



Christopher K. Chase-Dunn Circa 1970

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I'm glad to have the opportunity to comment for this celebration of the work of Christopher Chase-Dunn. I go back a long way with him, and it has all been very rewarding.

Chris began doctoral work at Stanford in the fall of 1966—the same time I arrived there. He came reasonably well prepared, and quite politicized, from his undergraduate years at Berkeley. He had completed his academic work there, although on the political side, as I recall, he still had to complete (on weekends) a jail term.

The Stanford sociology department was an unlikely choice for him. It was very much committed to an apolitical view of sociology as scientific, and was quite critical of the field in general as lacking in formal theory and clear methodology. Chris Chase-Dunn got along much better than one might expect: his own academic background left him comfortable with explicit theorizing and quantitative methods. And the departmental culture was fairly tolerant of radical politics, so long as these were kept distinct from scientific work. So Chris made good academic progress, with few difficulties.

The Stanford department tolerated him, but he had doubts about the relevance of its sort of academic work (or perhaps any academic work) to the disordered real world. So after a few quarters, he left to contribute more directly to the political transformations he saw as urgently needed. He gave a dramatic picture of his rationales to the Stanford community, and his objections



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to the irrelevance of mandarin academic work, but his indictments were less offensive to the local culture than it might now sound. After all, he agreed with the Stanford sociological idea of a divide between “science as a vocation” and “politics as a vocation,” as central to departmental culture. He was simply making that choice.

I think at my suggestion, rather than simply withdrawing from Stanford, he took a formal leave of absence—an easy thing to do, since he was in very good standing academically. Nobody involved objected.

I lost track of Chris for a while, and don’t know the subsequent unfolding, but obviously his efforts at producing political transformation (I think he may have used the term revolution) did not go well. I recall that some of the time he may have been in Panama. In any event, after some time, he found himself back in the Bay Area, at loose ends with his political mission gone sour. I suggested he might consider returning to Stanford—research work and a stipend would be readily available. And in the interim the department culture had broadened, so there would be projects and peers not so far removed from his substantive interests (seen as political sociology or political economy rather than politics).

So Chris returned to the doctoral program, and got involved in a number of projects. One of these, especially relevant to him, involved quantitative macro-sociological analyses of relationships between large-scale (i.e., national) political and economic and educational systems. The work was interesting, and he had both skill at it and taste for it.

The technical work got more exciting as it came together with Chris’ developing theoretical interests. A number of elements were involved. But one was especially relevant. Immanuel Wallerstein, an old colleague and friend of mine from Columbia days, was spending some time at the Center for Advanced Study (adjacent to Stanford), and was developing the line of “world systems” argument for which he has become renowned. He gave an informal talk on the line of argument at our research workshop, and Chris made a real intellectual connection.

In due time, that produced Chris’ doctoral dissertation—a clear and dramatic quantitative statement of core ideas in world systems argumentation, with striking empirical support for what to other lines of thought would be counter-intuitive ideas about the effects of foreign investment. This work, and the various follow-ups, have led to ideas and research—pro and con—that continue to this day. A bibliography would run to dozens of pages.

There is no need for me to recount the subsequent history—impressive and well-recognized work on a coherent research program covering more than forty years, involving a large set of students and colleagues. Many of the relationships involved are very personal—Chris has a very wide circle of caring and appreciating friends. I don’t need to describe my own long-term personal friendship. I’d rather make another point: it is very rewarding to have students who make their way successfully in the academic world. Chris Chase-Dunn has certainly been dramatically

successful over a long career, and that is extremely rewarding for those of us who have participated along the way.

About the Author

John W. Meyer is Professor of Sociology, emeritus, at Stanford University. He has contributed to organizational theory, the sociology of education, and the study of globalization, developing sociological institutional theory.

Disclosure Statement

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