

Introduction: Imperia and the Power of Scale

This book introduces a scale and power perspective on human development from the dawn of culture to the present and identifies the crucial transformations, the decision makers, and the cultural processes that have produced our present world. Imperia and the power of scale shed light on such contemporary global problems as war, environmental deterioration, poverty, and human rights abuses. From this new perspective these problems are seen as unintended consequences of the operation of personal power networks that have become too big and too dangerous to be safely controlled. Identifying imperia and scale as problems in themselves means that the most intractable human problems are not a result of human greed, Malthusian overpopulation, or technological backwardness. They are problems of the power of scale, and they have been with us for a very long time. Developing a better understanding of how social power is distributed and how it is used is an important and long-overdue step toward solving global problems. The unique convergence of democracy, mass production, and information technology at the dawn of the new millennium is a unique opportunity for humanity to improve the overall conditions of life if social power can be safely controlled and distributed. For the first time in human history we can create a truly democratic world, but we need to create optimum scale societies, with optimal distributions of social power.

Imperia, Social Power, and Scale

Imperia are important keys to understanding past, present, and future cultural development. *Imperia* is the plural of *imperium*, the Latin word for command over others, rule by an individual, or rule by an elite few. It is a conceptual tool to examine the role of individuals in directing cultural development. As a multidimensional concept, *imperium* is shorthand for any personal power network and elite organizational structure; it can be applied to households and to many kinds of corporate groups, including businesses and governments, where human decision makers have a prominent role. *Imperium* also means *empire*, and refers to absolute power or domination by a ruler, or an elite few, in any power domain—political, economic, ideological, or military—following Mann's (1986) analysis of social power. *Imperia* include antidemocratic command structures. *Imperia* exist wherever control is permanently exercised by an individual or an elite minority who are fewer than half of the members of any social group. Clans and lineages can be organized as *imperia*. A business corporation is an *imperium*, although its directors may be virtually anonymous in society at large. The household controlled by its adult members is a universal *imperium* in all human societies, but there are many other *imperia* or empires in the world today, and they exist at all levels of society from local to global.

Power in this context refers to *social power*; the ability of individuals to influence other people and events in order to maintain or improve their own and their children's material opportunities, or life chances. The ability to make strategic decisions that transform or "develop" entire societies and cultures to suit one's purpose is the apex of social power. The effectiveness of one's *imperium* can be measured by the degree to which one's household enjoys a higher than average level of material well-being and the ability to transmit these advantages to the next generation. In societies where social power is differentially distributed, the superior life chances of the more powerful are likely to be reflected in their larger, more comfortable households, superior health, life expectancy, nutrition, greater esteem, privilege, and overall security. This kind of power may be demonstrated by victory in competitive struggles with other households, but social power fundamentally means the ability to have one's needs met, regardless of opposition or adverse circumstances. Where there are cultural opportunities for elites to construct large *imperia*, and effective limits on power are absent, power elites may become a privileged minority who are able to impose their will on the majority. Very powerful elites may succeed in rising to the top in multiple-power domains, and they may dominate an entire society or multiple societies. It is also possible that multiple hierarchies and mobilized majorities may constitute

countervailing forces that prevent growth from becoming an opportunity for unlimited power seeking.

Scale refers to the absolute size of populations, economic enterprises, markets, armies, cities, or anything that affects the well-being of people. Scale calls attention to growth thresholds, order-of-magnitude increases in the size of societies, and the new cultural features that are required to sustain larger systems. Scale is about growth and power. As societies grow larger, it is likely that the organization of social power will need to change. A principal assumption of this book is that growth is an elite-directed process that concentrates power in the form of ever-expanding *imperia*. The power of scale is the reality that scale increases can be expected to mathematically produce disproportionate concentrations of power for those at the very top of any hierarchy in any power domain, while the costs of growth are likely to be socialized or borne by society at large. This explains why some people invariably promote growth and attempt to persuade everyone that growth is universally beneficial, even as growth changes the distribution of opportunities in ways that may disadvantage many others.

Everyone opportunistically seeks to build *imperia* because people naturally need physical and emotional security for themselves and their families and personal control over the conditions of their daily life. Just as the universal incest taboo restrains and regulates human sexual drives, the majority construct cultural and social institutions to restrain the natural drive for personal power and domination within socially beneficial limits because when individuals are allowed to create ever larger *imperia*, the well-being and basic human rights of others may be threatened. An *imperium* can benefit society at large, but unlimited power is always potentially dangerous. Power elites are different from the majority because they are in a position to concentrate greater than average power in personal *imperia* by manipulating personal networks of kin, allies, and associates scattered throughout society, many of whom may themselves have more than average power. Elites also control and manipulate a variety of corporate groups and institutions. Elites can use their more powerful *imperia* to transform culture for their own benefit. Elites gain their added power from increases in the size or scale of societies, politics, and economic enterprises. Elites may be well-intended people, but they have human weaknesses and can make mistakes, and the potential for abuse of imperial power, intentional or not, increases as *imperia* grow. The inequities, injustices, and maladaptations of the past and present are by-products of empire building, competition between elites, countervailing social movements, and the power imbalances that *imperia* create.

The *imperia* and scale approach explicitly rejects prevailing neoclassical economic models that present global capitalism as a benevolent, self-organized

system and an irresistible force. Rather, unfettered global capitalism may amplify the problems of scale and power, and may not be the best way to enhance human freedom and well-being. Although elite power in the form of imperia is a central theme of this book, it is not another Marxist version of class struggle theory. The focus on imperia highlights the role of individuals rather than social classes and emphasizes the diverse pathways to power, multiple-power domains, hierarchies, and networks. This is not to ignore the importance of organized groups as power blocks, but these will be treated as sources of individual power. Imperia and scale draw attention to the often wide divergence between formal social structures and cultural ideals and human realities in practice, especially as these are expressed in public discourse. Throughout this book I will avoid personifying such cultural constructions as the state and corporations and will resist appealing to such impersonal forces as markets as inevitable and irresistible determinants of our future. I will look instead at how people use these artificial entities and processes in ways that create unequal opportunities. In scale theory no single driving force behind cultural development exists other than opportunistic individuals and the contingencies of culture, nature, and history. In this analysis growth in scale itself is the central problem, and the objective is to explain why perpetual growth occurs, to understand its human consequences, and to consider the alternatives. Throughout history people repeatedly resisted the negative consequences of misguided imperia and developed many imaginative proposals for more humane, democratic, and sustainable worlds. Counter-imperia social movements have been crucial sources of cultural development. Democracy itself was a product of fierce popular resistance to tyrannical imperia. A world composed of optimal-scale societies would make the problem of power imbalances much easier to solve.

Three Cultural Worlds: Tribal, Imperial, and Commercial

The 5,000 or so distinct ethnolinguistic groups that anthropologists have described ethnographically are only a fraction of the tremendous cultural diversity created over the past 200,000 years of cultural development. However, the organization of social power is such an important determinant of the conditions of human life and well-being that all cultures can be sorted by their dominant forms of imperia into just three distinct cultural worlds: tribal, imperial, and commercial. Each world is dominated respectively by households, political rulers, or economic elites. It may seem overly simplistic and even trivial to reduce all of cultural evolution and diversity to such a sweeping generalization, but this is not a banal exercise. Imperia seem so familiar that it is difficult to grasp their real significance. Imperia are so

close, sometimes so large, and so pervasive that they become invisible, but it would be a mistake to disregard them. Imperia not only determine human well-being, but they determine how cultures develop and grow, how and why growth occurs, how growth is regulated, and when it stops. Imperia focus our attention on who controls and directs culture, and for what purposes.

Cultural worlds are the most extensive social environments where people routinely interact to secure their existence, and where in spite of linguistic or ethnic differences, people share understandings about the nature of the world, and about common human rights and obligations. The operation of distinctive dominant imperia in each world can create extreme differences in levels of economic productivity, standard of living, and overall well-being of households that are related to differences in the scale of settlements, societies, and regional and global populations. The most striking aspect of the three worlds is the scale and scope of human activities that each permits, and the distinctive ways imperia are constructed in each, and how social power is organized and distributed. The present chapter looks closely at the basic design and function of imperia in these three worlds and their human consequences, and examines the major transformations that created them. Chapter 2 will examine representative cultures from each world, and Chapter 3 will show how natural scale laws amplify the power of imperia and promote further growth.

The human consequences of life in each world are profound and largely the result of the different ways imperia operate in combination with scale differences. In the tribal world each household had direct access to the material resources needed for survival, and everyone lived in politically autonomous bands and villages. The household was the most permanent and the only dominant imperium. This was possible because societies were kept small and resources remained abundant. The tribe was an inclusive interest group, but did not operate as an imperium because no single person or dominant minority could direct it by gaining permanent control over the entire tribal society. Tribal leadership was temporary, and anyone with the personal qualifications could be a leader. All tribal members belonged to smaller, community-level groups controlling their own resources, but every household was incorporated within these groups, and everyone and every household could participate in decision making to the limits of their natural abilities. Under these conditions, competition between households was minimized, there was little capital accumulation, and the material level remained very low, but basic human needs were easily satisfied. Everyone was comfortable, within the cultural definition of comfort.

In the imperial world, where societies were much larger, strategic resources were controlled by dominant political imperia and societies were divided into hierarchical interest groups, or social classes, that systematically excluded

and disadvantaged lower-ranked households. The term "imperial" is applied to this world to evoke the common meaning of empire with reference to a territorially based, politically centralized society controlled by a political elite. Even though money, trade, and markets were often essential in the ancient imperial world, those who made their living in these areas were often distrusted and despised, and were relegated to the social background. The rulers and priests occupied the power center of the imperial world, and the military, tribute, and religion were the principle means used by the elite to mobilize social power from the subordinate masses. People gained access to resources only at the will of rulers and landlords, and by manipulating patron-client relationships. Local communities were politically dependent on urban-based centers of power, and most households were socially and economically dependent. The political elite formed an exclusive, privileged subset of society, enjoying superior power and superior life chances, while many nonelites experienced drastically reduced life chances. There was a striking increase in wealth accumulation, but it was largely directed and controlled by the political elites for their personal benefit. This is the human problem of political tyranny and exploitation.

In the commercial world material well-being depends on access to capital, markets, and employment, all of which are controlled by imperia organized by economic elites and the political rulers who support them. Economic power and economic elites are supreme in the commercial world, such that both local communities and governments are subservient to commercial interests, enterprises, and institutions. Risks are widely shared throughout commercial societies, but rewards are highly concentrated. The crucial reality of life in the commercial world is that because there are more total people than ever before, there are also vastly more people with less social power than others, and most people may have less control over the conditions of daily life than in any previous cultural world. This is the problem of economic tyranny and exploitation, added to the problem of political tyranny. The most important question is whether there are reasonable alternatives to these forms of tyranny, but first we need to understand the basic cultural features of each world, and briefly consider the transformations required to create each world.

Great Cultural Transformations

No culture is static. They all change, but change occurs for different reasons and has different human consequences. The three cultural worlds—tribal, imperial, and commercial—were produced and shaped by a sequence of eight great cultural transformations that changed how people lived, raised global population levels, and eventually increased the scale and form of societies

and cultures over many thousands of years (Figure 1.1). All people participated in and shared in the benefits of the first three great transformations that produced the tribal world:

1. Hominids became physically modern humans (by 100,000 B.P.* or earlier);
2. Humans created effective foraging cultures (by 50,000 B.P., or earlier); and
3. Foragers became effective village farmers (by 10,000 B.P.).

These transformations were democratically directed by all households, or domestic imperia, and were all part of the biocultural evolutionary process that made people human. All the transformations that followed can be regarded as dehumanizing, because their human benefits were narrowly distributed such that they left whole groups of people relatively disempowered, and because they subordinated the humanization process—which is the production and maintenance of human beings—to the politicization and commercialization processes, which are the production and maintenance of governments and businesses respectively. All of these processes and their various subprocesses are listed by cultural scale and the three cultural worlds in Table 1.1 and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

After the tribal world, each transformation wave was for the first time directed by a self-selected subset of people who were uniquely situated to take advantage of the special opportunities opened to them by the changes they introduced. The next two great transformations:

4. Chiefs began to gain control over independent villages (by 8,000 B.P.); and
5. Chiefdoms became agrarian civilizations (by 6,000 B.P.), produced the imperial world, and were directed by the leaders of political imperia.

The three most recent transformations created the commercial world, and reflect the progressive dominance of the leaders of:

6. Mercantile imperia (by A.D. 1450);
7. Industrial imperia (by A.D. 1800); and
8. Financial imperia (by A.D. 1900).

*B.P. means "before present" and is widely used in archeology with "present" set by convention at A.D. 1950.

Figure 1.1 Great Cultural Transformations

1. Hominids > Humans, 100,000 BP (Culture Capacity)
- THE TRIBAL WORLD
2. Humans > Forager Cultures, 50,000 BP (Speech, Kinship, Ritual)
3. Foragers > Village Farmers, 10,000 BP (Domestication)
- THE IMPERIAL WORLD
4. Villages > Chiefdoms, 8,000 BP (Imperial Organization)
5. Chiefdoms > Agrarian Civilizations, 6,000 BP (Urbanization, Agriculture)
- THE COMMERCIAL WORLD
6. Agrarian Civilizations > Mercantile Capitalism, 1450 AD
7. Mercantile Capitalism > Industrial Capitalism, 1800 AD
8. Industrial Capitalism > Financial Capitalism, 1900 AD

These last three rapid waves of change were all produced by different types of commercial imperia, often closely intermeshed with and supported by political imperia. It is not yet clear what kind of world will be created by the leaders of the new imperia who are now directing the present rapid expansion of information and communication technologies.

The first great wave involved the biological transformation of our hominoid ancestors into physically modern humans who were capable of creating culture by at least 100,000 years ago, perhaps much earlier. The second great transformation from this human base was the development of human speech and the relatively rapid proliferation of kinship systems, ritual, and the technologies that sustained small, nomadic foraging bands organized in decentralized tribal societies. People carrying forager technology quickly settled the entire world, raising global population by an order of magnitude, or ten times greater, from perhaps 1 million to 10 million. In the third transformation people in many parts of the world shifted from mobile bands into small, relatively permanent villages, and changed their subsistence technologies from foraging to gardening and herding. The fourth transformation was the change from autonomous tribal villages to politically organized chiefdoms. This meant crossing the great divide from the tribal world into the imperial world. Initially this was an organizational change that did not immediately require new subsistence technologies, but it led to order-of-magnitude increases in the scale of society and soon produced the next wave of change. The fifth transformation was a further intensification involving the emergence of cities, government, and intensive agriculture, again leading to order-of-magnitude increases in social scale and global population. The fourth and fifth transformations are the subject of Chapter 4.

In this succession of worlds there is an obvious trend for population to increase, economic production to intensify, and for power to become increasingly concentrated, all by orders of magnitude. Eight thousand years ago, when the entire world was tribal, the global population numbered no

Table 1.1

Cultural Worlds, Scale, and Cultural Process

I. Tribal world, domestic-scale culture humanization: producing and maintaining human beings, societies, and cultures.

Conceptualization: producing abstract concepts and symbols

Materialization: giving physical form to concepts

Verbalization: producing human speech

Enculturation: reproducing culture

Intensification: producing more food/km²

Sedentization: settled village life

II. Imperial world, political-scale culture politicization: concentrating social power by coopting the humanization process to produce and maintain political institutions.

Taxation: extracting surplus production to support government

Specialization: government employment

Militarization: use of organized violence

Urbanization: development of cities

III. Commercial world, global-scale culture commercialization: concentrating social power by coopting the humanization and politicization processes to produce and maintain for-profit business enterprises.

Industrialization: mass production and distribution of commodities

Commodification: markets for land, labor, money, and everything else

Capitalism: control of capital separated from producer-consumers

Externalization: costs of business enterprise socialized

Corporatization: business enterprise becomes suprahuman

Elitization: elites physically detached from larger community

Supralocalization: business enterprise detached from community

Financialization: investment detached from industry

more than perhaps 85 million people living in some 200,000 tiny independent villages and mobile bands. By A.D. 1200 the globe had become divided into two worlds. Half of the globe continued to be a tribal world occupied by some 60 million people in 150,000 politically autonomous settlements, and the other half was an imperial world of 300 million people controlled by political imperia centered in a few hundred chiefdoms, city-states, kingdoms, and empires (Figure 1.2). By A.D. 2000 the globe had become one commercially organized world of nation-states; only a few thousand people still lived independently in a tribal world. Virtually all former political powers were subordinated by the economic leaders and business corporations of the commercial world. Six billion people lived under the nominal political control of 191 national governments, but the practical power of political rulers was increasingly overshadowed by the economic power held by the directors of a relative handful of giant commercial imperia.

In the tribal world everyone lived at approximately the same material

level, such that everyone's basic needs were met and all households enjoyed roughly equal chances to maintain themselves and reproduce the next generation. The scale of human activities remained small, and adaptive adjustments to the natural and human environment were managed by every household and by small groups acting by consensus. As power shifted into disproportionately fewer hands with the creation of the imperial world, households began to differentiate materially and crucial decisions about cultural development were made by fewer people. Many people experienced declining material levels and were unable to form stable households; others maintained themselves at marginal subsistence levels, while a few were able to accumulate surpluses and enlarge their households with dependents and servants. As new imperia were created and power became more concentrated, the scale and scope of economic activities and conflicts intensified, and entire civilizations began to rise and collapse. In the commercial world these destabilizing trends have become more extreme, and material inequities have increased dramatically. Political and commercial volatility and instability have raised costs and increased risks for millions, but they have also created enormous opportunities for a few. By the year 2000 the wealthiest 7 million individuals in the world, less than 0.1 percent of global population, had accumulated more than \$27 trillion in investable assets (Gemini 2001), which represented more than half of global GDP, yet according to UN estimates, more people lived in absolute hunger than the entire population of the world (720 million) in 1750!

Quality of Life in the Tribal World

The most distinctive feature of the tribal world was that the dominant tribal imperia were domestic imperia, and they were focused exclusively on the production and maintenance of human beings, human society, and culture. Members of the contemporary commercial world are likely to deprecate life in the tribal world as "subsistence-level," because tribals accumulated little surplus beyond daily consumption needs, but this is a matter of optimizing means for a particular end. Tribal people selected the simplest, most efficient, and thus *best* means to their primary objective of producing and maintaining people. As long as humanization remained the dominant goal for everyone, government and commerce were not needed. In technical terms, the tribal world was characterized by *anarchy* (absence of government) and *autarky* (self-subsisting), but this does not mean disorder or poor quality of life. Accurate comparisons are difficult because we have few eyewitness accounts of daily life in the independent tribal world, apart from observers from the imperial and commercial worlds in chaotic frontier settings. Based

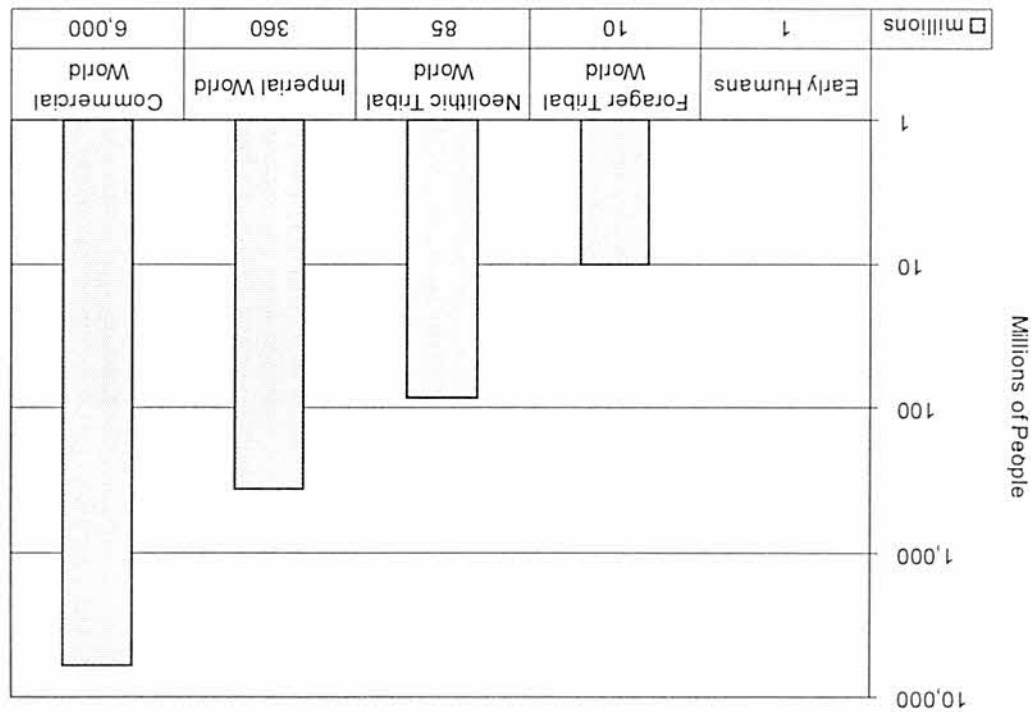


Figure 1.2 Global Population Scale by Cultural World

on fragmentary archaeological evidence and carefully selected modern ethnographic observations, it appears that life expectancy was generally lower and infant mortality higher in the tribal world than under modern conditions. However, tribals apparently lived at least as long as people in the ancient imperial world and the early stages of the commercial world, and were probably healthier overall. It is known that some Australian aboriginals and Arctic peoples lived longer than the English during the 1300s. The average life expectancy at birth was only about thirty-five years for most of humanity until about 1840, less than half of the average for much of the world in the year 2000. Significant improvements in life expectancy for any peoples have been extremely recent products of vigorous public health measures, immunizations, and antibiotics.

Life may have been relatively short for tribals, but quality of life was high for those who survived infancy. The advantage of high infant mortality rates and the absence of antiseptics and antibiotics is that tribal people developed strong natural immunities. At the same time, they lived active lives in healthful environments. Tribal culture promoted public health. Low-density mobile populations had little difficulty maintaining sanitary settlements and finding pure water. With food chains short, all food on hand was consumed fresh daily, and food quality was equal or superior to their commercial counterparts. Where medical teams were able to conduct health surveys on tribal groups living in remote areas in the twentieth century they consistently found them to be vigorous and free of debilitating disease. Independent tribals were typically well nourished and showed healthy teeth and an absence of the obesity, heart disease, digestive problems, and degenerative diseases that plague commercialized populations. Some of this can be attributed to low-fat, low-sodium, high-fiber, high-carbohydrate tribal diets, and their consumption of low-cholesterol wild fish and game. Plenty of varied outdoor exercise, and walking everywhere, must have also been beneficial.

It is not surprising that the first Europeans to encounter tribal peoples in North and South America invented the myth of the "noble savage," because they were so impressed with their superior physical condition. The native Americans were often taller, stronger, cleaner, healthier, and more self-confident than the Europeans who met them. Tribals continue to stand up well in comparison with impoverished people in many less developed countries. For example, doctors have found the children of independent forager groups to be healthier than the children of the urban poor in some countries.

The conclusion that independent tribals were basically healthy is further supported by the striking physical deterioration that has typically accompanied their adoption of commercial lifestyles. Whenever commercial clothing, foods, and housing replaced tribal patterns, infectious disease rates

increased, along with degenerative diseases, malnutrition, dental problems, alcoholism, family disintegration, and suicide. Many of these problems were obvious results of lifestyle changes, but they were not always voluntary choices, and they were often diseases of poverty. This is significant because poverty was not part of the tribal world. These new health and social problems were compounded by the inability of many impoverished tribals to secure healthcare or any form of public assistance. Given our definition of social power as the ability to influence events and maintain or improve one's life chances, tribals became impoverished and disempowered when they were incorporated into the imperial and commercial worlds.

The Irreducible Minimum in the Tribal World

Each cultural world is based on a particular view of how that world is naturally constituted, and the place of individuals in that world. In the tribal world each individual was assumed to be equally human, and the name of the tribe, the largest society, typically meant "the people," or "human beings." Social categories, such as male and female, young and old, were naturally defined in reference to human biology and the life cycle, and kinship categories, such as father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, husband, and wife, derived from marriage and the family. In the tribal world every member of the tribe was born with a "natural" entitlement guaranteeing the opportunity to enjoy a full life. Everyone had an estate to pass on to their children. Anthropologist Paul Radin (1971) called this human entitlement the "irreducible minimum," and argued that it was a unique characteristic of the tribal world. In a sense the irreducible minimum is what makes people human and could be considered the most fundamental of human rights. It is what social power is all about. This human entitlement is the natural right that empowers people to make a living, marry, form a household, and raise children, simply because they are human beings, although in detail it is allocated to individuals through the human universals of kinship, age, and gender categories.

The essential spirit of an irreducible human minimum is incorporated in the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, for example, that:

- "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Article 1);
- "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" (Article 3);
- "Men and women . . . have the right to marry and found a family" (Article 16);
- "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and

is entitled to realization . . . of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality" (Article 22);

- "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services . . ." (Article 25); and
- "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community . . ." (Article 27).

These humane ideals were conspicuously absent from the legal codes of the ancient imperial world, and were often explicitly denied. They may be formally recognized as human rights by some countries in the contemporary commercial world, but they are often disregarded or are treated as inferior to civil and political rights. The concept of any absolute human "entitlement" is often viewed with suspicion as being somehow illegitimate.

In the tribal world the irreducible minimum entitlement was constituted as a material and cultural estate that was automatically transmitted to everyone at birth. Materially the estate consisted of permanent rights to use portions of the tribal domain and all of its natural resources to secure a living. Everyone was a shareholder in a joint patrimony. Everyone was also entitled to full access to all cultural information required for human success or household well-being. An individual's complete estate thus included a bundle of rights that each person enjoyed as a human being, specific rights he/she held as a particular biological and cultural individual. This estate included access to real property in the form of territory and its natural resources, and cultural property in the form of information. At the time of marriage every individual was fully equipped to succeed in life, and was dependent only on other family members. In this sense, everyone enjoyed equal life chances, although the final outcome depended on individual personality, skill, and ambition. The household, the extended family, more distant kin, and the tribe as a whole provided everyone with a social support system that smoothed out the inequities of fortune, gender, and the life cycle.

Closely connected with the concept of an estate was the corporate group. In the tribal world a corporation was any, usually named, social group that had a recognized existence apart from the life of any individual member. A household, descent groups such as lineages and clans, residential groups such as bands and villages, regional associations such as moieties, and tribes were all corporate groups. Corporate groups owned and managed natural and cultural resources as estates, and tribal people gained access to these corporate estate properties through their membership in corporate groups. The impor-

tant feature of tribal corporations in contrast to corporations in the imperial and commercial worlds is that tribal corporations were inclusive groups that incorporated everyone on equal terms, excluding no one.

The key features of interpersonal and intergroup relations in the tribal world were cooperation, reciprocity, complementary opposition, and overlapping networks. People performed most daily domestic routines as cooperative tasks within corporate groups. Economic activities were shared and products were distributed on the basis of reciprocity between individuals and households, on the assumption that this would be fair because effort and returns would balance out over the long run. The assumption of fairness was realistic in these small societies where everyone knew everyone else, and everyone's possessions and activities were on constant public display. Social categories such as male and female, or group A and group B, were treated as connected sets, and the different parts were culturally understood to be two interdependent complementary halves of a larger whole, such that one half could not exist without the other. Membership in social groups also frequently overlapped, forming cross-cutting networks that made it difficult for aspiring leaders to organize competing alliances.

This combination of a universal human rights entitlement, supported by an emphasis on economic cooperation and equity together with specific social features that reduce conflict, all worked together to reduce the natural incentive for rivalry between groups of individuals. Ideally, there was no cultural incentive for households to produce more than their immediate material needs. Instead, people were free to focus on minimizing energy expenditures and risk, and maximizing household security and well-being. There was also no incentive for either economic growth, or population growth. Even more remarkable, in this kind of world there was no economic scarcity because everyone's material needs could be readily satisfied. There was social power in the form of property, income, and wealth, but people worked relentlessly to level differences and redistribute benefits. Equity and universal entitlement meant that economic advantage did not easily become the basis for competitive emulation.

The problem with the tribal world was that its human benefits applied only within the tribe itself and were most secure only within the band or village. Vengeance, raiding, and intergroup violence were chronic problems. Nontribal members were potential enemies and were not always considered human. Over the very long term, the real problem of tribal culture was that it was not always able to prevent assertive individuals from expanding their personal imperia and promoting scale increases. The organization of power in the tribal world is illustrated in Chapter 2 by the example of the Ashaninka, foragers and shifting cultivators in the Amazon.

Political Imperia and Conditional Rights in the Imperial World

Beyond all their obvious differences of language, religion, and details of culture, the ancient world's politically organized great agrarian civilizations—such as ancient Greece, imperial Rome, China, the Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms, the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Inca—all share important features that set them apart from cultures of both the tribal and commercial worlds. The dominant cultural process in all of these civilizations can be called *politicization*—the production and maintenance of governments. Elites used the politicization process to coopt the humanization process, and they developed new subprocesses such as taxation, occupational specialization, militarism, and urbanization. In contrast with the tribal world, both the ancient imperial world and the modern commercial world are characterized by the conspicuous presence of a bewildering array of imperia that organize social inequality in ways that give some families exclusive advantages over others. Politicization can be said to coopt the humanization process because it is the means by which elites appropriate resources that others require for their own maintenance and reproduction. These imperia are constructed from multiple status hierarchies in different power domains that exaggerate the personal differences between individuals. Ranked status positions are frequently inherited, and in the ancient world multiple imperia were often consolidated under the control of a single political ruler, his extended kin, and personal allies to create a dominant, highly personalized power network taking the form of a political economy and a political ideology with military support. All of this would appear bizarre, if not actually inhuman, to a visitor from the tribal world.

These are not new observations about political power, but they are seldom acknowledged in idealized histories that focus on the cultural achievements of "great" civilizations and treat progress as both inevitable and universally beneficial. In contrast, the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius (371–289 B.C.) was sharply critical of the inhumanity of Chinese civilization. He deplored the historical reality that rulers and their officials routinely used war to expand their powers and sought personal profit from their domains, calling such inhumane rulers "plunderers of the people." This, of course, was in opposition to his utopian ideal of the good king who enjoyed the "mandate of heaven" because he displayed humanity and justice to his subjects. Mencius's concept of justice (*yi*) approximates the tribal irreducible minimum, and explicitly recognizes the right of common people to a standard of living that would allow them to maintain their elderly in comfort. The imperial world is distinguished from the commercial world by the subordinate position occupied by traders and merchants in the former, and

their dominant, even exalted role in the latter, as well as by the position of the economy as a whole. This is clear in the origin myth that Plato created to distinguish the principal social classes in his ideal Republic, where he called the political elite "golden," and their assistants "silver," but farmers were iron, and craftsmen were the inferior brass. Slaves were not citizens. The Greeks regarded production and exchange as necessary evils, not really suitable activities for the nobility. Gold and silver had a dual significance for Plato because he would not allow his ruling class to even touch these metals, or money. This cultural attitude resembles the Hindu origin myth, which ranked in descending order the separate occupational castes sprung respectively from the mouth, arms, thigh, and feet of the creator god Brahma: (1) priests, (2) ruler-warriors, (3) herders, farmers, and traders, and (4) servants.

In Plato's ideal state the elite could not own private property, land, or houses, nor accumulate wealth, because these would be corrupting influences. Plato's *Republic*, as well as Aristotle's writings on the ethics of exchange, reflected the ideal of the Greek *polis* (city-state), which assumed a community of relatively equal citizens who would subordinate personal gain for the interests of the commonwealth; it stigmatized commercial exchanges that were presumed to generate an unjust profit and undesirable inequalities (see Chapter 7). Wealth was always suspect in classical Greece because it could lead to luxury and impropriety. It was expected that personal wealth would be generously directed toward the public good, and it was not to be endlessly reinvested. In the ancient world wealth was important largely as a status marker, as a reward for loyal allies, and for conspicuous display. This explains why treasures were often buried in royal tombs, or incorporated in mummy cults, rather than used to produce more wealth.

Following the insights of Karl Polanyi (1968), it is reasonable to characterize the economy of the ancient world as "embedded" in the culture as a whole. It was not thought of as having a separate existence. This is reflected in the Greek invidious distinction between a respectable economy (*oikonomia*), such as household management or domestic economy, and a disreputable economy directed toward money making (*chrēmatistike*). The household economy was superior to the money-making economy for the household was the focus of economic activity. This antieconomic growth attitude, and the accompanying general suspicion of money handlers, is also represented in the negative view of usury in the canon law of the Roman Catholic Church and in the Islamic prohibition of usury. This general antimerchant picture seems to have been true of the entire ancient world, and helps explain why economic growth was not an important goal, although imperial expansion and military conquest were prominent and honorable activities.

The technology of production in the imperial world was more intensive and dynamic than in the tribal world, because imperial political leaders had such a strong incentive to increase the density of the societies they controlled. Tribal members could comfortably meet their material needs with land-extensive, low-energy production systems such as foraging, gardening, and herding because they did not need to produce a surplus beyond the nutritional needs of their households. Rulers, as "plunderers of the people," extracted food as rent, taxes, or tribute, and promoted expensive and vulnerable irrigation and intensive plow agriculture in combination with draft animals and metallurgy in order to raise carrying capacity in the most productive zones.

Throughout the imperial world empires were headed by ranked patriarchal households. Political imperia in the ancient agrarian civilizations were ego-driven power hierarchies directed at the top by a single, usually male, head. Emperors became the heads of great families, whose members attempted to construct kin-based patrilineal, or dynastic, to perpetuate the core leadership structure of their personal imperia. Descent groups are cultural constructions modeled after biological facts, but they often consist of fictitious personal histories that can be manipulated for power purposes. In order to prevent political power from being diffused, rulers often selected their successors on the basis of primogeniture in the male line. Secondary sons received empty titles and had to create their own power bases, or were given control of religious imperia. The heads of political imperia were inherently driven to perpetual growth, because ego gratification knows no natural limits, and because emperors and empires were likely to have competitors. However, imperial overextension was a recurrent problem because physically, growing empires do reach natural limits. Empires either grow until they collapse or the leader finds a way to overcome the growth threshold and grows a larger empire until a new threshold is reached.

In the imperial world all human rights were naturally conditional and ranked, depending on one's relation to god or the temporal or spiritual lords, either through inheritance or in exchange for loyalty, labor, or tribute. In this world there was no universal human entitlement to an irreducible minimum. The supreme ruler was either god or god's appointed representative, who claimed all property as eminent domain, along with life-or-death power over everyone. There were new corporate groups such as towns, cities, kingdoms, temple societies, courts, palaces, armies, farms, factories, and merchant associations that formed the basis of new imperia. These were exclusive groups in which only certain people could be members. They were usually highly ranked internally, and were often structured to funnel material benefits to a single controlling family. Furthermore, a single family could control multiple corporate imperia through overlapping directorships. There were per-

vasive distinctions between *nobles* or *citizens*, who had privileged access to government, military power, property, and economic opportunity, and who despised *commoners* or *noncitizens*, such as peasant farmers, servants, and laborers, who were excluded and disadvantaged in multiple ways. Slaves, who were total dependents, were often a separate, most excluded category. The rulers, their households, close kin, and supporters were privileged and powerful people, forming an aristocracy with special inherited rights. These institutionalized forms of human injustice were virtually universal in societies of the ancient imperial world.

The power differential between households in the imperial world has its most remarkable expression in the reality that not everyone could marry and raise a family, and that for the first time vast numbers of people were treated like domestic animals, fit only for labor or slaughter. Today, this would be seen as a clear violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Servitude, serfdom, and slavery were not characteristic of tribal societies, although they existed in certain cases, but they were endemic in the imperial and commercial worlds. In ancient China, Egypt, Greece, and the Islamic world rulers used eunuchs to guard their harems, effectively subordinating some men's reproductive potential in favor of others' in a fundamentally inhuman way. In many ancient civilizations large numbers of both men and women were separated into celibate communities. Most noncitizens were left with no meaningful material estate to pass on to their descendants, although their inferior and stigmatized social status was likely to be inherited.

The scale of direct violence perpetrated by ancient political rulers is difficult to comprehend, but it further demonstrates the fundamental inhumanity of the imperial world. Wars organized by rulers for purely political purposes and fought by large armies generated large numbers of casualties and great material waste and destruction, and were an intrinsic problem of civilizations. For example, Rummel (1997, 70) estimated that 34 million people were killed in civil wars in China between 221 B.C. and A.D. 1900, and another 30 million by Mongol armies. Violence was also a chronic problem in the tribal world, but in these smaller-scale societies the total casualties were much lower. In ancient civilized societies human beings were routinely sacrificed to accompany royals into the afterlife, or common people were simply killed in rituals that served to terrorize and intimidate. The Mesopotamian royal tombs of Ur in 2500 B.C. contained 74 human sacrifices along with the body of the royal personage. In 1500 B.C. Shang China more than 600 people were sacrificed in the foundation of a single building. When the Spanish arrived in 1519, the Aztecs were ritually slaughtering tens of thousands of people—some estimate as many as 250,000 annually. Rummel (1997, 70) conservatively puts the Aztec toll at 1 million. The commercial world did not

reduce the slaughter. The Spanish killed millions in the Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations in a matter of decades. The European invasion of the tribal world may have killed tens of millions of tribals between 1780 and 1930. On a century by century basis, these figures are, of course, an order of magnitude below the more than 200 million soldiers and civilians sacrificed in wars, purges, and genocides in the twentieth century (Rummel 1997). Political violence directed by national leaders killed more people in that one century than twice the entire population of the tribal world at its peak.

The Commercial World and Capitalism

I have intentionally used the label "commercial world" rather than "capitalism" to denote a global-scale world dominated by commercial imperia whose leaders are dedicated to continuous expansion. As will be shown below, capitalism is a problematic label because it has such diverse meanings, not all of which get at the essence of commercialization as defined here. The point is that in the commercial world the leaders of commercial imperia operate on a greater scale, concentrate more social power, and have a greater impact on humanity than the leaders of political or religious imperia. In the contemporary world, commercial imperia influence virtually every aspect of everyone's daily life; they are omnipresent and virtually inescapable, but they were totally absent from the tribal world, and operated only in the margins of the imperial world.

The hallmark of the arrival of the commercial world was the identification of "the economy" as an object of scientific study by French physiocrat François Quesnay (1694–1774), with the publication of his *Tableau économique* (1758), coupled with the almost simultaneous revelation of the social benefits of the "invisible hand" of the "free market" by Scottish social philosopher Adam Smith (1723–90), as described in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776). These books were as important for defining the commercial world as were the works of Copernicus (1473–1543) and Galileo (1520–91) proving that the earth rotated around the sun, for advancing the world of science. Before the discovery of the economy, economic activities were so embedded within the practices of daily life or under so much political control as to be invisible. Previously, political rulers struggled over territories and peoples in order to accumulate wealth and power, but political power was central, and there was no detailed financial accounting. In the imperial world neither "the economy" as an independent entity nor economic growth could be the objective of policy.

This great transformation process that made commerce the centerpiece of cultural development will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 5, but at

this point we need to characterize the commercial world more fully. Many historians have identified the transformation from imperial to commercial with the rise of capitalism, but capitalism means many different, often contradictory, things. Granted that commerce defined as trade is a human universal, many modern writers identify capitalism with *laissez-faire* economics, or free enterprise, free trade, and individualism, in contrast to state control or collectivism. This is an inadequate definition of the commercial world, because even with fully developed markets, political power is still needed to protect private property, enforce contracts, prevent catastrophic market collapses, undertake risky long-term investments, and supply services that have little commercial value. Only in the tribal world was trade truly "free" from state control because the state did not yet exist. Furthermore, individualism is not the center of capitalism, because commercial imperia invariably involve individuals operating not as individuals, but as members of multiple partnerships and corporations. Commercial imperia are power networks. Free market competition is also not the defining feature of capitalism, because the leaders of commercial imperia invariably seek to reduce competition, socialize risk, and concentrate profit through any politically supported institutional means, such as monopoly. Commercial imperia thrive in a world where the otherwise natural individual differences in energy, skill, and property can be overwhelmed by state-supported collective social power.

The commercial world has a different dynamic from the imperial world, because it creates opportunities for "commercial" expansion that are seemingly endless. This encourages perpetual growth in a way that was never possible in the imperial world, which was limited by the frailties of political power. Commercial imperia are personally directed social power networks based first of all on personal income, ownership of wealth and property, and control over people, resources, businesses, markets, and secondarily on political power. Wealth and property, however acquired, conferred political power in the imperial world, but in the commercial world wealth and property are forms of economic power based on commodity exchanges. As commodities in a market economy, wealth and property are commonly understood to be among the fundamentals of capitalism. In the commercial world income may be "earned" from professional salaries and wage labor, or it may be in the form of "unearned" rents, profits, interest, and royalties. Personal wealth may be measured as net worth (assets less liabilities), and includes tangible wealth such as real property, as well as intangibles such as money, stocks, bonds, patents, copyrights, trademarks, and business enterprises.

Wealth has been called *capital* at least since the thirteenth century, and as *human capital*, capital can include individual knowledge and skills. Capital can also mean *cultural capital*, or cultural hegemony in the form of ideological

power, in reference to control over the information and ideas that direct human behavior. Even though the contrast between tangible and intangible property seems obvious, both are artificial legal concepts based on relationships between people, and they must be institutionally supported by formally organized markets and the coercive political power of law, police, and courts. Of course, control over other people's wealth and property gained by directors of commercial corporations, bankers, and financiers, or by individuals who form business partnerships or client networks, may be a far more important source of economic power than personal wealth and income by themselves.

Speaking of the *commercial* world calls attention to the commercialization process and its distinctive subprocesses, and emphasizes the unprecedented and overwhelming scale and scope of commercial influences. Commerce is an enormously efficient means of meeting human needs by promoting human creativity and stimulating production and distribution, but commerce can be easily subverted for imperial purposes. It is critical to distinguish commerce from *commercialization*, because it is possible to imagine a world in which commerce plays an important role, but does not overpower households, communities, or governments. The concept of commercialization, as used here, describes the condition that occurs when commerce becomes the dominant cultural process such that the success of commerce itself becomes more important than the well-being of people or governments. Commercialization in this respect is the cultural process of producing and maintaining business enterprises in order to concentrate social power. In this process elites construct imperia by coopting both the humanization and the politicization processes. The closely linked subprocesses of commodification and financialization are essential features of the commercialization process. Elites have expanded the scale and power of commercial imperia using the secondary subprocesses of capitalization, industrialization, externalization, corporatization, and supralocalization. All of these subprocesses will be discussed briefly here, but they are so important to understanding the contemporary world that they will be examined in operation, and in greater detail, in later chapters.

Commodification—turning things into marketable commodities—is the central feature of the commercial world. Extreme commodification would make every physical thing, conceptual object, and service a marketable commodity exchangeable for money. This can seriously undermine the humanization process, because when basic human survival items such as food, water, and shelter become commodities, they may not be equally available to everyone. Commodification can thus produce poverty conditions that lower life expectancies. For the commercial world to operate fully, all the factors of production including land, natural resources, labor, and money need to be

exchangeable with each other through organized markets. In this system things have value as objects of exchange, not for their consumption value. Again, this is a matter of degree, because in the tribal world a few things did have exchange value, but never land, labor, or money. In the imperial world foodstuffs and luxury goods routinely entered the market, but there was little wage labor, and very few individuals could purchase land or legally borrow money at interest.

Commercialization creates unlimited opportunities for power seekers who want to build ever larger imperia, because the exchange transaction is what counts, and in a sense the physical commodity is irrelevant. Transactions are cultural conceptions involving social relations between people, and thus they have no natural limits. Financialization is the conceptual counterpart of commodification that makes perpetual growth seem possible. Infinite growth appears possible in an otherwise limited physical world because money is a symbolic cultural construction with no necessary material reality. Money was always a counting device, but when it was legally disconnected from gold or silver, it became simply a quantity recorded in a ledger. Ultimately, commercialization is about the accumulation of money, and this is accomplished by *arbitrage*, in which one buys low in one market and sells high in another. The remarkable disconnect of commerce from the real world is demonstrated by the fact that in the 1990s as much as 90 percent of the monetary value of commercial transactions involved financial intangibles such as stocks, bonds, and commodity futures. Many observers consider such transactions to be the essence of capitalism, but they have no necessary connection either with human needs or the physical world, and they thus can generate endless potential for imperial expansion. The big problem with such unlimited opportunity is that unless people set cultural limits to power, individuals will be naturally driven to build greater and greater imperia, and out-of-control imperia can be very destructive to the human values of freedom and democracy.

Early in the twentieth century, German sociologist Max Weber (1930) described capitalism as a state of mind—a *geist*, or "spirit," that made money-making the meaning of life. This leads to some less than obvious key points about the commercial world. For Weber, capitalism was unique because it made money making an end in itself. Money, not goods, mattered most. The crucial element of capitalism was the drive for perpetual acquisition *beyond all natural human need*. Like Karl Marx, who contrasted the *use value* of consumer objects with their *exchange value* as commodities, Weber contrasted the *economy of needs* in the precapitalist world with what he called the capitalist *economy of acquisition*. Commodity exchange is correctly identified as the means, and monetary acquisition the end, by Weber's "spirit of capitalism." The important point is that commodity exchange is also the means

to the end of constructing commercial imperia. Recognizing this is a useful corrective to the misleading popular conception that commerce is driven by consumer demand. The question is, whose human needs does commerce serve most bountifully? The evidence will show that those who use commodities to build commercial imperia gain more social power and enjoy greater freedom and independence than the majority who merely consume commodities and remain dependents.

Weber stressed that the capitalist pursuit of money was carried out in a highly rational, calculating way. He thought that workers with a precapitalist mentality worked to satisfy their limited needs and would "irrationally" work less if their wages were increased. Of course, this was mainly a matter of whether or not workers perceived opportunities in available markets. However, Weber correctly noted that under a capitalist state of mind there would be no shut-off point to acquisition. One could argue that the unlimited acquisitiveness of capitalism was an irrational goal in a finite world, but rationality is not the issue; it is the means and ends that matter. Given the chance, people will amass as much social power as possible. We can safely assume that informed people will always act in a rational, economic way to meet their power goals, according to their perceived best interests and to the limits of their knowledge and ability. What Weber could not explain was why people adopted a capitalist state of mind in the first place. We will return to that question in Chapter 5 and later chapters.

Four interconnected subprocesses—capitalism, externalization, corporatization, and supralocalization—clearly demonstrate that concentration of social power may be one of the most important outcomes of industrialization and commercialization as they have developed. There is no reason why these particular subprocesses would be required in an alternative world in which industrialization and commerce were geared to the production and maintenance of human beings. Capitalism in its most specific meaning refers to Adam Smith's original observations that industrial society was "naturally" divided into the "masters," who were landlords and manufacturers, and the "laborers," who did the productive work. This is the essence of serfdom. Karl Marx described this in class terms as a division between the bourgeoisie ("capitalist" owners of the "means of production") and the proletariat (workers). Capital, understood as productive goods, is a human universal, but *capitalism*, defined as only a few owning capital while the mass of society are workers, would appear to be an outcome of the operation of imperia, not an inevitable law of nature.

Externalization, corporatization, and supralocalization are functionally connected with capitalism. The externalization subprocess involves spreading the costs and human risks of commercial activities throughout society at

large, while concentrating the benefits in the capitalists. Externalities are negative byproducts of commercial activities that are not charged as costs to the capitalists responsible. For example, based on careful calculations, economist Ralph Estes (1996) estimated that large corporations charged the American public at large \$2.6 trillion in 1994 dollars (40 percent of GDP) for "externalities" such as workplace accidents and illnesses, dangerous products, pollution, crime, and monopoly price-fixing. It makes sense that these costs would be charged to society at large in a social system directed by capitalists, but accomplishing this requires considerable social power to produce the necessary legal and institutional support. Capitalists need to dominate the political process.

Corporatization refers to business enterprises organized as corporations, rather than as sole proprietorships or partnerships. This makes possible the creation of enormously powerful and infinitely expandable business imperia because corporations can be given the rights of individuals, yet they are legally immortal. Corporations are ideal capitalist business forms because a few "capitalists" with relatively large holdings can easily control and direct them as part of their imperia, even when millions of people own very tiny shares. Furthermore, corporations allow capitalists to limit their personal liability for financial loss or damages, making externalization even easier. Sole proprietors bear the full risks of their businesses, and of course their businesses die with their owners; thus they have only limited opportunity to accumulate power. Partnerships are equally short-lived. As corporations, businesses can easily become supralocal, that is, they can be detached from particular communities. Supralocalization is the pathway to global expansion. The case study on the United States in the following chapter will illustrate many of these key features of commercialization.

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The POWER of SCALE

A
Global History
Approach

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