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Janet Abu-Lughod’s cross-sectional study of the medieval Eurasian ecumene has already reaped high praise. In awarding the hardcover edition a citation for “Distinguished Scholarship,” the American Sociological Association compared it to the works of Fernand Braudel and world systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein. William McNeill has described it as “thoroughly admirable;” a reviewer in the *American Journal of Sociology* declared it to be “world history at its best.” The often acerbic historical sociologist Charles Tilly compares Abu-Lughod to a “perfect acrobat... [who] takes leaps with apparent ease, catches the impossibly distant ring, than swings gracefully before performing another astonishing maneuver,” and he anticipates that even readers “most resistant to Great Systems” will find themselves obliged to “stretch in new directions.” A principal originator of historically-oriented dependency theory, Andre Gunder Frank, credits her work with having “finally cut into the Gordian knot of supposed break in world history at 1500 A.D.” by “pushing the starting date for the world system back to 1250.”

Some of these encomiums may give some readers pause. After all, world systems theories and their frequent corollary, dependency theory, no longer enjoy the favor accorded them two decades ago. Yet most of these doubts are likely to dissipate with the opening pages of this book. Whatever preconceptions may have guided its inception, Abu-Lughod’s argument retains from its outset a firmly empirical foundation. Readers will not encounter in these pages the familiar schematic apparatus of world systems theory; there are here no obligatory derivations of core and periphery, no references to subalterns subordinated to hegemonic power. Discussion of the demonstrable impact of interdependent price movements substitutes for abstract exposition of the ineluctable imperatives of capitalism. In place of doctrinal cross-references Abu-Lughod employs navigational manuals, warehouse receipts, mortality figures, and notarized contracts to establish the scope and intensity of the interchanges she perceives as evidence of a Thirteenth Century “world system.” Her prose remains lucid and engaging throughout; and the notably clear and useful maps, each carefully tailored to the specific topic under consideration, are in themselves almost worth the price of the book.
Abu-Lughod displays admirable self-consciousness concerning the epistemological foundations of her enterprise. What we know about this period is, as she notes, at least as much a function of what was though worth recording, and on what it was recorded (clay tablets last much longer than palm fronds), as of what transpired. Because the Chinese and the Genoese were compulsive about notarizing documents and enumerating data pertaining to commerce, it is easy but misleading to conclude that they were more heavily involved in mercantile transactions than were the Mongols, who considered financial transactions less glorious than chronicles of conquest and dynastic succession, or the principalities along the Straits of Malacca, where the humidly tropical climate and the absence of permanent, solidly built cities both worked against the preservation of whatever was not literally carved in stone. Despite the relatively high literacy of the Islamic and Indic regions for the era, Islamic ulema and Hindu brahmin exhibited a common contempt for the kind of secular history economic historians find most rewarding, whereas for contemporary scholars the value of Marco Polo’s memoirs at once magnified and limited by his selective preoccupation with the prospects for trade in textiles, spices, and precious stones. Modern historians often have reason to suspect that even the most perceptive and trustworthy travelers from the medieval era were deliberately and successfully misled by informants who wished to conceal information of strategic or commercial value; ironically, fabulous tales of dog-faced people or humanoids without knees may offer a surer guide to the boundaries of first-hand experience and reliable information such chronicles contain. The author’s sustained commitment to scrutinizing her sources, counterbalanced by the imagination she displays in making fragmentary data yield patterns of striking significance, has made her study a model in both respects.

Such care is needed because her vision of a functioning medieval world system is bold indeed. In a forceful introductory chapter Abu-Lughod sets out to show that the two half centuries flanking the turn of the Fourteenth Century encompass one of the most remarkable eras in world history. “Never before,” she contends, “had so many regions of the Old World come in contact with one another.” In the evidence now available to historians she finds numerous indications that by the end of the Thirteenth Century the Eurasian landmass from the Flemish artisanal entrepots of Bruges and Ghent to the glittering imperial city of Hangzhou had become effectively tied together through commerce. Trade between northwestern Europe and the Mediterranean Basin had fully developed by this point. Several Mediterranean port cities in turn were active participants in overlapping trading circuits extending through overland caravan routes across Central Asia to China or, alternatively, by sea voyages down the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea to ports on either side of India’s Cape Comorin and from there to and through the Straits of Malacca to the China coast. The volume and frequency of these interchanges varied
considerably over time among these circuits. So did, almost certainly, the amplitude of their documentation. Nevertheless, surviving records reveal in the aggregate a level of international commercial activity during her titular century very much at odds with widespread impressions of a pervasively parochial medieval world.

The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries may, as she shows, be viewed as in many ways the culminating era for several coterminous though unconnected developments that occurred some centuries earlier at scattered points across the Eurasian landmass. These began in Europe with the revival of town life and commerce; in China, with the incorporation of the southern port cities into the imperial economy; in the intervening regions, with the submission of Central Asia to the common tenets of Islam. Through a combination of conquest and pacification, the dominant powers established zones of stability within and across which the discovery of mutual advantage soon let to expanding commercial interactions. Well before the Fourteenth century the polar termini and many intermediate substations of the continent had learned to specialize in producing highly valued commodities of small bulk. They had located foreign markets for these products and the best routes thereto, and they had evolved mechanisms for payment at a distance. Following theoretical lines marked out by Douglass North, Abu-Lughod spells out in detail how transport and —above all—transactions costs had been lowered to the point at which cities at the extreme edges of the participants’ known world could take part in a loose sequence of exchanges from which all eventually profited. Her object is to document the sense in which an apogee in such trends was reached during these years.

Coinciding with the above developments, yet surely also stimulated by them, was an efflorescence of cultural achievements in several of these regions. Cathedral building and the revival of secular scholarship in the last Thirteenth and early Fourteenth Centuries in northwest Europe was paralleled in Italy by an urban culture supportive of the painting of Giotto and the poetry of Dante, and in Cairo by the splendid mosques and town houses of the Mamluks. Baghdad, the center and primary font of medieval Islamic culture through much of the Abbasid Caliphate, was so no longer under the rule of its weakened successors; but sophisticated and prosperous trading cities were springing up along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and in South India temple building was reaching a climax it was never to repeat. Abu-Lughod expresses some doubts as to the level of civilization attained along the Straits of Malacca during this period but none at all regarding Hangzhou, as dazzling to the Venetian Polo family as to its Mongol conquerors. In each of these regions, wealth and artistry combined to provide a definitive statement of human creative potential.

The world system that reached a peak in 1250-1350 A.D. was not quite without historical precedent. Although, at the beginning of the Christian era,
northwestern Europe was still a barbarian frontier, the Roman Empire and the Han Empire of China was connected in a similar manner through a great “Silk Road” across Central Asia and by means of a series of Indian Ocean trading centers. The intermediate components of this system were much less well integrated in monetary, contractual, and technical terms, however; and the fate of the system as a whole depended much more critically upon the fortunes of its two imperial termini. In contrast, the core elements of the medieval system were not so much large territorial units as an “archipelago” of cities—Bruges, Troyes, Genoa, Venice, Cairo, Aleppo, Samarkand, Kashgar, Aden, Hormuz, Calicut and Quilon, Kanchipuram, Malacca, Palembang, and Canton—among which power was more evenly distributed. Not all the links within this archipelago remained equally active. Some were weakened through papal injunctions against trading with Muslims, others through the Egyptian Mamluks’ interest in restricting the profitable spice trade to their own merchants. Different familial branches of the Mongol Empire had differing views regarding the acceptability of Christian traders in their territory, and these views changed over time within the same region as a consequence both of religious conversion and of changing strategic calculations. Internal political developments within South India and Ming China affected the status of international traders in both territories, while the lack of clear locational advantage along the Straits of Malacca meant that the importance of any one port waxed and waned with the trade policies of its rulers as well as with the openness of China itself to direct trade with foreign merchants. Conversely, specific topographical constraints and the enduring patterns of monsoonal winds meant that certain trade routes enjoyed a natural comparative advantage over others when their use was not blocked or rendered prohibitively costly by those who exercised strategic control over them. What is striking about the network as a whole is that by the Fourteenth Century the interest in sustaining commerce among its major centers was so high that as one channel of trade was blocked off, another quickly developed to take its place. Thus the search for maintaining and strengthening valued transcontinental connections remained a constant of this period.

Confronted by the data Abu-Lughod has meticulously culled from partnership agreements, customs receipts, sailors’ manuals, and travellers’ journals, even initially skeptical readers are likely to be persuaded that contact and commerce among the port cities and caravansaries of the Old World was considerably greater than previous portraits of the Middle Ages have suggested. But in what sense was this interchange truly systemic? This question is, perhaps, as difficult to operationalize as to answer. Presumably, conceptualizing a set of social relationships as a system entails the postulate that its participants are linked in their decisions and actions to such a degree that their choices become fully comprehensible only when viewed within the context of their interdependence. Demonstrating self-consciousness concerning this interdependence is not a requisite (let along knowledge of the
specific identify of the other participants), but a systems theorist should at least be able to show that the determinants of individual choices are significantly affected with some regularity by the ramifications of other choices within the postulated system. The problem is, of course, that when mathematical values cannot reasonably be assigned to these terms they leave the analyst with great latitude in making the case for viewing relationships systemically. Given sufficient tolerance in this respect, one could probably trace out a filigree of causal relations linking decisions in Yakutsk to choices arrived at in Parana or Perth. The question remains of whether and under what circumstances it pays the analyst to do so.

Regarding the question of systemic relations in Eurasia, Abu-Lughod is less conceptually explicit and less persuasive empirically than at other stages in her argument. To what extent does evidence of contact per se, or of diffusion of the consequences of such contacts, count toward the case for viewing medieval economic activity on the Eurasian continent as systemically interrelated? If a single “world system” did operate, how far beyond the port cities did it extend before its effects became swallowed up by local determinants of economic choice? She clearly means to assert more than that the Venetians developed a taste for noodles and for humpbacked bridges in the years following the Polos’ visit to Suzhou. She cites the swift spread of the bubonic plague along the transcontinental trade routes as evidence of the close-knit contact among long-distance traders by the middle of the Fourteenth Century; but while William McNeill has made a strong case for viewing infectious diseases systemically, the single chance contact among disease-carrying vectors sufficient to spread many epidemics do not in themselves disprove the essential isolation of many communities for other analytic purposes. In an intriguing comparison of the Thirteenth Century world system with its Roman-Han predecessor, she attributes the greater resilience of the medieval system in part to the greater self-sufficiency of its intermediate components, thereby opening up but not resolving the issue of how to define the line between quasi-autarky and well-articulated system-subsystem integration.

Her most interesting arguments, clearly crucial to her central thesis, are directed to showing that the rise and decline of the major entrepots within the Eurasian world system owed more to shifting terms of external trade than to internal strengths and failures. Thus she argues that neither local business acumen or altered political commitments could have saved the flourishing Twelfth Century fairs of the Champagne from the consequences of improved Genoese ocean-sailing capabilities in the Thirteenth. Likewise, she is at pains to establish that the fate of the port cities on India’s Malabar Coast was closely tied to that of its Middle East trading partners and that the fortunes of Malacca varied directly with the power projections and the policies of the Chinese and Portuguese. But the analysis in all three cases focuses most convincingly on the Mediterranean-North Sea, Arabian Sea, and Southeast
Asian sub-systems, leaving open the question of the magnitude of the effects across subsystemic boundaries; and in any case the evident vulnerability of intermediate trading points render them peculiarly favorable to hypotheses stressing external over internal causal factors. The harder case is to show that her general thesis applies equally well to South India and Ming China and that it can override other efforts to explain why these regions fell notably behind Europe in their power capabilities after 1500.

It is clear in any case that within this network some trading relationships were more intensively cultivated than others. Abu-Lughod joins an increasingly crowded company of historians in arguing that Eurocentric perspectives on history have obscured the extent to which throughout this period western Europe appears as something of a sideshow to the multi-ringed circus of the medieval world system. Cairo, the Persian Gulf, and Tamil India were by no means mere way stations between Europe and China, she contends; indeed, in terms of economic productivity, urban culture, and navigational achievements they were in many respects more advanced at this time than the European powers. Many supposed indicators of the distinctively dynamic qualities of Western Civilization appear so only through ignorance compounded by misinterpretation of what they indicate: thus recent historical investigation has established that medieval Arab navigators knew their way around the African continent long before Vasco de Gama made his celebrated voyage around the Cape of Good Hope but saw no commercial or military advantage to the more circuitous route between India and the North African littoral when they controlled the shorter one. She is especially critical of the prevailing tendency among Western scholars to search for unique characteristics of European capitalism responsible for the breakthrough to the Industrial Revolution. Her comparative research revealed “enormous similarities and parallels” among Asian, Arab and Western forms of capitalism during this period, she writes, and where differences existed, these reflected respects in which the West lagged behind the East. In a condensed inventory of the similarities, she stresses that credit transactions were highly developed in the Middle East and China long before they were first found necessary for business transactions at West European fairs, that Italian merchants learned most of their techniques for pooling capital and spreading risk from their Muslim counterparts, and that state management of unambiguously fictive currency was established in Tang China several centuries before Europeans discovered that money need not have any commodity value. As for the allegedly critical role of a semi-autonomous merchant class in Europe, she argues that mercantile wealth, independent of the state, was an important factor in all Asian economies. Important it may have been; but here more than elsewhere Abu-Lughod appears to be glossing over matters of degree with profoundly important consequences for the state-society balance and subsequent political histories of the European and non-European...
regions.

These disparate themes are brought together in a provocative concluding chapter in which she asserts that attempts to account for the “Rise of the West” are fundamentally misplaced. What needs to be noted, she argues, is that this much-studied development was preceded by the “Fall of the East.”

Given the flourishing world system of 1250-1350 A.D. that she depicts, the deteriorating power capabilities of Eastern societies thereafter quite logically seems to her to present a more challenging and historically crucial puzzle than the continued upward trajectory of the West, and one more in need of explanation. It must be said that Before European Hegemony does not convincingly provide that explanation. Drawing on the research of the China scholar Jung-Pang Lo, Abu-Lughod finds neither mystery nor evidence of fatal internal flaws in the Chinese imperial system in the sudden cessation of the Great Voyages of the Admiral Cheng Ho during the early decades of the Ming Dynasty; their termination was straightforwardly due to the “not so mysterious collapse of [the Chinese trading economy] in the mid-fifteenth century” that force the Ming emperors to scuttle their navy. In documenting the economic consequences of the Black Death and the collapse of the Mongol Empires trade routes, she makes a persuasive case for favoring economic calculations over palace politics in explaining the termination of expensive and showily symbolic voyages of no clear economic or military benefit, but not for why these considerations should prevail over the next several centuries in maintaining China’s isolation from a changing world order. It is true that in this case she states that “[As] was true of other regions of the [Thirteenth Century] world system, the economic health of China rested primarily on her own ontogenic developments in political organization, technological inventiveness and skill, and commercial sophistication—that is, her ability to harness her local resources.” But that “truth” was by no means made evident in much of her preceding analysis—indeed, in “other regions” she explicitly contested it—and it is unclear both how unconditional a concession she intends and where it leads in terms of appropriate analytic focus. Similar points might be made regarding the intrusion of inland military disruption of the Tamil sea trade and the disintegration of Mamluk power. Conversely, she takes note in a single sentence of the near total indifference of Islamdom to the social and technological culture of Christendom, and then only to emphasize that medieval Western Europe appeared to offer very little to the sophisticated urban cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean. That may well have been true during her titular century; but, as Bernard Lewis has shown in The Muslim Discovery of Europe, the institutionalization of that contemptuous lack of curiosity was to prove costly to Islam in the years to come.

Abu-Lughod’s book ends with a stimulating discussion of the principles on which world systems have been organized. As she shows, the ones that have received the most attention—those that portray a northwest European core hegemon
hierarchically superior to various peripheral and semi-peripheral regions—constitute only one possible pattern, and not the one depicted in her study. She further considers the analytic sense in which such systems can be said to have “broken down,” and she argues instead for viewing such breakdowns as a form of restructuring. It is one of the many pleasant surprises of this meticulously and graphically empirical work that some of its finest pages should be devoted to elegantly concise and pointed conceptualization. In hailing it as a “first-class contribution that will become a major reference point in future scholarships” the American Journal of Sociology but gave it its due.

George Von der Muhl

A MATERIALIST, WORLD-SYSTEMS TEXT


When the first edition came along a few years ago, I took this to be a clone of Gerhard Lenski’s book. In fact both books have the same words in the titles, except that for Sanderson Macrosociology replaces Human Societies as the lead concept. Well, I had tried Lenski for introductory sociology, but there wasn’t time to use it in a quarter system, and in Social Change, where it was okay, but other combinations were more interesting.

So I probably would have given away Sanderson’s second edition except by the time it arrived I had realized he was a member of the ISCS, and I was looking for reading material for an amorphous course I hadn’t taught in years: social organization.

It was then I realized that Sanderson was not a clone of Lenski. His perspective was very different, more concerned with social organization than social change, and decidedly materialist and world systems oriented in interpretation. The length was right for an upper level sociology course, the writing was interesting, especially because Sanderson doesn’t hesitate to take a stand, and I felt that as instructor I could blunt the impact of what I perceived to be excesses of materialism and world systems perspective.

The coverage is excellent if you want to get beyond an American contemporary perspective. He includes culture, evolution, preindustrial and industrial modes, stratification, economic systems, political evolution, the state, race and ethnicity, gender inequality, family and kinship, educational systems, religious systems and