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Pre vs. Post 1500ers

Albert Bergesen

The world-system school has its first major theoretical schism: the Pre-versus the Post-1500ers. Post’s, like Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin, see the logic of the world-system as that of capitalism, which they believe began in the 16th century, although Amin allows some protocapitalist development in earlier centuries. The Pre’s trace earlier origins. Stepping back a few centuries is Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), who pushes the starting date to the 13th century and adds the most provocative idea of recent years: Europe emerged by virtue of the decline of the East rather than the rise of the West. It’s a thought as pregnant with theoretical implication as A.G. Frank’s (1969) now classic “development of underdevelopment” phrase, which captured the process whereby the development of one sector of the world (the North) retarded the development of another (the South). Others push further back. Gills and Frank (1991) trace the history of the modern world-system back 5,000 years, arguing that there has been a common set of geopolitical economic dynamics over this period: one world-system, with one logic, over the past 5,000 years. Finally, Chase-Dunn and Hall (1991) trace origins all the way back to hunter-gatherer intersocietal networks.

How are we to account for this difference in world-system starting dates? Let me suggest that this search for ever earlier origins of the modern world-system is part of a more general rethinking of what constitutes the basic framework of human collective existence. As the 20th century draws to a close it is clear that the great 19th-century paradigms of sociology and Marxism seem to have lost their grip on our imagination. Is it social logics that determine our life chances, or is it the dynamics of the international system? Or is it both, and if so, how much of each? Simple social determinism — our 19th-century heritage — is now in profound doubt. Also, social science believes less in the power of social structural dynamics and more in the power of culture, ideology, and discourse. The so-called literary turn toward models of explanation rooted in questions of interpretation, hermeneutics, and meaning represents a clear preference for determination by consciousness and culture rather than by formal social structure. If this preference has its origins on the European Continent (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Kristeva) there is an Anglo-American turn from social-structure-as-explanation seen in the growing interest in the pre-sociological models of utilitarian thought reborn as rational choice theory. Whether the turn is to the vagaries of culture or to the individualism of rational choice, the social, as in class, economy
and social structure, is in low regard as the 20th century draws to a close.

With ideas about society and societal dynamics faltering, a window of conceptual opportunity has opened to retheorize the basic unit of human association at which the most primal and determinative social processes are thought to exist. For 19th-century sociology and Marxism this has been at the national or societal level. But this is changing. With faith in the societal level of explanation weakening, new theoretical contenders have arisen to challenge for the allegiance of social thought. Let me add that there is also a strong strain of nihilism contending too, in postmodernist arguments against anything closed or fixed, whether the structure of language or of society. The postmodernist position is for a world of play, irony, unsutured formations, and life as infinitely regressing signifiers (Bergesen, 1992, in press a,b).

Our theoretical paradigms (Marxism, sociology, neoclassical economics, modernization theory) constitute the intellectual bailing wire that binds historic time and space together to produce believable units for analysis and objects for purposeful transformation. We cannot separate belief in the existence of societies, economies, and institutions from the theories of their existence and operative logic. For a hundred years now we have focused on the social formation, class relations, mode of production, and the "social" as the appropriate unit of study. The social has been our context where structures of hierarchy and oppression exist that require transformation for the project of human emancipation. The social, therefore, was as much a part of our secular religious life — the object of everything from revolutionary struggle to liberal politics to conservative institutional preservation — as our practical social science. All that is changing as various models of world dynamics vie to replace the societal as the primary unit of explanation. Through this window of opportunity stepped Wallerstein (1974) with his conception of the modern world-system. He tried to re-bind the unraveling sense of collective existence at a new level, that of the world as a whole starting in the 16th century. In the now classic phrasing, there is no longer a first, second, and third world, but only one world with a top (core, North, developed regions) and a bottom (periphery, South, underdeveloped regions).

There were initial intellectual successes: modernization theory as an explanation of why countries develop was thoroughly discredited, and a line of empirical research articles began in the 1970s to link a region’s economic dependence to slower rates of growth and greater income inequality (Chase-Dunn, 1977). This, though, turned out to be the only major victory for Post-1500 theory, which has had little or no intellectual impact upon other issues in advanced capitalist countries. Questions concerning post-industrial society and the legitimation crisis of advanced capitalism and explanations...
for the new social movements of women, race, ethnicity, gender and environmentalism, were largely untouched by the central propositions of world-system theory.

In time the question arose as to why the modern world-system should have begun in the 16th century? Wasn’t that somewhat arbitrary? Some thought so, and the unraveling of historical structures to be reabsorbed into a now pre-1500 world-system began. How far back did this systemic interconnectedness of human life go? Wallerstein had said back to the 16th century, Abu-Luhgod back to the 13th century, Wilkinson and Gills and Frank back to 3000 BC, and Chase-Dunn and Hall all the way back to intersocietal networks between hunter-gatherers. By the late 20th century it was safe to say that the theory of collective life was a wide open issue, from the postmodern nihilists arguing that no order exists to those who see a continuous world-system going back to the origins of social life itself.

As it now stands, all the world-system positions contend for a following and they argue back and forth as to who is right. Does the economic logic of something like capitalism only begin in the 16th century (Wallerstein) or can it be found in ancient civilizations too (Gills and Frank)? Is there one common socioeconomic logic throughout the entire history of the world (Gills and Frank) or has that history passed through a number of world-system types, defined by different modes of production (Chase-Dunn and Hall)?

How are we to decide among these positions? Which is right, which wrong? Since much of this is about history that has already happened, interpretation will probably always be contentious. But let me suggest a criterion for evaluating the strength of these schemes: their answer to the question, Have they produced any new theory or principles of explanation other than what we already have? The Posts clearest success has been dependency theory’s explaining underdevelopment better than modernization theory.

What about the Pres? It would seem that the long-term interconnectedness of human life has been sufficiently systemic to warrant the designation “central civilization” (Wilkinson), “world history” (Gills and Frank), or “intersocietal networks” (Chase-Dunn and Hall). But that has not been enough to supplant the Post-1500 argument, or to make a significant dent on present social science models. This is not because human history isn’t some sort of continuous web — it no doubt is — or because this web didn’t become world wide — it did — but such a long-term perspective has yet to give rise to any new principles, laws, or models that seriously alter what we already have. This is important. The conceptual opening to consider larger units was created by paradigm crisis, and it will only close around a
Pre or Post world-system scheme that manages to produce a new world framework that absorbs and thereby replaces the social logic of today. The move from sociology to something that could be called globology, then, will occur only when world-system thinkers produce some distinctly world models and not just stretch or aggregate today’s societal logics. From this point of view, perhaps the basic flaw in world-system theory is to have conceived of the world as only the sum of so many societies, rather than being a corporate collective entity with a life of its own independent of that of its societal subdivisions.

For example, Chase-Dunn and Hall (1991) argue that different types of world-systems are defined by different modes of production. The problem here is that what they call “world-system types” turns out to be nothing more than the old Marxian and social evolutionary stages of societal, not world, development. Their world-system “theory” is really not a new theory about global dynamics but a batch of societal theories aggregated to a global level. Take their very definition of a world-system: “Intersocietal networks in which the interaction (trade, warfare, intermarriages, etc.) is an important condition of the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affects changes which occur in these local structures” (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991:7). In this logic, societies and their modes come first and then interact and form networks, much as international relations theorists have states coming together to form international regimes (Bergesen, 1990). You can ask, What is wrong with such an idea? How else would a world-system exist if it were not because of the interaction of different societies? That is a good question for which there is no answer, except the conceptual leap that is the paradigm revolution of considering the world-system as the primary unit and societies within as subdivisions. It’s a very basic change in thinking: it is not societies that form the world-system, but the world-system that forms societies. For instance, we don’t argue that economic, religious, educational, and political institutions come together to form a society. They are subdivisions of society. They don’t exist on their own independent of each other, and the same logic holds for the global system. Societies do not align in a rational choice fashion to form a world-system. Societies are but the cellular infrastructure of an already existing world-system.

What I am suggesting here is to repeat the theoretical leap that occurred a hundred years ago with the advent of sociology. Today’s rational choice theorists, like their 19th-century utilitarian brethren, still argue against this logic. They argue, first individuals, then their interaction, and then out of that come social institutions and society. But sociology inverted that logic, and this is what is needed today, except instead of individuals being the parts
and society the whole, societies should now be the parts and the world-system the whole. This is a conceptual shift in explanatory logic that is revolutionary in nature, for all that is social is now derivative from all that is global.

Chase-Dunn and Hall, though, still operate with a sort of global utilitarianism, where instead of individuals and their wants and needs coming first we have societies and their modes of production coming first, and then their trade and exchange comes second, with the institutionalization of these relations constituting the network component of their definition of a world-system as nothing but an “intersocietal network.” But if the world-system were the basic unit, then there wouldn’t be any network relations, except between different world-systems. The missing assumption in contemporary world-system thinking is that the world collectivity has an existence of its own, independent of its societal parts.

In sociology it is the social formation, not the individual, that has a mode of production; it is the social formation, not the individual, that has class relations; it is the social formation, not the individual, that is hierarchically structured; it is the social formation, not the individual, that has feudalism, capitalism, and slavery as systems of production. What then are the analogous modes, classes, relations and hierarchies that are unique to the world formation and that do not belong to each individual social formation? Some would say the core-periphery division of labor. But that is not a structural relation; it is not a question of ownership or control of the world means of production, but of the exchange of commodities produced by societal modes of production. If there are 150 or so national economies in today’s world, are there 150 modes of production? And if there is one world-economy why isn’t there one world mode of production? I see no reason. But, world-system theory as presently conceived doesn’t think this way; instead it argues that there are multiple modes of production within a singular world economy, or if a mode is identified, it is in fact social, not global.

Wallerstein, for example, argues that the world-system is characterized by the capitalist mode of production, and yet he identifies no ownership of the world means of production and speaks of no world classes. He speaks only of unequal exchange and commodity chains. What he really means is that the capitalism of national formations produces commodities that are then exchanged globally, and that unequal exchange is what he calls capitalism. This is fine — a neo-classical economic definition of capitalism as Brenner (1977) noted — but it involves no theory of capitalism as a world formation with world relations of production and world classes. It is simply linked societal modes of production (Wallerstein calls them commodity
chains). This analysis will not move us from sociology to globology until theories of production within societies are replaced by a theory of production on a world scale, until societal modes are replaced by global modes, and until social class relations are replaced by something like world class relations.

World-system theory’s failure, then, is that the analytical notion of a mode of production is frozen with relations between social classes, such that it cannot be used to conceptualize production processes on a distinctly world level of analysis. Capitalism is defined by relations between wage earners and owners of capital. On a world scale the rich countries do not have a wage relation with the poor countries. Classes, not whole regions of the world, have wage relations. They are related in a different way, through a different logic. Discovering that logic, figuring out how it is that the relationship between core and periphery generates the periphery’s underdevelopment should be the task of world-system theorists; the task should not be stretching the old paradigms of social process to fit over the global formation.

World-system theorists, whether they consider their system from the 16th century or the past 5,000 years, have not devised such global theories but have stretched and pulled societal models to make them seem worldwide in scope. Wallerstein takes the idea of a capitalist mode of production and just asserts that it exists worldwide without providing any evidence of what would constitute worldwide relations of production, or global classes, or the logic of a distinctly world mode of production. Chase-Dunn and Hall, following Amin, repeat 19th-century evolutionary theory by talking about “world system types.” They list three stages of development in terms of three general modes of production: (1) the kin-based mode, (2) the tributary mode, and (3) the capitalist mode. But this is nothing but the older evolutionary scheme of (1) hunter-gatherer societies, which tended to be more tribal and kin-based, followed by (2) a kind of Greco-Roman slavery and the settled agriculture of ancient empires through European feudalism, right up to (3) the advent of capitalism in the 19th century or, following Wallerstein, the 16th century.

There is simply nothing international, intersocietal, or intercivilizational going on here at all. Chase-Dunn and Hall tell us (1991:21), “The central theoretical distinction we will use in studying system logic is the neo-Marxian notion of mode of production.” Exactly, and exactly the problem for world-system “theory” if it is ever to develop its own logic at a distinctly world level of analysis. In using the notion of mode of production as the logic of the world-system, Chase-Dunn and Hall miss the point that this seemingly abstract concept has a very specific level of analysis built
into it: societies, or social formations, or class structures.

The key theoretical point is this: by using the notion of modes of production the conceptualization of the production process remains imprisoned within the societal parts of the world-system, leaving nothing but the exchange of such produced commodities to be the only systemwide process. But this need not be so. There is nothing natural about relations between classes within a society that leads one to stick with traditional modes of production and not go ahead and formulate distinctly world, or civilizational modes of production. To specify a level of relations between groups at the class level, rather than between family members, clan members, neighborhoods, or territories, is a theoretical decision, not a fact of nature. Modes of production at the societal level are not a fixed reality. Remember, in the neoclassical economic paradigm the basic unit is the rationally choosing individual, not the class. This basic unit is actually below the level of class, which for the economic paradigm is fine. For the sociology paradigm, it is raised a notch and put at the level of social class and social group. Now, for there to be a world-system paradigm, a science of globology to succeed the social science of sociology, the basic unit of analysis will have to be raised yet another notch to the world level. Production must be specified at the world level or world-system theory will remain social theory projected onto global history.

So, let's clear away some prejudices. There is no reason why the idea of production in human life cannot be considered to occur on a world scale. Production can just as easily be considered a world or global process as its present incarnation as a social process. The process of production must be freed from its societal imprisonment if a global or civilizational world-system theory is truly to exist. Remember, at the cultural level civilizational studies see a common logic systemwide, such as East versus West, so why not a common systemwide logic in the economic realm? Why must the hands that pick cotton in the antebellum American south be considered part of a slave mode of production while the hands that weave it into cloth in Britain are part of a capitalist mode of production? Why aren't all these hands part of a common worldwide mode of production? I see no reason.

Like sociology a hundred years ago, something like globology is crying out to be born. Societies are but the cellular infrastructure of the global entity, not separate things that come together to form a world-system. Marx argued something to the effect that it wasn't men buying and selling that made capitalism; rather, it was capitalism that made men buy and sell. The same logic holds on the global scale, only the units change: it is not unequal exchange, war, hegemonies, and colonialism that make a world-system, but a world-system that produces and enforces unequal trade, propels nations...
into war, creates hegemonies and produces colonial domination. First the whole, then the parts; sociologically, first the relations of production, then the existence of classes; globologically, first the global system, then the relations between the developed core and the underdeveloped periphery. Contrary to Wallerstein, Amin, and Chase-Dunn, it is not the core-periphery division of labor, or unequal exchange, or the intersocietal network, that makes the world-system, but the world-system that produces the inequality and division amongst the world’s nations and peoples.

In a way our history and descriptive powers are ahead of our theory. We see the world as a singular historical system, but its animating logic remains lodged in theories of the component parts rather than in the collective logic of the world civilizational whole. The key determinant process, the motor that makes the system go, is at present trapped within the theoretical logic of the societal subparts; or, if there is world-system process, it is not of a primal sort, as all core-periphery divisions of labor (Wallerstein), unequal exchanges (Amin), and intersocietal networks (Chase-Dunn and Hall) appear only after the more fundamental production process has transpired. The theory of production remains a societal theory, not a global theory, that occurs within societal modes of production governed by societal class relations. It is only within the secondary acts of exchange and networking between already existing social entities that present-day world-system theory says anything distinctly global. Relations of production do precede relations of exchange. And the way it stands now, production takes place within this or that localized mode of production governed by this or that set of class relations, whereas the only truly global or world-systemic economic process is the exchange of already produced products by already existing social relations of production.

This is the one basic reason why world-system theory has not gone on to become a general model and challenge the more dominant paradigms of social science. It has yet to formulate a theory of the human production process at a world level. World-system theory specializes in world exchange, world networks, world divisions of labor, but not in world production. Until that limitation is overcome, world-system theory will always remain a secondary footnote to more basic social science.

Late 20th-century social theory is open to conceiving of larger units for the analysis of our collective existence. Most thinkers still think societally, but a growing number think in terms of a world-system. Some see it operating since the 16th century, others since the 13th century, and still others for at least 5,000 years. On the question of human interconnectedness there will be no debate. But the conceptual window of opportunity to consider world units appeared precisely because of a theoretical crisis in received models.
of social science, and until a new theoretical framework appears with processes and operations different from the 19th-century societal ones, world-system theory, Post- or Pre-1500, will remain a limited theoretical paradigm. So, neither the Pre’s nor the Post’s have the advantage, as neither has generated any new ideas that are not already part of the fundamental package of received social science knowledge.

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