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5. Critical contributions to world-systems analysis
World-system history, without a hyphen, asks a series of questions about global history that challenge many inherited assumptions.

[Recognizing the common existence of capitalist practices in East and West for much of world history allows us to reassess completely the overarching dynamic of the world system and the capital accumulation process on a world scale. This is the intention of world system theory: to reveal the common rhythms, the competition and rivalry, and the mutual influence among all the zones of the world economy over a period of several millennia, ... with an objective structural emphasis on the process of capital accumulation on the world scale and the real patterns of this process, both in terms of the “long cycles” of world economic expansion and contraction, and the “center shifts” between rival economic and political power centers. (Gills 2002: 152)]

From this perspective, world-systems analysis (with the hyphen) has led to a set of temporal, spatial, and processual assumptions that occlude our vision and lead to unsupportable conclusions. World-system history is constructed on a critique of those biases.

World-systems analysis emerged in the 1970s positing three important insights. The first addresses the unit of analysis. The state had served as the focal point of social analysis from the seventeenth century onward. States were not just handy social categories, but political units that self-consciously sought power. World historian Frederick Tegart argued that:

… academic history has not succeeded in liberating itself from the influence of the Romantic period, during which, in every country of Europe, the spirit of nationality demanded the rewriting of history in terms of a new sense of national existence and a new enthusiasm for national achievements in the past ... The division of history ... into “ancient,” “medieval,” and “modern” obscures the fact that these terms have reference, not to the world at large, but to a relatively small part of the earth’s surface.

(1925: 40–41)

A generation later, Fernand Braudel’s (1949) history of “the Mediterranean world” rejected the state as the central unit of analysis and put forward the économie-monde’ that “cut across many
political boundaries and was knitted together by its skein of economic interdependencies” (Wallerstein 2008). Wallerstein honored Braudel by naming the research center he founded as a platform for the emerging world-system perspective after him. The error of adopting a state-based analysis was further highlighted by the lack of real progress among most newly independent former colonies in the post war world. The failure of “modernization,” which had been a central prediction of state-centric social science, revealed the poverty of this theory. This failure opened the way for new radical social theory. In 1974, Wallerstein published his path-breaking study of the “modern world-system,” which rejected the assumptions of modernization and the centrality of the nation-state, and proposed an alternative conception based on the world-system as the unit of analysis. Andre Gunder Frank was preparing a similar work on the emergence of the modern world-system titled *World Accumulation, 1492–1789* (Frank 1978). Frank extended insights established in earlier work on dependency theory and underdevelopment. These included moving the origins of the capitalist world-system back to “the sixteenth century expansion,” examining cycles of rivalry by contending core powers, utilizing “long wave” analysis of the world-economy, mapping the “triangular” economy of Europe-America-Africa, and including Asia.

World-systems analysis adopted an important change in temporal perspective. In a system with presumed fixed social units (i.e., states) that developed along pre-determined lines, time could be linear in nature. Once formed, states were believed to “develop” and could be compared in terms of that (inevitable) development. The western capitalist state was assumed to be the universal archetype. Braudel was especially wary of this view. He put forward provocative alternatives in the shape of “structural” time and “cyclical” time. In world-systems perspective, time was cyclical, encompassing cycles of economic expansion and contraction, rise and decline, and worldwide geopolitical cycles (e.g., K-waves, “A” and “B” phases, cycles of hegemony, and rivalry). These cycles punctuate history, reflecting its underlying constitutive structure. In addition, longer-term secular trends created important limits to the changes that could take place within the modern capitalist world-system.

The third facet of world-systems analysis concerned revising our epistemological understanding. Increased emphasis on systemic complexity, and not mechanical Newtonian predictability, revealed the fundamental character of social (as well as physical) reality. Thus Wallerstein (2008) has suggested that “Probabilities are not reflections of our scientific ignorance but describe states of the world, indeed the vast majority of states of the world.” World-systems analysis pointed to disjunctures in the “linear progress” assumed by conventional theories. Its scholars argued that we would understand more about historical social systems if we examined not only periods of “normal” order, but the repeated periods of social breakdown (and reformulation), of disequilibrium, disruption, and “crisis,” which may contain the seeds of potential transformation.

These insights are important, progressive, and broadly accepted by contemporary scholars of world-system history (without the hyphen). Where world-system history takes issue with world-systems analysis is in the manner that each insight has been applied. Where world-systems analysis focuses on the alleged unique nature of the modern capitalist world-system, world-system history contends that there is much fundamental continuity that allows us to see longer-term dynamics that have been ignored or mis-theorized. The axial division of labor, identified as constitutive of the modern world-system is very real, but its foundation precedes modern capitalism (understood as a system with a requirement for the ceaseless accumulation of capital that emerged in the last few centuries). Conventional liberal, Marxist and world-systems analysis tend to conflate the current manifestations of a long-standing “form,” that is, “capital,” with the historical process of capital accumulation itself. Furthermore, the changes that world-systems analysis argues characterize the current system are derived from limited (modern European) temporal and geographical horizons. The European social processes commonly identified in nineteenth- and twentieth-century analyses
have been confused with universal social processes. It was on the basis of fundamentally endo-
genous “internal” factors that such changes were said to be driven, while worldwide systemic structural forces were ignored or relegated to marginal significance. World-system history remains fundamentally oriented to a break with the Eurocentric knowledge construction of world history.

Finally, the world-system history perspective is sympathetic to the position taken by world-systems analysis on the inherent limits to predictive capacity, but adds a further caution. So long as traditional concepts of “capitalism” remain at the heart of the analysis, we will remain trapped in essentially Eurocentric social theory. In the course of the development of the new world-system theory, Gunder Frank (1991) argued that such traditional concepts as “feudalism,” “capitalism,” and “socialism,” when understood as “modes of production,” were less scientific than “transideological.” It is necessary to break with these traditional concepts to make intellectual and theoretical progress.

The continuity thesis in world-system history

The continuity thesis in world-system history expresses the idea of long-term historical continuities, in contrast to the idea of periodic epochal transformations in characterizing social relations (Gills 1996). Central to this view is the argument that “production of commodities, commerce, trade, (price-setting) markets, private ‘enterprise,’ private capital, capital accumulation, and, yes, the ‘international’ division of labor have all played much more important roles much further ‘back’ in world history than has usually been recognized or accepted” (Gills 1996: 228). In European thought, Machiavelli relied on the assumption that humans remained psychologically essentially the same. When faced with similar situations they respond in similar ways. Students of these patterns could learn valuable lessons. Enlightenment philosophes’ were wedded to a view of human psychology, derived from John Locke and conveyed by Etienne de Condillac, which disallowed any change in human nature. Social change had to come from outside the individual. With fixed internal laws on the one hand, and an obviously fluid set of social and historical situations on the other, the foundation for a linear theory of progress was established.

There are many ways to posit the alternative idea of historical continuity: the continuity of an historical pattern, for example, the “rise and decline” of large political units; the continuity of (deep) structure, grounded in a materialist philosophy of history; the continuity of human psychology which reproduces similar behavior (and social relations) as successive generations replay the same impulses and patterns.

Conceptions of cyclical time and cyclical history have been common in the past (Pollard 1968). These conceptions could take the form of theological or cosmological understandings, as in classical Mayan thought; or a secular form, as in the “dyanistic cycle” described by Chinese historians, where “what has been fragmented will be united, and what has been united will fragment.” In the medieval world, Ibn Khaldun (1958) retained the idea of patterns centered on a historical dialectic between urban based and rural kinship based social relations.

For world-system history, the point is neither to return to pre-modern conceptions of cyclical history, nor fall prey to modern biases regarding the primacy of change. World-system history simply suggests that too much scholarly emphasis has been placed on the elucidation of discontinuities and epochal transitions in global social relations. There are unrecognized implications to this focus on change. Much of the social order may be stable in nature. Changes that appear significant in the near-term may actually be minor alterations embedded in a broader set of patterns. It is easy to over-emphasize the differences that exist between areas, or to draw a sharp distinction between social forces that exist “before” and “after” some putative historical threshold. Before we make any a priori decision to focus our analyses on change, we should consider those significant continuities that exist across time and space. We may come to believe that behaviors
that fail to regularly change are part of a fixed social order. So conceived, such continuities may be considered insignificant. There are also important ideological and political issues at stake. A study of “other” societies may be undertaken to facilitate understanding, or it can also be used to disparage “others” and aggrandize the accomplishments of dominant groups. A narrow focus on the here-and-now might be used to falsely credit a given set of policies with having generated positive outcomes, or descend into bigotry to justify injustice and aggression.

From the perspective of the continuity thesis there is no compelling reason to focus on change, nor is there any self-evident reason to declare that some differences are particularly significant, unless they can be placed in the context of a long-term analysis. World-system history seeks to identify those long-term contexts. Only an analysis of the world-system as a whole will provide us with a good understanding of how all the parts of the story fit together. Many of the social forces considered to be unique to the modern era are actually of significant antiquity, and can be better understood when viewed in global and historical perspective.

Material(ist) analysis and (world) systematicity

Both world-systems analysis and world-system history hold to a broadly materialist conceptualization of social relations. World-systems analysis identifies the “modern world-system” as a capitalist system born in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. European capitalism is said to have first endowed social relations with the requirement for ceaseless accumulation. This ceaseless accumulation brought with it an allegedly unique socioeconomic environment where modern classes and nation-states emerged, economic cycles built upon contradictions in the process of capital accumulation played themselves out, and advanced capitalist (core) areas were driven to expansion into the periphery. From this perspective there have been multiple world-systems, but the social processes that existed in “precapitalist” world-systems were fundamentally different, requiring a focus on change and “transition(s).”

This orientation was challenged by Frank and Gills, starting in about 1989. Their joint studies of history, especially outside Europe, caused them to question the idea that significant differences existed between important social processes that took place in allegedly unique social epochs. Wallerstein (1990: 288–89; see also 1992) identified twelve “characteristics presumed to be the description of a capitalist world-economy” including an axial division of labor between core and periphery; semiperipheral areas; continued non-wage labor; cohabitation with a sovereign state system; periods of hegemony and rivalry; cyclical rhythms and secular trends; and a variety of forms of exploitation (i.e., national, racial, ethnic, gender) used to extract value from certain groups. Frank and Gills saw most of these phenomena as having been well entrenched both earlier and elsewhere. If the same kinds of social processes were operating across these temporal contexts, generating the same kinds of outcomes, they could be neither new nor unique to the modern era. From the perspective of the resulting continuity hypothesis, the modern world-system is not fundamentally unique, nor is the rise of capitalism in Europe the appropriate starting point for understanding the present era (Gills 2003, 2010a, 2010b). While we may learn a great deal from the study of comparative world-systems (following the work of Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997), we can expect that the current period will bear a significant resemblance to those of previous periods. If we want to understand the world-system, we should be focusing on both continuities and changes between earlier and later iterations (Denemark 2010).

From the perspective of the continuity thesis, the world-system was created and sustained by an expanding set of intersecting trade and communication routes that emerged some five millennia ago. People and events in areas that are far-removed have influence on one another through “inter-penetrating accumulation” processes (Gills and Frank 1990, 1991, 1992). The antecedents of
such systemic routes extend even back into the Neolithic period across significant stretches of Eurasia. The Anatolian settlement of Catal Huyuk is a much studied example of a seventh millennium BCE community that was dependent on long-distance trade.

Perhaps the most famous set of trade and communication routes are the Silk Roads across Central Asia that connected areas as disparate as Britain and Scandinavia with Indonesia and Korea. The crucial gateways from Asia into Europe traversed the “three corridors” of interzonal exchange (Gills 1996: 231; Gills and Frank 1990, 1991). From at least 500 BCE, these and other interconnected routes linked the farthest points of the known world (ArchAtlas 2010; Rowlands et al 1987; Sherratt 1993). Interestingly, the newly renovated Ashmolean Museum in Oxford has been reorganized to illustrate the central importance of these routes throughout world history.

This system of long-distance exchange carried more than just trade-goods. The roles that societies played in the processes of acquiring raw materials, production, transportation, marketing, consumption, and investment served to influence the structure of social orders. By engaging in the mutual intercourse of Eurasia, societies were mutually influenced. The implications of such extensive linkages are traced back 5000 years in the work of Ekholm and Friedman (1982) in the first explicitly formulated thesis on the historical continuity of capital accumulation and “capital-imperialism.” There is ample evidence from the ancient world for extensive long-distance trade, the competitive accumulation of capital via market-driven production and exchange, and the development of imperialism and core-periphery relations based on a mixture of economic and geopolitical motives. (See also Ekholm and Friedman 2005; Friedman 2000.)

The structure and significance of world-system linkages, and their continuity during the medieval and early modern period was superbly analyzed by Abu-Lughod (1989). Her review of the thirteenth century Eurasian world-system focuses on eight interlocking and mutually dependent globe-spanning regions. Abu-Lughod illustrates the manner in which fundamental social processes are generated not by local conditions but by the incentives provided by participation in a world-system of production and exchange.

Here is where world-system history parts company with Wallersteinian world-systems analysis. For Wallerstein, the modern world-system is fundamentally different from the non-capitalist organizational forms that came before it. Capitalism, from this perspective, includes private property, wage labor, commodification, and the extension of (market based) commercialization. But the real difference between a capitalist and non-capitalist era, according to Wallerstein, is the imperative that capital accumulation be ceaseless, meaning that continuous reinvestment in the means of production is absolutely required. Those who predominate in the process of ceaseless accumulation gain power, which emanates from the creation of wealth. In earlier eras, to the contrary, it was political power that generated wealth (Amin 1999: 300, 2000).

Contrary to the arguments of these scholars, much historical evidence suggests that such processes have long existed, and that capital accumulation has normally been a competitive process requiring continuous reinvestment. Specialist histories suggest that private property and the quest for profit was a fundamental driver of the world-economy far earlier than the classically understood advent of capitalism. Braudel argues that capitalist cities and capitalism itself were already developed by the thirteenth century in Italy. These cities mirrored practices of the Arab world of the second and possibly the third millennia BCE. Rostovtzeff (1926) considered the differences between the modern market economy and the fourth century BCE Hellenistic world as merely quantitative. Students of the Levantine Phoenician cities and of the western Carthaginian empire are familiar with extensive commodity production and long-distance markets used in the pursuit and accumulation of money profits.

Actors and processes that would be uncontroversially labeled as capitalist in the modern era can be traced back to second millennium BCE Assyria, where private owners of joint-capital textile
firms employed thousands of wage laborers. The markets in which these firms were situated set prices, and provide evidence for the accumulation of capital, and both circulating and fixed capital assets (Larsen 1976). It is no surprise therefore that students such as Ekholm, Friedman, and Larsen conclude that the relevant processes of capital accumulation can be traced back into the third millennium BCE. Indeed, even Max Weber traced early modern European business contract forms back to ancient Babylonia.

Cycles and trends

Among the most interesting and controversial predictions of world-systems analysis is the hypothesized array of cyclical rhythms and secular trends. The social, political, and economic cycles are among those suggested to be driven by the unique processes of the modern world-system. The trends are likewise either driven by, or the inevitable result of, capitalist interaction (Wallerstein 1990, 1992).

Students of world-system history are particularly concerned with the periodicity of economic rise and decline. If similar cycles existed prior to the onset of the modern system, then they were driven by processes that are not uniquely associated with the modern system. Any attempt to understand them exclusively from within the “modern” period will overlook important world-historical processes. Giovanni Arrighi (1994) identified cycles of economic rise and decline prior to the sixteenth century in his analysis of early Italian city-states. Frank, Gills, and Thompson, among others, look for evidence of large-scale cyclical behavior and find 150 to 200-year economic upswings and downswings in the Bronze and Iron Ages (Frank 1993; Frank and Thompson 2006; Gills and Frank 1992). These economic cycles appear world-system-wide, constituting evidence of “systematicity” in patterned long-term material interactions. The causes that produce these cycles that pre-date the onset of the modern world-system, like the causes of the cycles that exist during the modern period, remain in question.

The cycle of hegemony and rivalry provides another focus. Hegemony is defined as the existence of a significantly hierarchical structure of the accumulation of surplus among polities that is mediated by force, and is hardly unique to the modern era. A hierarchy of polities is established that appropriates a privileged share of surplus, and the power that comes with it, to a given center/state and its ruling/propertied classes. In such a structure, the hegemonic center subordinates secondary centers and their respective systems of production and accumulation (Gills and Frank 1990, 1991, 1992).

From the perspective of world-system history, one must raise questions about conceptualizations of hegemony that begin with modern states like Portugal, the Netherlands, or Great Britain. These actors were not as wealthy or as dominant as coterminous Ming/Qing China or Moghul India, though they outlasted them. The story of the domination of western hegemonic states may be more a function of ideology than historiography (Blaut 1993; Frank 1998). Instead, we find that several core-periphery-hinterland complexes might exhibit significantly unequal flows of value to a small set of core states, yielding a hegemonic actor. Following Abu-Lughod, we should look for the temporary rise and decline of some states or group of states relative to others. As Wilkinson (2009) verifies in his latest papers on the polarity structures of “central civilization,” we see more periods of rivalry than hegemony, and there is no fundamental change in this regard with the advent of the modern world-system.

Both economic and geopolitical upswings and downswings may be driven by the same process. For Modelski and Thompson (1996), the rise of the market in about 1000 CE gave birth to a set of innovation-driven cycles that define and animate the world-system. Such innovations provide their societies with sources of wealth and accumulation. Innovations then diffuse, returns are
reduced and there is a downturn. Leaders may have sufficient resources to continue to innovate, and have incentives to do so in the context of global threats created during economic downturns. What results is a pairing of K-waves driving both economic and political leadership. Innovations give rise to significant resources upon which new powers rise and consolidate their positions (usually after victory in a major war). Their economies eventually slow. A downturn may lead to global violence and another round of innovation. Global leaders may earn another round of leadership if they leverage their initial position into additional innovation, or they may be replaced by those who pioneer new innovations.

Modelski and Thompson trace this pattern back one thousand years. Devezas and Modelski (2003) suggest a broader, longer-term evolutionary learning cycle. (See also Modelski et al 2008). These cycles of economic upswings and downswings extending across temporal and spatial frames, yet constituted by very different, if not incompatible social structures, provides further evidence for the continuity thesis in world-system history.

A conclusion and an invitation

As a result of these considerations, Frank (1991, 1993) came to define as problematic all of the various lines of western thought that identified transitions between “modes of production” as central to the study of global development and global history. According to Frank, there were no such transitions or even discrete modes of production, and Europe was not the exemplar upon which we could construct a globally-relevant social theory. A more complete “humanocentric” perspective can only emerge when we abandon these “transitional ideological modes” and adopt a form of analysis that traces all significant historical processes to their origins, while simultaneously looking to the macro-structure of the world-system as the only appropriate unit of analysis. World systems-analysis is not so much “incorrect” as it is insufficiently world-historical and world-systemic. Social processes that are truly long-term in nature, and not confined to or pre-determined by European experience, must be the focus of additional attention.

Those who are interested in world-systems analysis should also be interested in world-system history. Wallerstein responded to some methodological challenges to world-systems analysis, including those from world-system history, by categorizing the big picture of world-system history as a form of ideographic analysis wherein critical disjunctures are effaced with unhelpful truisms regarding the fact that “…there are always some things that do not seem to have changed” (Wallerstein 1994). If the questions raised by world-system history were about “some things” then this would be particularly apt, but when the “things” that do not seem to have changed are the processes that rest at the center of what is allegedly unique about the modern world-system, then it is worthwhile to spend some time studying the level to which continuity is evident, and what that continuity might teach us. A healthy skepticism regarding criticisms is good, and intramural debates can bring clarity to fuzzy concepts and light to obscure conditions. In the case of world-system history, scholars in world-systems analysis should not lose sight of the fact that these two perspectives have ontological and epistemological foundations and intellectual agendas that are more similar than different. No form of social analysis can long exist under the misperception that it cannot be improved. We have much to learn from one another.

References

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