Hold the Tiller Firm: On Method and the Unit of Analysis

Immanuel Wallerstein

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol30/iss30/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
HOLD THE TILLER FIRM: ON METHOD AND THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

Immanuel Wallerstein

Historical/social analysis is like sailing a boat in rough waters. The dangers come from all sides. It requires not merely good judgment, but the ability and the will to hold the tiller firm. When I first started writing The Modern World-System in 1970, I thought the issue was primarily substantive, that is, that I was entering into a debate about what is the most useful interpretation of what happened historically. World-systems analysis was for me a set of protests against prevailing modes of interpretation, at first primarily against modernization theory (see Wallerstein, 1979). But I soon came to see that, in order to arrive at a useful interpretation of what happened historically, one had to dispose of a useful method. And that has turned out to be not merely an even more controversial matter than the question of the substantive interpretation of historical reality, but a more slippery one as well.

In my venture into worrying about method, I decided that one key issue was the “unit of analysis,” which is why one speaks of “world-systems analysis.” The assumption is that the appropriate unit of analysis is a world-system, by which I at least originally meant something other than the modern nation-state, something larger than this nation-state, and something that was defined by the boundaries of an effective, ongoing division of labor. Hence I started with spatial or geographic concerns. The basic metaphor of core/periphery is in origin and etymology a spatial metaphor.

But as I proceeded, it seemed to me that space could never be separated analytically from time, and that the unit of which we were talking was therefore one kind of TimeSpace (see Wallerstein, 1991), specifically that which I denoted as structural TimeSpace. To give it a language of easy reference, I thought of structural TimeSpace as divided into “historical systems.” I liked the term because it caught what I thought of as the essential tension of structural TimeSpace, that it is a system (meaning it has continuing rules of relation/process, and therefore contains cyclical rhythms) but that it is also historical (meaning that it is different at every moment, and therefore contains secular trends). By combining in one concept both cyclical rhythms and secular trends, I was clearly using an organic analogy. An historical system has a life: it is born or generated, it lives or proceeds, it dies or disintegrates. Each of these three moments of the organism can be analyzed.
and located in TimeSpace.

From its institutional outset, what came to be called in the nineteenth century the "social sciences" was beset by a Methodenstreit. The classical formulation of this methodological debate was posed in terms of two alternative epistemologies. On the one hand, there were those who believed that the object of research was the discerning of general laws of human behavior, true of all time and space. Their avowed model was to imitate the methods of classical physics to the degree possible and thereby replicate its scientific (and social) success. Windelband called this the nomothetic method, and its proponents became dominant in the emerging university "disciplines" of economics, sociology, and political science. On the other hand, there were those who believed that the search for general laws was not merely futile but dangerous, in that it pushed scholars away from what this group saw as their primary task: ascertaining empirical reality, which was always particular, indeed idiosyncratic. What really happened, in the famous phrase of Ranke, could indeed be discerned and, once discerned, empathetically reconstructed. This was called the idiographic method, and its proponents became dominant in history and for the most part in anthropology.

This difference between nomothetic and idiographic, between synchronic and diachronic, between objective and subjective, between structure and agency, has been renewed and rediscussed under many labels and in many avatars. While the organizational linkages of epistemology and specific disciplines largely reflected university realities between say 1880 and 1945, it has tended to break down since then, particularly since the 1970s. That is to say, the debate is still there, but the persons on each side are not so easily recognizable by the name of the university department in which they teach.

Of course, this debate was seldom crude. From its subtleties emerged not two but a thousand positions. Nonetheless, the cleavage was profound. Furthermore, there were always schools of thought which specifically refused the terms of the debate, and suggested either that the dilemma was false, or that the correct position was an intermediate one or one proceeding from an Aufhebung. This group was always a numerical minority, if a vocal one. I count myself among them, and I have called this conducting a "war on two fronts" (Wallerstein, 1980).

In the period since 1945, there have been a growing number of scholars who became unhappy with Establishment social science (including of course history) on the grounds that its methodological imperatives (whether they were nomothetists or idiographers) had pushed them de facto into the study of the infinitely small in time and space, and that thereby the problems, the realities of large-scale, long-term social change had become eliminated from
the purview of scholarship. There was a call for intellectual renewal, and for new (actually revived) foci of analysis. This call had many names: dependency theory, civilizational analysis, world history, world-systems analysis, historical sociology, long-run economics, international political economy, and still others. The list is long. Let me call this the family of dissidents, in the sense that they all were dissenting from the views that had dominated, still largely dominate, the universities.

The seas are rough in two senses. Historical/social reality is enormously complex. Indeed, it represents the most complex of all realities. And we know so little still. But the seas are rough in another sense. The study of historical/social reality is a highly sensitive subject, which has immense consequences for the existing structures of power in our existing world-system. Hence, the analyses are closely surveyed, pressured, and kept in check. The Establishment views are not only wrong; they are powerfully protected by extra-intellectual means. If we are to proceed in such rough seas, we must hold the tiller firm, and in particular we must not fall prey to the temptations of the world, which are primarily three: to become nomothetic, to become idiographic, to reify. I see very many persons in the family of dissidents paying, in my view, insufficient attention to these dangers. I shall discuss each in turn.

THE NOMOTHETIC TEMPTATION

Since all explanation is ultimately in terms of a covering law, however implicit and even if specifically denied, it is tempting to wish to make the covering laws we use as general and as simple as possible. But, of course, there is a price to be paid for generalizing our laws. The more general, the more different things they explain, but the fewer aspects they explain about each thing. It depends on what we want to have explained. For most things, if we use too general a law, the explanation is vacuous, and if we use too narrow a generalization, the explanation is specious. So there is a pragmatic judgment to be made, in terms of payoff. We need to do constant, if not always explicit, cost-benefit analyses.

In world-systems analysis, Christopher Chase-Dunn and others have put to themselves a very simple, obvious proposition. If our unit of analysis is a world-system, and if there are several kinds of world-systems (not an enormous number, but more than one), would it not be useful to compare the three or four or five kinds of world-systems with each other, to discern their similarities and differences, and therefore to arrive at more general explanations of the functioning of world-systems? This is a nomothetic temptation. Chase-Dunn has put his case this way:

The world-systems perspective has expanded the temporal and
spatial scope of theorizing about social change. Our understanding of modernity has been radically transformed by the study of the Europe-centered world-system over the past 500 years. But the analysis of a single system encounters methodological and theoretical limitations. If we would fathom fundamental change we need to comprehend the causes of those structural constants which are usually taken for granted in the modern world-system. These structural “constants” exhibit variation when we broaden the scope of comparison to include very different kinds of world-systems. Are interstate systems of core/periphery hierarchies inevitable features of all organizational wholes? Do all world-systems share a similar underlying developmental logic, or do systemic logics undergo fundamental transformations? These questions can only be scientifically addressed by a comparative perspective which employs the corpus of evidence produced by historians, ethnographers, and archaeologists regarding human activities over very long periods of time much longer than the five hundred year span of the modern world-system (Chase-Dunn, 1992:313).

Hence, Chase-Dunn is ready to compare the “world-system” of Cahokia within the middle Mississippian tradition with Mesopotamia and with the modern capitalist world-system. To do this, he adds that “concepts developed for the analysis of the modern system be applied with care; some of them need to be redefined in order to avoid projecting contemporary reality on the past.”

This may work, but I remain skeptical. One of the major reasons I remain skeptical is that I wonder if one can take a set of concepts developed for the analysis of one historical system, consider the concepts one by one, redefine each in some more general form (of which consequently the form in the modern world-system becomes but one variant), and then recombine them for the analysis of Cahokia or Mesopotamia. This presumes a certain independence of the concepts from each other which, it seems to me, is doubtful. To be specific, the concept “core/periphery” is not analytically dissociable from the concept “class conflict” or the concept “interstate system” or the concept “endless accumulation of capital.” That is to say, the set of concepts developed for a fruitful analysis of the modern world-system is a set. Dissociated, redefined (in the sense of giving different values to each), and reassembled, they may have the coherence of an awkwardly patched pottery bowl.

There are no doubt similarities one can find between Cahokia, as an example of a stateless, classless (?) structure; Mesopotamia, as an example of a world-empire (if that is what it was); and the modern world-system, as an example of a capitalist world-economy. But are these similarities and
therefore the differences analytically interesting for problems we wish to solve? There might be some, but looking at these problems does not seem to be the line the “comparative study of world-systems” has been following. The work up to now has emphasized the comparison of the rules governing the system, which I would call looking at the ongoing lives of the systems. Here, I think we are comparing apples and oranges, and I don’t think we’ll get much further than saying they’re both fruit and not vegetables.

What might possibly be a fruitful line of enquiry is to compare both the geneses and the terminal crises of systems, to see if there are any patterns, which could then (a) give us some insight into “world history,” if by that we mean the synchronic unfolding of human social existence, and (b) illuminate how system bifurcations (vide Prigogine) work in historical systems, which in turn might help us with (c) the practical question of how best to navigate the current bifurcation (or systemic demise, or transformation from one historical system to one or more other such systems).

I have said that where we draw the line in our work in this nomothetic/idiographic divide (or intrinsic tension) is a pragmatic matter, and I have suggested reasons to believe that the “comparative study of world-systems” is not where I would place my bets in terms of useful interpretations. But of course I may be wrong. I would feel more comfortable about this line of work if its practitioners were more cautious about the nomothetic temptation.

THE IDIOGRAPHIC TEMPTATION

In the same article cited above, Chase-Dunn criticizes two extremes on a continuum, what he calls the “lumpers” and the “splitters.” “The extreme lumpers are those who see only one global system far back in time. . . . Extreme splitters are those who focus only on local processes to the exclusion of more distant connections” (1992:317). He comes out sensibly for an in-between position. But the way he puts it, the story is not quite clear. One of his extremes is temporal (too much time), and the other is spatial (too local). Of course, both are in reality spatio-temporal. Most important of all, the two “extremes” are in fact only one: they are both forms of the idiographic temptation. To say that everything is one single thing, or to say that every “unit” is local, that is, different from all the other units, are both ways to avoid structural explanation. In one case, there can be no variation and therefore no alternative structures; in the other, there is nothing but variation, and no two things can be lumped together as structures.

We readily recognize in localism a familiar particularizing face, the standard undergirding of idiographic analysis. Presumably, the dissidents of whom I spoke above have all been allergic to such self-defeating localism.
But one big single story is just another form of the idiographic temptation, and this is the route Andre Gunder Frank has chosen to take in his recent writings about "world system history":

I now also stress and examine "systemic connections in a single historical process" extending back much earlier than 1500. I now examine these systemic connections in a single historical process over a much wider social and geographical range, including at least the entire Afro-Eurasian ecumene, of which Europe and its world is only a part. Thus the historical and socio-geographical scope of this process is no longer seen as beginning and centered in Europe, which, on the contrary, joined it rather late. I will also question the supposed historical uniqueness and perhaps the social-theoretical relevance of the modern capitalist mode of production (Frank, 1990:164).

This is not the place to review Frank’s version of the evolution of world history. Here we are only raising methodological doubts. Everything that can be denoted as a system can be shown to be "open" at some points of its perimeter. One can always take this opening and insist that the presumed system is really part of some larger system. It will not take long to arrive at the largest of all possible systems, the universe from the beginning of its existence to now. Whether even this supersystem is open is itself a matter of philosophical and scientific debate. And in this sense everything is determined by the big bang, if there was a big bang. But while it is salutary to remember this, it is not very useful to build our analysis on this quicksand, which will very rapidly engulf us. Once again, the question is pragmatic.

Frank says the story does not start in AD 1500, but rather in 3000 BC (or so). Perhaps, but by what logic do we stop at 3000 BC? Why not 10,000 BC? Why not go back to Australopithecus, or to prehominids? Once again, it depends on what question we want to answer. And that depends on your chronosophy (Pomian, 1979). If you think the history of the world has been a linear upward curve, then it is very important to pursue Frank’s line of argument. It is explicitly aimed at undermining a Eurocentric reading of world progress. Basically, it says that the Europeans, whether circa 1800 or circa 1500, did nothing special. They were a part, a "rather late" part of the story of humanity’s achievements. This is the salutary message Frank bears. And I sympathize with it, except that I do not think that the history of the world has been a linear upward curve. I think, to put it crudely, that the curve essentially went up with the so-called agricultural revolution (despite its social negatives), then essentially went down with the arrival of a capitalist world-system (despite some pluses which have been much exaggerated), and may go up again (but then again may not) with the future demise of the world capitalist system. If this chronosophy is adopted, then it positively impedes clarity of vision to efface the 1500 line. Rather we must exert much more
energy than we have up to now on the question of genesis — what it was about the situation of the Europeans that accounts for their taking this major, backward step (see Wallerstein, 1992). And we need to spend much time as well on the question of bifurcation, demise and/or transition, which may require a comparative look (along the lines I suggested in my discussion of Chase-Dunn).

It is always easy, as I said, to find generalizations that are plausible (if often not very interesting). It is always possible to insist that every particular situation is different from every other in some way, and that therefore all the generalizations are false. And it is always easy to prove continuity of a single reality, in that there are always some things which do not seem to have changed. In any case, there are no caesuras in history that are vacuums, or unbridgeable chasms. The world goes on, microsecond by microsecond. The hard thing is to find the appropriate balance, and to be certain that it is the most relevant balance for the question you wish to answer.

THE TEMPTATION TO REIFY

Analysts do not manipulate data, though many of them like to think that is what they are doing. Rather, analysts manipulate concepts. Concepts become our friends, even our children. They take on a certain life of their own, and it is tempting to stretch their usage beyond the purpose for which they were created. This is what reification is about. In the context of the study of long-term, large-scale social change, one of the concepts most frequently and lovingly employed is that of civilization. Indeed, most of us have a fairly standard list in mind when we use the word: the West (or Christianity), perhaps Russia (or maybe the whole Orthodox world), Islam (or the Arabo-Islamic world), Persia, India, China, perhaps Japan and Korea separate from the Sinic world, and then the ones no longer surviving: Byzantium, Mesopotamia, the Incas, Pharaonic Egypt, classical Antiquity (or are Rome and Greece separate?), and so forth. Are there African civilizations, or one African civilization? The list is of course open to amendment, but that is beside the point. It is a somewhat limited list, usually 20 or 30 examples at most.

What is a “civilization?” It is hard to say because different analysts use different criteria. For most analysts, it usually involves a linguistic element, a religious (or cosmological) element, a distinctive pattern of “everyday life,” a spatial locus (however blurred or shifting) and therefore perhaps an ecological element, and perhaps least convincingly continuous ethnicity and some genetic coherence. This list too could go on. If one looks at the names listed above, the one that appears to have the longest continuous history is, by common accord, China. We talk of a Chinese civilization that presumably
goes back to the earliest dynasty and continues to today. What continuity does this imply? We can of course find continuities — not perhaps the same exact language, but mostly (sic!) related ones; not the same religion(s), but some links between older forms and later ones; not the same patterns of everyday life, but some long-lasting peculiarities; more or less the same geography, provided one is not too fussy about the breadth of the boundaries; a limited case for ethnic and genetic descendence.

As with the case for a single world history, one can make a case for a single Chinese history at about the same level of plausibility, or perhaps at a stronger level. And certainly we can make the case that many/most Chinese today (Chinese thinkers, Chinese politicians) believe in this continuity and act in function of this belief. Suppose, however, that someone were to postulate that China since 1945 or since 1850 is closer overall on a multitude of measures of social relations to Brazil since 1945/1850 than it is to the “China” of the Han dynasty. We could not reject the case out of hand.

Of course, one can avoid the decision by a common sense dismissal of the issue — in some ways the one, in some ways the other. The question doesn’t thereby disappear. For many purposes, we have to decide whether it is more profitable to consider contemporary China and Brazil as two instances of the same phenomenon (say, very large underdeveloped nations within the modern world-system or the capitalist world-economy) or to consider the China of today and Han China as two instances of Chinese civilization, comparing it then (I suppose) with the Brazil of today descended from an uncertain something else of 1500 years ago as two instances of I’m not sure what (perhaps Christian civilization).

Would it not be more useful if we didn’t reify civilizations? One way to think about China is to think of it as a name linked to a geographical location in which there existed successive historical systems, which had a few features in common, and each of which sustained (for a good deal of the time) myths concerning civilizational continuity. In that case, instead of China, the civilization, we are perhaps talking empirically of five, six, or seven different historical systems (each of which could be grist for the eventual fourfold tables that will derive from the nomothetic temptation). At least, I wouldn’t like to close off this way of viewing “Chinese history” by a too rapid embrace of “civilizational analysis.” (Of course, one can see why there would be social pressure against adopting such a perspective on “China” or “the West” or most of the names we use for “civilizations.”) China is no doubt the strongest case for a civilizationalist thesis. It becomes harder to demonstrate inherent cultural continuities everywhere else. To be sure, if we narrow our analysis to the scale and scope of a single historical system, then a “geoculture” is part of its “systemness.”

I have discussed the civilizational hypothesis under the heading of the
temptation to reify. It is of course most frequently a variant of the idiographic temptation but occasionally a variant of the nomothetic temptation. But reification as such is a recurring problem because we deal in concepts, and concepts are inherently ambiguous tools. Civilization is by no means the only concept we reify, but for the purposes of the analysis of long-term, large-scale social change, it is the exemplary one.

CONCLUSION

What is there to conclude? I suppose that the scholar should be intellectually monastic, and resist temptations. But product that I am of "American civilization," I urge that the resistance be modulated by pragmatism. I see no other way. The issues are too important that they not be faced, and they are too urgent to be closed off to analysis by failing to fight the war on two — indeed on all — fronts at the same time. Above all, I urge prudence in any haste to shout Eureka!

Binghamton University and Maison des Sciences de l'Homme

REFERENCES