

On the Borders of World-Systems: Contact Zones in Ancient and Modern Times

edited by

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This monograph is an interdisciplinary study by a group of authors of different ages working in different areas of social studies (archaeology, oriental studies, historiography, regional studies and political theory) and engaged in different historical periods, but focussed on one issue – the world-system and civilisational analysis. The monograph is addressed to researchers and postgraduate students, as well as a wide circle of readers interested in theoretical and macrosociological issues of ancient and modern history.

Introduction

This collection of essays is the result of studies conducted by scholars representing different spheres of humanitarian sciences (archaeology, orientalist studies, regional studies, theory of political sciences, international relations) whose professional interests cover the timespan from early antiquity until the modern period. What unites them is the problem of world-system and geocivilisational analysis of corresponding periods. In the course of preparation of the volume the participants undertook interdisciplinary studies so as to converge the available data in a given sphere. This resulting collection has a prospective character, the main goal of which is the solution of a major problem – the study of worldwide practice, oriented towards the problems of the modern social world as a system. In the terminological *sense* the present volume follows the traditions of world-system analysis, but in fact some articles break the stereotypes formulated in the final decades of the last century, in order to form more relevant, stereo pair, system-structural and structural-functional concepts. The main focus of this work is the borderland – *limes*,¹ which resembles an impenetrable cordon, and an open, interactive environment as well. In this world of interworld encounters and different civilisations, an exchange of goods and ideas took place. In the course of the history of empires, the main centres of convergence of local and imperial civilisational values were the military camps and settlements, and their colonists – the pivotal civilisational agents. In the field of social-political sciences, the term ‘contact zone’ began being used comparatively recently. Perhaps this could explain the discrepancy and vagueness of formulations in studies where it is used in different contexts. More frequently, ‘contact zone’ is used for denoting the ‘borderzone’, ‘frontier’, ‘boundary line’, ‘buffer territory’, ‘limitrophe’, ‘interface’, ‘cordon’; more vague or specific (although not always justified) meanings of this term are also used. Obviously, the concept of the ‘contact zone’ opens new possibilities and treatments for the understanding of many historical realities of ancient, medieval and modern periods, however the arbitrary usage of this term can only discredit the very idea. The concept of the contact or boundary zone might be defined as follows: ‘contact zones’ are located between two, rarely three or four ‘domain zones’,² each having its ‘nucleus’, ‘semiperiphery’ and ‘periphery’. These terms were introduced by I. Wallerstein, who took the concept of the world-system (World-System)³ from F. Braudel. Accepting the terms used by Wallerstein, we, however, do not share some basic foundations of his theory. According to Wallerstein

¹ *Limes* (in Latin – ‘boundary, limit’) – a border between different sections of land, granted to the citizens of the community. During the Roman empire *limes* denotes the fortified border of the state, a fortified boundary (rampart, wall) erecting watchtowers defended by the legions. The system of the *limes* included a network of well-maintained roads, military camps and signal posts. *Limes* construction was initiated and augmented by the emperors Octavian, Domitian, Trajan and Hadrian. As a result, a whole defence system was organised, consisting of military camps of different sizes (*castra* and *castellum*) and fortified guard posts (*burgae*). As well as providing defence for the empire, the *limes* also served as a means of custom control.

² In the given context we find this mathematical term more appropriate.

³ See: Wallerstein 1974-1989; Wallerstein 1987: 309-324.

the ‘nucleus’ is a cluster of the most developed ‘central’ countries and regions that sets the directions of the development of the ‘world-system’ and defines its key-parameters. The ‘periphery’ (not always identical with a real periphery) consists of countries and regions, occupying marginal positions in the system, which barely play any role. Moreover, according to Wallerstein, the ‘periphery’ is destructive by nature and it often negatively influenced the development of the ‘world-system’. But the participants of our project hold the view that the theoretical schemes and structures of Wallerstein are somehow biased, having a simplified view on world history. In Wallerstein’s theory, the role of the ‘nucleus’ is overestimated, and the ‘periphery’ underestimated.

Even a brief view into world history reveals quite distinct patterns: often, having reached some limit, the ‘nucleus’ begins to lose its creative qualities, becoming the main cause for the system crisis of one or other civilisation, and sometimes even the whole ‘world-system’. In some cases the crisis leads to the destruction of the mightiest system. But in some other cases the ‘world-system’ switches on underlying defensive mechanisms, stimulating the renewal of the ‘nucleus’. In this case the impulses for renewal come exactly from the periphery of the civilisation. While the ‘nucleus’ continues to remain a hostage to traditional system of values, on the periphery, located in a much more plastic and mobile marginal environment, vital ideas and attitudinal paradigms of future epochs come into being, which are in turn able to change fundamentally the architectonics of the ‘world-system’, including the ‘nucleus’.⁴ From this moment onwards exactly, the ‘periphery’ directs the whole ‘world-system’ and defines its constructive peculiarities and vital rhythms.⁵ This concerns, first of all, the pre-industrial periods. It gives sufficient reasons for the re-evaluation of the role of the ‘periphery’ in the periodic cycles of the global ‘world-system’. While looking closely at the problem, the ‘periphery’, especially the border zone, appears as a kind of laboratory, where new civilisational paradigms arise, crystallise, and undergo testing.

In cases where the ‘nucleus’ is flexible enough and sensitive to innovative ideas, renewal of the whole civilisation took place, ‘into old skins new wine is poured’; in effect a new *nomos* comes into being,⁶ which is shamelessly given the old name. But more often, the nucleus, especially its conservative elite, resisted modernisation of the *socium*, trying to prevent the embedding of new institutions and values at

⁴ This pattern was first recognised by the outstanding Arab thinker Ibn-Khaldun. He states that the self-renewal of civilisation took place under the positive influence of the periphery. Accordingly, the periphery is responsible for the destruction of civilisation. Ibn-Khaldun regards the end of civilisation as a means of welfare if it loses its creativity and the ability for self-regeneration. Dead civilisations can, however, prepare the ground for future ones (Sorokin 1992: 176; Mahdi 1957; Grigoryan 1960; 1966; Irwin 1997: 461-479).

⁵ See: Shils 1975.

⁶ In this same sense, *nomos* should be understood first of all as a civilisational paradigm, world order. In the modern period the term *nomos* was first used by the well-known German lawyer and political philosopher – and father of geopolitics – Karl Schmitt (1888-1985). In his theory of ‘big spaces’ (Grossraum), Schmitt figuratively speaking describes the *agon* of two alternative *nomoi* – those of the Earth and the Sea. This *agon* has determined the character of the modern period.

the expense of older ones. In such cases a change in the ‘nucleus’ appears, which, due to its not being renewed, starts to move towards the periphery, close to the sources of the goal-setting ideas of the new period.⁷ The change of the nucleus, therefore, symbolises the appearance of a new civilisation. An example of the deactualisation of the nucleus, and its shift from the centre to periphery, is Classical Greece, which, after the campaigns of Alexander the Great, had become a periphery of the Hellenistic world forever, passing its dominant role over to Eastern countries. Another example is the irrelevancy of the classical Roman civilisation, which had lost its former creativity in the 2nd-3rd centuries and appeared in the state of a system crisis. The only way out of that crisis became the shift of the civilisational nucleus towards the Hellenistic East, where the Eastern Roman empire was formed – a new type of civilisation enrobed with the name of its predecessor. Similar shifts of the nucleus, which sometimes seem spontaneous and unexpected, in reality are quite predictable.

Civilisation is a multidimensional concept and can occur as a minimum on two levels – temporal (spatial-provisional) and spiritual (NOMOS, PAX). But these levels are not always authentic and sometime do not overlap. Between two or more civilisations, and also between the civilisation and the so-called ‘barbarian’ world, exists a clearly marked boundary zone. Historians and archaeologists long ago abandoned the idea that *limes* was exclusively a defensive structure, an impassable cordon. Most likely it was a kind of a membrane between two worlds, ensuring a well-balanced exchange of goods, cultural values, ideas, spiritual beliefs, etc. In some cases the boundary zone was intended to serve as an impassable cordon between absolutely hostile civilisations and communities (e.g. The Great Wall of China, The Maginot Line, The Mannerheim Line, the Iron Curtain, around the USSR and its satellites during the Cold War, etc.), and in other cases in the role of contact zone. Two or more civilisations may constitute the contacting parties, or the civilisation and the ‘barbarian’ element. The continuous chain of northern Hellenistic city-states can be seen as illustration of such a contact zone, those entities that used to encircle the northern Black Sea region. As is known, these states were mediators between Scythian tribes and Greek colonists of the northern and western Black Sea regions. Another good example of a contact zone, obviously, was the Roman *limes*. Among the more important sections of the latter were the Upper German-Rhaetian *limes* (550 km) and Hadrian’s Wall in Britain. Remains of the *limes* have been preserved in the territory of Scotland, in the regions of the Rhine and Danube, as well as in the west of North Africa. It was via the *limes* that western and eastern civilisations made contact, as well as civilisation and the barbarian world. However, the *limes* was not simply a border, but first of all a continuous wall, a symbol of the power and might of the empire, between PAX ROMANA and the rest of the world. The closest Greek equivalent of the *limes*, perhaps, was encapsulated in the term *temenos*,⁸ a bordering,

⁷ Margaryan 2012: 66-95.

⁸ *Temenos* – a Greek word which denotes a sacred space, decoupled from the everyday world, a protected place. As a rule in ancient Greece the territory around a temple was such a space, where one could feel and experience the presence of the god. This word however has also another meaning, indicating a

sacred zone located amid the territories of different communities, guarding the centre from hostile influence. Since ancient times, the *temenos* was known as a space populated by various marginal elements (outcasts, runaway slaves, foreigners, etc.). Located on the border of different social groups, systems, statuses and cultures, and experiencing the influence of their contradictory norms and values, these bordering elements of traditional societies provoked different social transmutational changes. But, if in the Archaic period *limes-temenos* was regarded as a boundary between communities, in the succeeding periods this concept acquired a new meaning, e.g. as a volatile periphery of an imperial or civilisational platform, the so-called *Nomos*. For example, the Roman *limes* in the East became the border between PAX ROMANA and the eastern Hellenistic *nomos*, located beyond the Euphrates.⁹

Thus, the fault line between the ‘world-systems’ could be very wide and occupy a considerable space, hence in some cases it is reasonable to define not through the lines but fault lines. Such a fault line, for example, could include the territory between the Euphrates and Tigris, as well as the territories of many other frontiers registered in the course of world history. This present volume has as its main goal the identification of several basic *nomoi* and draw fault lines between them, and also to show which civilisations were integrated in these macrosystems.

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sacred space protecting a central core (see Margaryan 2006: 17-24 for more detail on this).

⁹ Edwell 2008: 27-30.

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