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The great transition debate and world-systems analysis

Eric Mielants

Since its creation in the 1970s, world-system analysis has challenged the way social scientists think about the past, the present, and the future (e.g., Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982). In doing so, this approach has raised significant epistemological questions about existing academic structures (such as disciplines and social science journals) in terms of whether the traditional modes of gathering and evaluating knowledge about the modern world really made sense (see Wallerstein 2004a). In particular, the nineteenth century artificial construction of separate disciplines institutionalized in different departments in the modern university setting, leading political scientists to study the state, sociologists civil society, economists the market, historians the past, and anthropologists the non-Western world as if separate logics were at work (Wallerstein 2004a: 124), was challenged by this new perspective. This challenge implied not only embracing a multidisciplinary approach to social science (see Wallerstein 2001), but also a critical deconstruction of traditional perspectives' meta-narratives explaining how, why, and when the modern world had become modern, or, alternatively, how capitalism had emerged in previously pre-capitalist geographical areas. In doing so, world-system analysis essentially dismissed sociological analyses that looked for cultural and religious variables to explain the origins of capitalism (e.g., Stark 2005; Tawney 1926; Weber 1930) while opening up a two-front war on two historical materialist perspectives that had for decades dominated previous debates over the emergence of capitalism and modernity: liberal Smithianism and Orthodox Marxism.

Wallerstein (1974, 2004b), considered by many as the founding father of world-system analysis, essentially defined the capitalist world-economy, or modern world-system, as a socio-economic entity that emerged in sixteenth-century Europe and subsequently expanded to incorporate more areas of the world such as the surrounding mini-systems and world-empires, which operated according to a different logic. Characterized by a global division of labor resulting from intense yet unequal bulk trade linkages and illustrated by commodity chains between different zones that he labeled core, periphery, and semiperiphery, this capitalist world-system gradually expanded from 1492 CE until the end of the nineteenth century when the entire world had become capitalist.

As stated earlier, this theoretical position ran counter to the Orthodox Marxism embraced by the Soviet Union and Communist Parties as well as intelligentsia allied to them. Marx himself was always much more interested in providing a scientific analysis of nineteenth-century capitalism than he was in exploring the specific origins of capitalism. Many of his statements were essentially "contextual observations dependent on his analysis of the capitalist production" (Guérreau 1980: 57) during

the industrial era. The focus of Marx and Engels on Britain (and their subsequent characterization of non-European areas of the world as Oriental Despotism) was continued in the twentieth century by renowned Marxist scholars such as Maurice Dobb (1976: 59) and Robert Brenner (1985: 275), who also juxtaposed the general socioeconomic feudal crisis “on most of the continent” with the “critical breakthrough to self-sustaining growth in England.” More recently, Georges Comninel (2000) and Ellen Meiskins Wood (1999) have updated this Orthodox Marxist perspective. For the latter, the seventeenth-century world-economy was mainly trade in luxury goods being bought cheaply and sold dearly to make profit—so-called merchant capitalism, not real industrial capitalism using wage labor. England was a unique place with unique agricultural conditions, its “internal market” and its “capitalism in one country.” This exceptional island was capable of becoming on its own the first capitalist nation-state (Wood 1999: 72–130).

Despite Orthodox Marxism and Smithian liberalism being intellectual adversaries, from a world-system perspective they are only *frères ennemis*: members of the same family, pushing in different political directions. Like Marxism, liberal Smithianism also created a meta-narrative in which nothing novel or important happened in the so-called long sixteenth century. In addition, in common with the great ideological counter-narrative of Marxist theory, the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was looked on as the most important historical watershed, opening the gates of modernity and unleashing capitalism. Like Marxists, modernization theorists have also predominantly focused on England in order to understand modernity (e.g., Wrigley 1988). Consequently, the Smithian’s main interest in preindustrial economies and societies lies with understanding the constraints that allegedly prevented them from becoming modern. Therefore, modernization theorists problematize specific political, social, or cultural features of certain (mostly non-European) societies as backward or primitive, and similarly, they problematize current “undeveloped” or “emerging” economies without providing a rigorous and critical analysis of the complex interactions between different but mutually constitutive parts of the world-system. Despite their intellectual differences, liberal Smithian theorists as well as Orthodox Marxist scholars often characterize medieval Europe as well as contemporary “medieval-like” pre-modern and pre-capitalist societies as predominantly feudal, hierarchical, deeply conservative, and religious, with economies composed of self-sufficient autarchies populated by passive, self-subsistent peasants (see Bois 2000: 41).

Essentially, both Orthodox Marxist and liberal Smithian approaches have, over time, created a venerable social science tradition in which most Western scholars focus mainly on Europe (and occasionally also on European settler states). This scholarly activity on the origins of capitalism does not frame itself with reference to developments in, or in dialogue with, “the rest of the world” (e.g., Emigh 2008; Lachmann 2000).

To challenge this intellectual legacy of Eurocentrism, leading world-system scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Andre Gunder Frank, and Samir Amin have written extensively about the pitfalls of Eurocentrism and have attempted in their own work to criticize parochial social science that disguises itself as objective, unbiased, and universalist. Studying the interconnectedness of the entire planet before the Industrial Revolution, world-system scholars have, since the 1970s, reframed the “great transition debate” about the origins of modernity. They analyze uneven socioeconomic development over several centuries, while also raising important questions about contemporary public policies and methodology. In terms of Eurocentrism, Wallerstein (1999: 169) has remarked on how social science has, from its inception, suffered from biases in the construction and continuous reproduction of its historiography, the parochialism of its universalism, and its assumptions about (Western) civilization, Orientalism, and an incorrect theory of progress. This stance holds that the main meta-theoretical perspectives used to explain the origins of the modern world, as well as its continuing dynamics, are fundamentally flawed. They have also

served particular colonial and imperialist projects—be they of a Soviet or Western variety—while masquerading under the label of scientific objectivity.

According to world-system analysis, it was in the context of European colonialism and imperialism that unfolded in the so-called long sixteenth century (1450 to 1640) that the entire world gradually and irrevocably became interlinked through trade patterns constitutive of unequal exchange. This ushered in a genuinely profound transition: that of the genesis of a modern capitalist world-system, initially centered around Europe and the New World but subsequently incorporating ever more geographical zones. By stressing the importance of economic cycles and the commodity chains of leading sectors, world-system theorists study the upward and downward mobility of hegemonic polities that occurred long before the Industrial Revolution (see Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Frank 1998; Modelski and Thompson 1996). The Industrial Revolution was, from this point of view, just another instance in which a rising hegemon was able to attain a comparative advantage in new lead industries and to develop new capabilities for leading the capitalist world-economy toward greater consolidation (e.g., Arrighi 1994: 175, 188).

This downplaying of the significance of the Industrial Revolution as a watershed event in world history runs counter to the narrative predominant in the twentieth century of both Orthodox Marxism and liberal Smithianism (and its outgrowth of modernization theory). This is a major break with these perspectives as well as with mainstream historiography, which classifies time periods according to arbitrary Eurocentric demarcations: the classical, medieval, early modern, and modern period, the latter often only being ushered in once the Industrial Revolution has occurred. While Smithians (e.g., Lal 1999: 211–21; Wrigley 2004) and Marxists (e.g., Mandel 1962: 124) alike consider a “pre-modern,” “pre-capitalist,” or “feudal” society’s overall economic growth to be limited and/or not recurrent, and suggest that the Industrial Revolution changes all of this, the world-system perspective claims that the cumulative windfalls generated by centuries of colonization decreases the need to focus on technological innovations (e.g., Mokyr 1990). Minimizing the significance of the Industrial Revolution, Wallerstein (1989) points out that it should not be interpreted as the major event that brought about recurring growth, but rather as the outcome of modern economic growth in the core. Thus the significance of the Industrial Revolution lies with the fact that it enabled the West to achieve economic growth more rapidly and more intensely (which ultimately widened the gap between the core and the periphery) sometime around 1800 (Guarducci 1983: 695–746; cf. Prak 2001) when a systematic policy of colonization and deindustrialization of the periphery allowed Western powers to accumulate great power and resources (Habib 1985).

Because of its emphasis on the importance of trade linkages based on unequal exchange (exploitation) and their lasting impact on both the core and the non-core over long periods of time, world-system analysts have often been labeled as “Marxist” by their Smithian detractors, who lament the way “leftist political economists and economic historians think in terms of core and periphery” (Landes 1998: 252). Unlike the Orthodox Marxists, who focus on the nation-state, however, world-system theorists regard the existence and movement of free labor and slavery as coexisting within the same mode of production in a large (worldwide) geographical arena interconnected by trade linkages. This is a fundamentally different theoretical position in the “great transition debate.” Using the world-economy as their main unit of analysis, world-system analysts insist that modes of labor control as well as production for trade are historically, relationally, and therefore mutually constitutive. It is only because of the low cost remuneration of coerced labor in the periphery, which historically exported raw materials for the world market, that wage remuneration could be relatively high in the core, where high value-added products are produced and exported. The logic of ceaseless accumulation of capital in the system is intrinsically linked with the racial hierarchy constructed during the long sixteenth century

(Quijano and Ennis 2000; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992). If one desires to understand the contemporary dynamics of racial polarization within as well as between countries, it is imperative to comprehend the history of a global polarizing system over several centuries. For world-system scholars, the Smithians are themselves the ideological by-product, if not the apologists, for a highly racial and unequal global order that finds its roots in the long sixteenth century. Denying this reality, together with a failure to acknowledge the colonial features that are still prevalent in many postcolonial states only brings about more “feudalmania,” or “temporal distancing” among liberal Western elites who produce false knowledge that denies the coevolution of “developed” and “underdeveloped” parts of the world (Grosfoguel 2003: 12). For world-system analysts, the Smithian pipedream in which all or most of the impoverished areas of the capitalist world-economy will someday catch up with the West in terms of production and income standards so long as they implement the correct policies, must be refuted. What makes the capitalist modern world-system different from mini-systems, world-empires, or other entities is that the quest for ceaseless accumulation is dependent upon and inseparable from a system of unequal exchange. This resembles the dependency school’s analysis of the “development of underdevelopment” (see Frank 1967; cf. So 1990). Central to its analysis is the argument that what is so unique about the emergence of a capitalist modern world-system in the sixteenth century, initially centered on Europe, is the transition from a non-capitalist world into a capitalist world during which growth of world trade contributes to the expansion of a polarizing zero-sum game, reproducing and expanding poverty and inequality on a world scale. The crucial concept of semiperiphery was introduced to clarify this idea theoretically: the three zones (core, periphery, and semiperiphery), in which different political entities such as nation-states are located, contain divergent practices (in terms of life expectancy, standard of living, labor control, production of items for sale on the world market, and political regimes) precisely because of their hierarchical location and interconnection within the capitalist world-economy. World-system scholars argue that it is only in analyzing inequality and social mobility on a global scale over long periods of time, and in focusing on their relational interactions, that one can understand the dynamics of a centuries-old system that reproduces a “high inequality equilibrium” (Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009; cf. Bergesen and Bata 2002). It is therefore no coincidence that the origins of capitalism and the construction of “modern” notions of citizenship go hand-in-hand (Mielants 2007).

Despite world-system scholars’ disagreements with Smithians and the latter labeling the former as Marxists, Orthodox Marxists claim no affiliation with the perspective. Indeed, the different interpretations surrounding the entire Transition Debate has led Orthodox Marxists such as Robert Brenner to call world-system scholars “neo-Smithian Marxists” who are “circulationists.” Rather than focusing on production and the extraction of surplus value derived from wage labor, which according to Orthodox Marxists essentially determines whether a particular nation-state made the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the world-system scholars commit a fundamental error. For example, the fact that scholars such as Wallerstein have considered the Soviet Union not as a communist experiment illustrating the successful transition from capitalism to socialism, but rather as a typical powerful semiperipheral state embracing protectionism (as opposed to the typical state located in the core zone favoring free trade), was seen as anathema. Analyzing workers’ revolts in tandem with and co-equal to other anti-systemic movements (decolonization, feminism, environmentalism, etc.) (e.g., Martin 2008) also constitutes unforgivable revisionism.

As Sanderson (1995: 178) has pointed out, however, “[w]hile it must be admitted that much of what goes on among Wallerstein’s zones of the capitalist world economy involves exchange, much also involves production. When, for example, core capitalists peripheralize a region in order to extract surplus value from it, they are doing so through the direct establishment of productive activities that they ultimately control. How can such an economic relationship between core and

periphery be regarded as based only on exchange?” It is therefore important to note that it is the combination of profits based on the exploitation of wage labor, as well as those derived from unequal exchange, which constitute a capitalist system. After all, profits derived from surplus value are not necessarily “of greater historical significance” (Heilbroner 1985: 66) than those derived from unequal exchange (cf. Norel 2009: 87–104). One should also consider that “the exploitation of labor is not only determined by the wage bundle and the extraction of labor from labor power in the production process, but in substantial measure by the prices at which goods are exchanged between the economies that make up the world-system” (Bowles 1988: 434). World-systems analysis has endeavoured to explain the emergence and expansion of the capitalist system by integrating a Marxist focus on production with an analysis of trade and unequal exchange in trade prices between core and periphery. This unequal exchange has been a continuous process due to differences in rates of labor remuneration that are larger than the differences in productivity. World-system scholars also insist that these differences were not only being produced by colonialism but are currently reproduced by neocolonial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as well as public policies such as laws that restrict international labor migration (Jones and Mielants 2010). This interdisciplinary approach produced an analysis of “globalization” long before it became a fashionable buzz word in the 1990s (Guillen 2001: 241).

Over the last 25 years the “transition debate” has been revisited within the “world-system school” itself, and published in scholarly journals such as the *Review* (published by the Fernand Braudel Center), the *Journal of World System Research*, the *Journal of World History*, and the *Journal of Historical Sociology*. These more recent debates have reconsidered when and where a transition occurred from a pre-modern/pre-capitalist world to a modern capitalist world-economy. Scholars such as Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) and, in the last years of his life, Andre Gunder Frank (1998), articulated doubts about the temporal and spatial parameters of the Wallersteinian version of world-system analysis, calling for a rethinking of the meta-narrative about the genesis of capitalism in Europe in the sixteenth century. Frank (2000) in particular, in his research on the existence of a five-thousand-year-old world-system and its cycles, considered world-system theory too Eurocentric. The argument about whether there is empirical evidence of a clear break or transition in human history has more recently led to calls for a different kind of historical social science, such as that embraced in the newly created *Journal of Global History* (cf. Beaujard et al 2009).

But the theoretical disagreements between Marxism and Smithianism on the one hand and world-system analysis on the other, in terms of the transition debate, do not only revolve around differing temporal or geographical units of analysis. More fundamentally, the very definition of capitalism is itself substantially different. Whereas Orthodox Marxists consider the extraction of value based on wage labor in an industrial setting key to considering a particular nation-state as “capitalist,” Smithians forego the focus on production (Reinert 2007: 68–69) and advocate instead that the invisible hand of free markets constitutes the essence of a global capitalist economy (cf. Noble 2000: 17–100), leading both to believe that there are currently certain areas of the world that are not yet capitalist but which may become so if they experience a particular stage of development. Following from the insights of the French economic historian Fernand Braudel, however, world-system analysis considers capitalism as an “enemy of the market” (Wallerstein 2001: 202–17) in which oligopolies and monopolies are formed. For Braudel, the very “coexistence of the market economy with the older subsistence economy” (Burke 2003: 63) is crucial to understanding not only the reality of the structures of daily life on the ground but also “the wheels of commerce.” This, in turn, may ultimately provide an accurate “perspective of the world.” For world-system analysis, the capitalistic phenomena identified in sixteenth-century Europe were not only wage labor, the specialization of industries, an advanced division of labor, class struggles, profits from trade (derived from the fact that entrepreneurs who own the means of production are

involved in specialized production and competition), and complex financial techniques but also the systematic construction of an exploitable periphery to further the ceaseless accumulation of capital. This further implied that different zones of the world-economy, interlinked through trade, had divergent labor practices (such as slavery or serfdom) because of the inherent capitalist dynamics of the system itself. Therefore, the different life expectancies, labor practices, and political constellations could not be properly explained simply by looking at a particular nation-state at a specific moment in time, but at relational power structures over large parts of the world. These relational core-periphery dynamics that Western Europe enjoyed with the New World and to a certain degree also with Eastern Europe from the sixteenth century onward, were non-existent in other parts of the world and are therefore crucial to explaining the subsequent great divergences between various parts of the world that persist today (e.g., Pomeranz 2000: 268, 289). The way in which we envision, interpret and explain past, present, and future states of affairs is intrinsically interlinked, which means that the great transition debate will continue. It remains to be seen which school of thought will prevail in the twenty-first century.

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