Part II

Theory and critiques
3. Theoretical frontiers in world-systems analysis
Core, semiperiphery, periphery

A variable geometry presiding over conceptualization

Nicole Bousquet

Among important contributions to the world-system analytical framework is the tripartite division into core, semiperiphery, and periphery. Defining core and periphery raised little debate; not so for the semiperiphery, its most innovative concept coined by Immanuel Wallerstein. Early on, Wallerstein (1979, 1984) had made clear that separate dimensions of analysis were required for positioning countries in the world-economy and the interstate system and that occasionally, countries would not hold identical status in both systems.

The structural foundation of the world-economy was deemed to be the division of labor between its three constituent zones, crisscrossed by systemic commodity chains along which “surplus” was transferred from periphery to center, transiting through the semiperiphery. If the center and the periphery were considered as the locus of respectively highly and poorly rewarded activities along the commodity chains, the semiperiphery was conceived as the locus of a mixed bag of surplus generating activities, some being core-like surplus-wise, while others were of a peripheral type. Measuring the amount of “surplus” benefiting respective world-system zones was a real challenge. It entailed mapping innumerable commodity chains crisscrossing the world-economy at any given time.

In the early 1980s, Arrighi and Drangel (1986) estimated that a shortcut should and could be found to measure the quantum of “surplus” devolved to each world-economy zone. They hypothesized that the differential quantum of surplus reverting to the core, semiperiphery and periphery would translate into different levels of GNP per capita. They then proceeded to verify Wallerstein’s postulate that notwithstanding occasional country mobility within the tripartite structure, the relative importance of each region in terms of proportion of world population was a constant.

At about the same time, the historical division of labor between core and periphery came to be conceived as resting on the exchange of “high-wage goods” against “low-wage goods” (Chase-Dunn and Rubinson 1977) rather than manufactured against primary goods, as was previously thought. In addition, a combination of high and low wage goods was coming out of the semiperiphery. This left unanswered the question of the prevailing wage levels inside the semiperiphery: high and low wages versus an average intermediate level of wages.

A further tangent of the definition of the three zones of the world-economy was Wallerstein’s proposition that the expansion and deepening of the world-economy would lead eventually to the complete “proletarianization” of the world-labor force. As new regions became integrated into the system, part of their population was to be transformed into “semi-proletarians” thereof.
partially dependent on the sale of their labor but still having access to some land for part of their subsistence. Eventually, semi-proletarians would become proletarians, that is, totally dependent on the sale of their labor time. Unanswered questions remained: if at any given time the labor force composition in the semiperiphery could be distinguished from that in the periphery in terms of the relative importance of full versus semi-proletarians; and were the growing masses of poor urban dwellers scavenging for a living in self-employment in the informal sector to be considered proletarians or semi-proletarians.

In a nutshell, three defining criteria and empirical indicators of each of the three zones of the world-economy emerged from the world-system analytical framework: the relative wealth of countries (per capita income); the differential level of wages; and the differential labor force composition (“proletarians”/“semi-proletarians”).

Preliminary calculations indicate quite a high correlation between the per capita income of countries, the average level of wages (high in high income countries, intermediate in medium income countries and low in low income countries) and the proportion of wage labor in the working age population (high in high income countries, less so in intermediate income countries, low in the poorest countries). This being the case, the level of wages and the type of income source can be considered as defining dimensions of the three regions of the world-economy and an important criteria for classifying states in its tripartite structure.

National economic power is yet another dimension relevant for the classification of countries in the tripartite structure of the world-system. For instance, China and India, given the sheer size of their national economies and their emerging importance in the world-economy have often been considered parts of the semiperiphery. If national economic power is to be a legitimate dimension of the composition of zones in the world-economy, this implies that the relative importance of the semiperiphery and periphery in terms of percentages of world population will be altered to the point that the tripartite structure will end up taking the shape of a diamond instead of its historical pyramidal shape. According to our calculation, the semiperiphery would then be the predominant zone at about 60 percent and the periphery about 25 percent, with the relative size of the core remaining the same.

When the dimension of “economic power” is taken into consideration, a different composition of both the semiperiphery and the periphery pertains. Some countries will inevitably be characterized by status incongruence in terms of belonging to the semiperiphery versus the periphery. Moreover, level of income and economic power are not the only relevant dimensions for classifying countries in the world-system. There are also those dimensions of politics and power in the interstate system (including internal state strength, military power, external political weight, and influence).

What we should perhaps conclude is that from now on it is judicious to conceptualize the tripartite structure of the world-system as characterized by a number of axial dimensions of analysis. We should work with them all with the understanding that the composition and shape of the zones might vary according to the dimension considered. In a nutshell, we should consider the variable geometry.

References