unintended consequences of system expansion.

Finally, detailed case studies (e.g., Blackhawk 2006; Bush 2005a; Dunaway 1996a; Hall 1989a; Reséndez 2005; Yang 2009) will remain extremely valuable for teasing out new processes, factors, and contexts that shape the processes of incorporation. All the refinements discussed here derived from attempts to understand specific instances of incorporation that required modifications of existing concepts and theoretical understandings. Comparative studies will be useful in assessing the limits of applicability and generality of many incorporation processes. While the expansion of the European “modern world-system” gave rise to many instances of incorporation, there are thousands of instances of incorporation by other systems in other times.

References


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