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An Irreverent Analysis of World-System Analysis

19 marzo 1998

R E V I E W XXI, 1 1998 brings several articles on "world-systems analysis," its history, conceptualization and procedures in which I have also taken an interest for some time and am now moved to comment.

The third article by Forte on Anthropology (A Research Review) cites my work the most, perhaps because it is itself by far longest. However, it is the one on which I am least moved to comment other than to agree with the author's critique of the work by the oft cited Roland Robertson, which I have found less than helpful to say the least in analyzing the world-systems analysis or indeed the real world itself. I would just add that in my experience and opinion, if we must chose between identifying and emphasizing uniqueness and differences on the one hand and holistically searching for similarities and especially relations and commonalities, we do best - and can only do 'science' - by doing the latter rather than following Robertson's and others' predilection for identifying uniqueness and stressing differences. Indeed, what is most 'unique' is the one world that we all [must!] live in, whose structure and dynamic itself attract attention to the virtual exclusion of the underlying and of determinant commonalities and relations. So we cannot - indeed mostly do not even want to - see the common forest for focusing on the individual trees.

That brings me to the first article on the "continuationist/transformationist debate" regarding "how many world-systems?" or trees or groves of trees there were by Debra Straussfogel. She rightly pigeon- holes me and my some-time co-author Barry Gills among the 'continuationists' and virtually everybody else, including Wallerstein and Chase-Dunn & Hall, among the 'transformationists.' Of course, the answer to the question Gills and I pose in our book *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* is consistent with the holistic and continuationist position. That is so even if some parts of the world were only belatedly [but contra Wallerstein certainly well before 1750] incorporated into the structure and logic of a system that itself began thousands of years earlier and still 'continues' today.

Straussfogel, like Wallerstein and I as well, appeals for help to chaos and complexity [also dubbed 'chaoplexity'] theory associated with Prigogine and others. And she suggests that at least its perspective if not its analysis can help us "put system into world- system theory" and offer an answer to the continuationist/transformationist question of "how many world-systems?". Alas in this article, she never does arrive at or offer an answer to that question. Instead, she limits herself to attempts to 'operationalize' the distinction through identifiable criteria and evidence of 'transformation.' She rightly argues that both trends and cycles are quite compatible with continuation, and that we need "to be able to identify the existence of bifurcation points ... [that] indicate qualitative differences in structure and function" of the development of the system to transform from one to another, and that at least their identification, if not also explanation, is incumbent on transformationists.

So far so good. She seems to join Chase-Dunn and Hall in their claim that we can and must identify a few such bifurcations, from kin-based, to tributary, to capitalist 'systems', and even for what they call - after Wilkinson and Frank/Gills - the 'central world system.'

But Straussfogel also goes on to claim quite wrongly that for continuationists like me "there have been no bifurcation points in the general process creating human social structures" while for transformationists "the argument would be that bifurcation points have been crossed resulting in a sequence of recognizably distinct types of world-systems" [p.22]. Alas, neither of these statements is empirically true in fact; and their either/or juxtaposition is a logical non-

sequitur. I can and do recognize bifurcation points, which the chaos theory and its non-reversible arrow of time to which she also appeals can help us to identify and understand. But it is decidedly false that these bifurcations and how they discriminate between paths taken and not taken by the world system must result in a "sequence of recognizably distinct types of world- systems." Why and how so?

There is no reason in theory to anticipate such different types and there is also not much evidence that it has happened in fact in fact in our 'central world system' any more than in our universe, independently of whether it is expanding [like the world system] or not or whether there may or may not be other universes out there [as we may wish to argue that for several thousands of years there may have been one or more 'world-systems' in the Western hemisphere].

It is perfectly logical and I believe empirically verifiable to argue that our 'world system' has been transformed by and in some major bifurcations and even revolutions, such as the neolithic one of agricultural/state society, the 'encounter' between 'two worlds' in 1492, and the industrial revolution or evolution with its global ecological consequences [and also 'causes' as Ken Pomeranz and I argue]. However, none of these transformations need theoretically have been nor in fact were from anything that transformationists can operationally identify as having been from 'recognizably' tributary, much less 'feudal,' to capitalist/ic "types of world-systems."

Any and all such claims literally make NON-sense.

The reason appears clearly in the fourth article by Giovanni Arrighi. He dissects two "non-debates" that went or are still going on "at cross purposes" between critics or partial dissenters of world-systems theory and Wallerstein. The latter himself in the third article denies that there is any such 'theory' but prefers the more modest 'analysis,' on which I prefer to comment on only after examining Arrighi's.

The first debate that Arrighi summarizes is between Wallerstein and Theda Skocpol who wants to "bring the state back in" and with Robert Brenner who defends the primacy of class relations over all else. Both, according to Arrighi, attack the Achilles heel of world-systems theory, which is "Wallerstein's failure to account plausibly for the emergence of capitalism in the modern world" [116]. I agree, but for reasons that go well beyond those mentioned by Arrighi. He rebuts Skocpol's charge that Wallerstein fails to deal adequately with the state per se, but he accepts her argument that Wallerstein does not show how the state accounts for the developmental breakthrough of capitalism. Brenner for his part argues that only class structure and its transformation can account for that same development, and not the world-system. Even less so can the core-periphery relations and cyclical A-B phases that Wallerstein attributes to it, particularly in the 'long sixteenth century' from 1450 to 1620 or 1640. Indeed, none of these theorists, including Skocpol, Brenner and Wallerstein do or can explain 'the rise of capitalism in Europe.'

The other "non-debate" is between Wallerstein and Fernand Braudel from whom Arrighi especially cites "the well-known passage in which he confesses to not sharing 'Wallerstein's fascination with the sixteenth century' Braudel's interpretation of the rise of the capitalist world economy in Europe departs in key respects from Wallerstein's" [123]. In particular, in Braudel's "account there is not a word about a 'crisis of feudalism' ... nor about the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which is central to Wallerstein's account. The focus is instead on how a world-economy centered on city-states was transformed into a world-economy centered on territorial states ... [which] expanded... to encompass the entire globe" [125]. For his part, Arrighi criticizes both theorists for missing what he himself regards as the real point: Wallerstein offers an only "implausible account of the emergence ... of competitive pressures" because he looks for them in the wrong place. And "Braudel offers no account at all" even though he points in the right direction for the seat of capitalist transformation: the city states and the intercity-state system that anticipated the Westphalian inter 'national' state system by two centuries and "originated in the interstices that connected those larger territorial organizations to one another and their totality to other 'worlds'." [126].

Yet however magistral and prize-winning Arrighi's own Long Twentieth Century analysis of this development is, it also remains essentially irrelevant to - or yet another 'non-debate' about - the [cause of the] real world rise of what all of the above like to call the 'European world-economy' and/or the 'modern capitalist world-system.' The reason for this failure emerges from the theoretical one already given by Straussfogel, that is the continuity in the world economy and system and the incumbency on transformationists to demonstrate, not to mention account for, some bifurcation that led to some different type of world- system.

Yet as Arrighi rightly argues, none of the above do or within their parameters even can demonstrate any such thing: not Braudel with his city-states in the 'European world-economy,' not Wallerstein with his core-periphery relations and cycles in the 'modern world-system,' and also not their critics Skocpol by bringing the state back in nor Brenner with his class analysis in even smaller social 'systems.' But neither and no more so does nor can Arrighi himself! For in the real world of course, there was a well structured and fully functioning world economy and system, primarily in Asia, of which any and all of Europe was no more than a quite marginal peninsular outpost. Indeed, the very Italian city states that 'fascinate' Arrighi and Braudel derived their very existence and life-blood from their quite dependent trade relations with Asia, as Braudel himself recognized, Modelski and Thompson (1996) now demonstrate, and Arrighi also admits in fact. Alas, that fact also pulls the empirical and theoretical rug out from under the entire argument from Marx and Weber, to Braudel and Wallerstein, and still from Arrighi himself.

How in the world can it still be maintained that a fundamental transformation occurred in the mere interstices of territorial states, or in their formation as part of an alleged transition from feudalism, or in the transformation of class structure and dynamic in any of the above in any parts or even all of Europe? For after all is said and done, Europe remained for several hundred years still totally marginal to the structure and development of the great bulk of the world economy, which was in Asia. All the less so can any of these arguments have even the slightest empirical or theoretical merit as long as the alleged transformations in Europe or its national or city states or even their entire "European world- economy" and "modern world-system" were themselves derivative from and dependent on events and developments across all of Eurasia and especially those at its far eastern end. It is surely not for nothing that the very voyages of Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Magellan - like the European Crusades before them - were themselves motivated and generated by the economic development especially of China and India.

Still nearly three centuries later, Adam Smith recognized these regions as agriculturally, industrially, technologically, and commercially still far more developed than any or all of Europe.

Moreover as Smith also emphasized, they remained far more competitive on the world market. On what imaginary European basis then can any of the above cited analysts offer the "plausible account of the competitive pressures that have promoted and sustained the capitalist transformation of the European world- economy" that Arrighi rightly demands? Rather obviously on almost no European basis whatsoever, except that of its competitively quite disadvantaged place and role among the competitive pressures that emanated from and primarily impacted on various parts of Asia and only very marginally so in Europe, or rather which they long continued to marginalize still further from where the major economic and demographic action, not to mention political, social, and cultural action was.

That is why all these, alas still including Arrighi's, 'non-debates' about the [reasons for] the alleged rise of capitalism in Europe make literally NO sense at all, any more than how many imaginary European 'capitalist' or other angels could dance on the head of the marginal European pin. To make even minimal sense out of any of this, we must search for it in the structure and transformation of the real world economy and system, the motor force of whose economic and technological development remained in Asia, and especially in China, until at least 1800, and not in any imaginary 'European world-economy' or 'modern world-system.' To the extent to which there was any such, it was certainly part and parcel of a real world economy and system [without a hyphen!], of which developments in the 'European world-economy'

including its American outliers were in reality far more derivative effects than they were imaginary causes.

So Wallerstein is probably right in the third article in predicting the 'demise of world-systems theory ... from the eventual exhaustion of its utility.... We are clearly moving in the direction of such a demise" [108]. But Wallerstein remains wrong in the reasons to which he attributes the exhaustion of utility and the demise of his world-systems theory. His list of 'fundamental questions' [111] may be important; Wallerstein's (1996) Gulbenkian Commission critique of the alleged universalism of our nineteenth and twentieth century heritage is certainly well taken; and the call for Opening the Social Sciences instead may well be innovative.

Yet none of the above cited theorists including Wallerstein himself even recognize let alone seek to replace the still ingrained Eurocentric provincialism of the historiography that underlies and underpins all of their social theory from Marx Weber to Braudel and Wallerstein, still including Arrighi [who is now turning to study China and East Asia].

In a world that is itself rapidly ReOrienting and pulling the rug out from under Eurocentric theory, that is the underlying real world reason for the exhaustion of all that 'world-systems' theory. That is also why our multiple choice must be NONE OF THE ABOVE.

My forthcoming book ReORIENT: GLOBAL ECONOMY IN THE ASIAN AGE [University of California Press, April 1998] is a modest effort to help begin also to reorient our historiography and social theory.

All are invited to a critique of this ReORIENT book by Giovanni Arrighi, Ed Farmer, George Modelski, and David Wilkinson, with a response from myself at an ISA/IPE Roundtable Panel chaired by Sing Chew on Thursday C-16, from 1:45 to 3:30 PM on March 19 [followed by the IPE Section panel and then the reception both honouring Immanuel Wallerstein] at the ISA Meetings in Minneapolis. I will also be at the PEWS meetings from March 21 to 24 in Evanston, Ill., where Immanuel Wallerstein will also give a lecture at Northwestern University and also discuss his Golbenkian Commission Report.

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