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Author(s): Janet Abu-Lughod

Source: *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), pp. 273-286

Published by: [Research Foundation of SUNY](#) for and on behalf of the [Fernand Braudel Center](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40241153>

Accessed: 11/08/2013 06:01

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Restructuring the Premodern World-System

Janet Abu-Lughod

World-systems theory has begun to involute, an ironic outcome that may illustrate the inevitable routinization of charisma. Wallerstein's field-shaking innovations, which reminded us so strongly to take the global context into consideration when evaluating local changes, and which gave us powerful concepts to describe integrating systemic patterns, are now becoming "normal science." Scholars, largely but not exclusively in the *atelier* at Binghamton, have been adding more precise details to the story of the West's rise to hegemony. The basic premises of their work, however, remain relatively unexamined.

There is an irony to this. The brilliant light that world-system theory shone on developments from the sixteenth century onward has created its own shadows and even blind spots. It is not that consensus has been reached about the post-sixteenth-century system. Controversies still abound. But they focus primarily on the plot at center stage, where Western culture has strutted for some 500 years. Forgotten is the fact that European players entered—from the peripheral wings, as it were—onto a preexisting stage which subsequently became obscured, and that the Atlantic nations are already being forced to share the stage with a considerably larger and more diverse cast.

A second conceptual blindspot has followed from this. The term "world-system," forgetting the adjective "modern," has now become virtually synonymous with the *particular* way the world came to be organized after the sixteenth century. Wallerstein argues, I think over-enthusiastically, that the term *world-system* (as opposed to world-

economies, world-empires, long-distance trading circuits) should be applied exclusively to a singular instance with a singular (albeit not static) form of organization. And he therefore posits that, due to the inherent logic of capitalism, convergence will be the ultimate outcome of all further integration.

The world-system, in this sense, had a beginning and, one must suppose, has a foreordained “evolutionary” *dénouement*. It originated with the establishment of a hierarchical arrangement of different modes of production and/or extraction (the capitalist, the semifeudal or precapitalist, and the “slave mode”)—whose relations were based upon unequal exchange and whose geographic distribution was roughly congruent with position in the hierarchy (capitalism at the western European core, feudalism in the eastern European semiperiphery, and unfree labor at the “Third World” periphery). And presumably it will “end” when all parts are capitalist, socialist, or, in an alternative scenario which I tend to favor, when multiple hierarchies and diversity supersede that uncentered system. Does that mean there will be no more world-system? To avoid such a counterintuitive conclusion, a more open definition of system must be adopted.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is as good as any place to start. It defines “system” as

an organized or connected group of objects; a set or assemblage of things connected, associated, or interdependent, so as to form a complex unity; a whole composed of parts in orderly arrangement according to some scheme (*OED*, s.v. “system”).

Note that no *particular* scheme is specified. A system may be hierarchical or nonhierarchical; it may be organized on a simple large-scale pattern of interdependence or it may be more complexly patterned. Nor is any particular organizing principle specified.

Thus, to conflate “world-system” with a particular scheme of organization keeps us from recognizing other possible schemes. Furthermore, it takes our attention away from moments of radical *reorganization*, when the very principles of organization are undergoing restructuring. Since the understanding of restructuring is not peripheral to the basic problematic of world-systems theory, and since Wallerstein can never be accused of chasing the chimera of Talcott Parsons’s homeostatic “Social System,” I want to make a plea for paying closer attention to just

those moments of *discontinuity*, when the principles of systemic organization are changing. There are at least two of these: the period I have called "Before European Hegemony" (Abu-Lughod, 1989), and the present time, which at least some analysts are referring to as "After Hegemony" (Keohane, 1984).¹

For the past six years I have been studying the world-system that preceded European hegemony. This paper reports briefly on the conclusions of that study. From an analysis of the transition between it and the modern world-system I develop some theoretical guidelines that might strengthen the ability of world-systems theory to deal with moments of restructuring. Finally, I explore, in a very tentative way, how these theoretical guidelines might be applied to increase our understanding of the new period in world history we have recently entered.

THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY WORLD-SYSTEM: GROWTH AND DEVOLUTION

The thesis of my book, *Before European Hegemony*, is that, by the end of the thirteenth century, a long-standing globally-integrated "world-system," to which Europe had finally attached itself, was reaching climax stage. Even though, when compared to the contemporary epoch, this thirteenth-century system of international trade (and the expanded domestic production associated with it) could not be described as either large-scale or technologically advanced, it was substantially more complex in organization, greater in volume, and more sophisticated in execution than anything the world had known before. It was in no way inferior to the level achieved in the sixteenth or even the seventeenth century.²

This world-system was organized around three or possibly four "cores." One was the Middle East, which occupied a strategic zone of international interchange. A second was the northern steppe across central Asia which, after the Mongol conquests, had coalesced with China. A third core zone was focused on the Indian Ocean, which linked China to the Middle East via the Strait of Malacca and India. And finally, thanks to the trade and industry stimulated by the Crusades that eventually tied Europe to this ongoing world-system, the towns of developing western Europe (especially in Flanders, France, and Italy) had begun to form a fourth "core" region.

What is noteworthy in the world-system of the thirteenth century is that no single cultural, economic, or imperial system was hegemonic. Indeed, a wide variety of cultural systems coexisted and cooperated, most of them organized very differently from the West. Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and numerous other smaller sects, often dismissed as “pagan,” all seem to have permitted, and indeed facilitated, lively commerce, production, exchange, risk-taking, and the like. Similarly, the economic systems that coexisted in the thirteenth-century world ranged across a wide spectrum — from “near” private capitalism, albeit with state support, to “near” state production, albeit assisted by private merchants.

These variations, furthermore, were not particularly congruent with either geographic region or religious domain. The organization of textile production in south India was not unlike that in Flanders, whereas in China and Egypt larger-scale coordination was more typical. The state built boats for trade in both Venice and China, whereas elsewhere (and even at different times in Genoa, China, and Egypt) private vessels were often commandeered when the state needed them.

Nor were the underlying bases for economic activities unvarying. Participating in the world-system of the thirteenth century were: (a) large agrarian societies such as India and China which covered subcontinents in expanse, and whose industrial production was oriented mainly, but not exclusively, to the processing of agricultural raw materials; (b) small port city-states such as Venice, Aden, and Palembang or Malacca whose functions are best described as *compradore* to anticipate a later term; (c) places as diverse as south India, Champagne, Samarkand, Iraq, and the Levant which owed their importance to their strategic locations astride pathways between flanking trading partners; and (d) places that contained valued raw materials unavailable elsewhere (fine quality wool in England, camphor in Sumatra, frankincense and myrrh on the Arabian Peninsula, spices in the Indian archipelago, jewels in Ceylon, ivory and ostrich feathers in Africa, and even military slaves in eastern Europe). The important fact, however, was that more was going on than trade in preciosities. Bulk agricultural products and manufactured goods were also circulating, and localized economies were restructuring with an eye on the export market.

Despite so promising a beginning, this incipient world-system began to unravel after the middle of the fourteenth century and, by the

late fifteenth century, only small portions retained their former vigor. While historians have traditionally focused on local events to account for discrete declines, my analysis points to a set of causally-linked or “systemic” forces set into motion by the Black Death, which may have broken out as early as the 1330’s and had definitely spread throughout most parts of the system by mid-fourteenth century.

The first-order effects of this catastrophe were horrendous, with commercially-linked core cities losing a third to a half of their populations within a few years. The second-order effects of this massive reduction in population were of perhaps even greater significance. Recovery in Europe shifted local power northward (away from Italy to formerly peripheral zones such as England). In the Middle East, the plague initiated a period of crisis which even demographic recovery failed to alleviate. But it was in the central Asian and Chinese arenas that the sources of world-system collapse were to be found.

To comprehend this, it is necessary to note that the roughly 200-year “medieval” period, during which China played a key role in completing the circuit of world trade, was an aberration in Chinese history. Most of the time, there was tension (at best, stand-off, or as Barfield claims, pay-off) between the nomadic tribes of central Asia and the settled agriculturalists of China. Most of the time, China was a *land* power. The only deviant period was the thirteenth century, when the Mongols unified China with central Asia (in the Yuan Dynasty), and when Chinese commercial shipping dominated the Indian Ocean.

The thesis of my book is that the flowering of the world-system in the thirteenth century was ultimately due to the completion of a continuous circuit of long-distance sea and land routes, thanks to the openness of China. Thus, the “rise” of the world-system to its peak in the second half of the thirteenth century and the opening decades of the fourteenth was due primarily to developments in the East, not in the West.

The causes of the system’s demise must also be sought in that arena. Apparently, the plague first broke out in southwest China as early as the 1330’s, chiefly among the horse-borne Mongol cavalry. Their mobility, via fast post roads, gradually diffused infected fleas throughout China and central Asia. This selective weakening of Mongol forces, I suggest, made possible the Ming Rebellion which, in 1368, restored an indigenous government in China. This successful revolt against the

decimated Mongol rulers of China, however, had the predictable consequence of once again splitting central Asia from China. That singular unification under the Yuan Dynasty had created an almost frictionless medium through which overland world trade flowed. Now it reverted to its more usual blockages.

A second effect, albeit delayed, was the eventual withdrawal of the Ming Dynasty from the sea route through the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea and the closing (indeed, in some cases, the physical destruction) of trading ports in south China. When this slow, and by no means even, process was completed by the 1430's, it signaled the final fragmentation of what, given the level of technology, had been a remarkably coherent system.

In short, just as the "rise" of the thirteenth-century world-system was in essence attributable to an increase in the connectivity of the system itself, so the demise was due to a breaking of those connections.

RELEVANCE FOR WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY

What can a study of the rise and fall of the thirteenth-century world-system tell us about causal analysis?

First, it confirms world-systems theory, in that even in this earlier phase, more than *internal* causal variables are needed to account for change; variables at the system level must be sought. However, just as there had been no single overriding factor that, like some *deus ex machina*, accounted for a sudden *organization* of the thirteenth-century world-system, but rather gradual and synergistically-interrelated developments that were in large part related to the linkages being forged, so in the downswing there was a similarly complex and systemic process whereby constituent parts declined as they "delinked."

Secondly, however, it cautions us against reifying "cycles" as an explanation. During the more than 300 years, over which the thirteenth-century world-system formed and devolved, each of the individual sub-regions experienced cyclical variations — but these were not necessarily congruent with the temporal patterns in other areas. All that can be said is that when there was a period of congruence among the upward cycles of related regions, synergism was definitely present and one could speak of a vector of common ascent. Such upturns were due, in part at least, to the linkages each region managed to forge with other parts

of the world-system; and feedback from that system, in turn, intensified local development. The same was true in reverse. When separate regions experienced setbacks, either from unique or common underlying causes, the overall direction of the vector of change was deflected. And just because the regions had become so interlinked, declines in one inevitably contributed to declines occurring elsewhere, especially in contiguous parts which formed "trading partners."

Thirdly, our findings suggest that world-systems may not only be organized in varying ways, but that a weakened world-system may undergo restructuring, even though the old system continues in vestigial form. If the particular "modern" world-system, whose early organization Wallerstein has so carefully traced, was built on the remains of a preexistent system, albeit restructured, it is conceivable that a subsequent one is possible. Indeed, the process continues, as can be observed in the present "rise" of Japan and the Pacific NIC's, a phenomenon that is drastically altering the shape of the contemporary world-system.

World-systems do not "fail"; they "restructure." If we assume that restructuring, rather than substitution, is what happens when world-systems succeed one another, albeit after intervening periods of incoherence (disorganization?), then failure cannot refer to the parts themselves but only to the declining efficacy and functioning of the ways by which they were formerly connected. When we say that the thirteenth-century world-system failed, we mean that the system itself devolved. Its devolution was both caused by and a sign of the "decline" in its constituent parts, with multiple feedback loops.

Thus, despite the popularity of that cliché, "rise and fall," which has been indiscriminately applied to nations,³ empires,⁴ civilizations,⁵ and now, world-systems, the metaphor is unfortunate.

In the course of history, some nations, or at least groups within them, gain relative power vis-à-vis others and occasionally succeed in setting the terms of their interactions with subordinates, whether by means of direct rule (empires), indirect supervision (what we today term neocolonialism), or through unequal influence on the internal policies of others (hegemony). When this happens, we call it a "rise." Conversely, the loss of an advantageous position is called "decline," even when there may be no real deterioration in absolute level of life.⁶

The rise and fall of empires is judged by different criteria. Empires

rise when their geographic span of control expands, and, conversely, decline when those boundaries contract. Even more complex is the idea of the rise and fall of whole civilizations, in which the cultural content, as well as its expanse, is judged as alternately “high” or “decadent.”

World-systems do not rise and fall in the same way that nations or empires or civilizations do. Rather, they rise when integration increases and they decline when connections along older pathways decay. However, it would be sophomoric to suggest that the world returns to the status quo ante when the vigor of a given dynamic of integration dissipates. Rather, the old parts live on and become the materials out of which restructuring develops. In this sense, the “modern world-system” was both a continuation of the earlier one and at the same time a “new” world-system.

What, then, marks the boundaries between world-systems? When do we use the term “restructuring”? I think we reserve the term “restructuring” for periods when players who were formerly peripheral begin to occupy more powerful positions in the system, and when geographic zones formerly marginal to intense interactions become foci and even control centers of such interchanges. (If the players and zones remain constant, one does not talk of restructuring, no matter how much activities in the system fluctuate, as long as they do not disappear.)

And, I contend, that is exactly what has been happening in the world in the twentieth century. Can our understanding of the earlier restructuring, which led to the hegemony of the West, help us study this new development and predict its outcome?

THE NEW WORLD-SYSTEM

Analysts agree on some of the major characteristics of the world-system that is now evolving, although they differ on dating the origin of the transformation, in accounting for its causes, and in predicting its likely outcome. Among the commonly recognized trends are:

- (a) the globalization of at least the upper circuit of finance, production-planning, and trade within the capitalist countries;

- (b) the “loss of empire” by the Atlantic states and the rise of several Asian powers that for centuries were marginal to, or insulated from, that upper circuit; and
- (c) a renewed vitality, therefore, in the Pacific Ocean arena which, since the Second World War, has assumed an importance at least equal to, if not greater than, the Atlantic, on which the former world-system was focused.

Some scholars, contemplating these grand global shifts, use the term “restructuring” to capture the paradoxical meaning of this type of change, namely—a continuity with the past (the old “world-system” has certainly not ended), but also a significant shift in its major players and the relations among them.

This presents a challenge to how we Western social scientists conceptualize change. Until now, in some ways, we have had it too easy. If, indeed, a modern Euro-centered world-system began to take shape in the sixteenth century, and continued to evolve over the next centuries as the West strengthened and enlarged its core position and extended its direct and indirect control over more and more distantly located semi- and real peripheries, then our chief problematic as scholars of social change has been to study the continuities of the system—namely, its “progress” and “diffusion.”

Even though the dead-center of the core migrated (from Holland-Spain to England and then to the eastern seaboard of the United States, with some intermediaries and buds), nevertheless it remained within a common cultural zone that excluded African, Latin American and Asian powers. And even though the economic and political institutions of the core underwent significant transformations, they remained within a tradition that was culturally Western. Indeed, most of the “great” social science literature generated since the eighteenth century has essentially tracked the development of this core and its evolving institutions.

The concepts and tools designed to analyze continuous change within the same basic structure, however, are proving less robust when applied to the changes that now seem to be taking place. It now appears that the larger context is undergoing reorganization. I think much of our theoretical foundering in early “modernization” or “develop-

ment of underdeveloped nations” studies may not have been entirely malicious or ill-intentioned. Its naiveté was due to the fact that we assumed that the basic structure would not change: that gradually, one after another of the so-called Third World nations would be absorbed into *our* world. It did not occur to us that they might *change* the structure and, in consequence, our place in it. (It is sobering to reread early discussions on Japan which, in the immediate postwar period, was classified among the underdeveloped or “backward” areas.)

In this new non-normal science, we do not know how to proceed. Recently, a spate of books has appeared, all wrestling with this dilemma or including somber predictions of the decline in exclusive Western power; one of these was even entitled *Beyond American Hegemony*, a direct naming of the anxiety. The widespread publicity for Paul Kennedy’s surprisingly popular book focused on chapter eight, which tried to reassure the West that it need not lose its prime place. This literature symptomizes a deep anxiety about the future. We have been so busy in Western social sciences studying the persistence and evolution of *the* “modern” world-system that we are unprepared to understand what we sense may be its break-up or at least its radical transformation.

I want to try to apply to the present some of the insights I have gained from studying the thirteenth century and its restructuring. Chart 1 lays out in tentative fashion a number of dimensions along which I think the three successive “World-Systems” can be compared. It is impossible, in this preliminary essay, to explain all the entries, much less to defend my reasons for describing them as I do.

On the basis of this tentative comparison, my preliminary theory about the current restructuring places its origin, not in the 1950–70 period favored by other investigators, but in the second decade of the twentieth century—with the First World War and its direct impact on the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and on the Russian Revolution. While the former added, in the short-run, to the imperial reach of Europe, the latter split the ecumene of east Europe and central Asia from western Europe and interrupted a prior process of integration.

The “world” agricultural depression of the 1920’s, followed by the “Great Depression” at the core, further interrupted established patterns and depressed the volume of exchange, permitting modest industrialization in the periphery.

But it was the incredibly destructive character of the Second World

Chart 1: Comparison between Three Forms of World System

	SYSTEM I	SYSTEM II	SYSTEM III
DIMENSION TIME:			
Range	12th-15th c.	16th-20th c.	21st c.-
Peak of System	end 13th	end 19th	?
Period of Restructure to next	15th c.	20th c.	?
DIMENSION TECHNOLOGY:			
Level	low	moderate	high
Diffusion	low	moderate	high
Eradication of space by time	low	moderate	high
DIMENSION SYSTEM ORGANIZATION:			
Core Players	multiple	few	multiple
Dominance	low	high	lower
Economic Organization	varied coexistent	one form hegemonic	alternative forms?
Unit of Analysis	cities	nations	firms
DIMENSION SPATIAL PATTERN:			
Nature of Space	highly constraining	time-cost distorted	fungible
Travel	ship	rail/steam	plane
Degree of Intraregional Diversity	high	low	increasing
Degree of Interregional Diversity (International Division of Labor)	low	high	declining

DIMENSION
SYSTEM INTEGRATION:

Degree of Entailment	modest but increasing	high but uneven	high and increasingly even
Response Time (Sample Event)	decades (Black Death)	year (Depression)	instantaneous (Stock Market Crash)

DIMENSION RESTRUCTURE BETWEEN:	Transition I to II	Transition II to II
Proximate Systemic Causes	disease, depression, war	depression, war, ?
New Players	European	Asian
New Regions	Atlantic	Pacific
New Rules	conquest	co-existence?
New Goods	manufactured	information

War that ultimately split continental Europe and precipitated the Chinese Revolution. The effects were comparable to those that occurred in the fourteenth century when central Asia and continental China ceased to serve as arenas for frictionless exchange. The “legal” decolonization of imperial domains—regardless of their subsequent reincorporation through other means—signaled the end of the past principles of systemic organization.

These vacuums and discontinuities permitted the restructuring of the system and opened the way for new players playing by different rules, in the same way that the vacuums and discontinuities that came in the wake of the Black Death in the fourteenth century opened the way for European players playing by their own rules. I see parallels between the responses of the Indian Ocean powers to the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century and contemporary American-European responses to the Japanese. The bewilderment among formerly powerful players, their sense of aggrievement and anger, and their unwillingness to recognize the new principles by which the coming world-system would be organized, are quite similar.

WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY: A NEW AGENDA

I realize I am not here calling for a new research agenda. Each one of these “events” is well studied, and indeed, it would be impossible for any individual to “master” the multiple and complex literatures about them. But just as I found each of the separate regions of the thirteenth century well studied by specialists, but found no theory that connected them, so I see little systematic macroanalysis of how these events, when combined, have operated to restructure the present world-system. Instead, we have general allegations of two kinds. One, that develops out of the insights of Lenin, is now being pursued by Wallerstein. It posits convergence to a single system of international finance capitalism that will order all parts of the globe in an hierarchical (albeit no longer spatially-ordered) system. The second suggests the creation of a multi-centered, multi-formed, but increasingly integrated, global system in which several diverse but culturally- and geographically-distinct “blocks” coexist. I see some elements of this appearing, for which the thirteenth century offers a precedent. I do not know which of these scenarios is most probable, but no other research question seems more important for us to study.

NOTES

1. Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (1984) is the best known. The title for my book was selected before I saw this source, so the parallelism is quite accidental.

2. Lest one think that this was an entirely new phenomenon, we might recall that this thirteenth-century system had its precursor in classical times, around the beginning of the Christian era, when it encompassed almost the same geographic space, but was organized in a radically different manner.

3. See, for example, Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (1982).

4. Including, most recently, Robert Gilpin (1987); David Calleo (1987); Robert Keohane (1984); and Paul Kennedy (1987).

5. Of which, among many, are Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (originally published 1926) and Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1947-1957).

6. The entire debate generated by the eighth chapter of Paul Kennedy's recent work seems to revolve around this distinction.

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