

The World System According to Andre Gunder Frank: Hegemony and Domination

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Andre Gunder Frank is still recognized world-wide for his research and activism, including his contributions to dependency theory in the 1970s and world-system debates in the 1980s, as well as for his book *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* in the 1990s (Lauderdale and Harris 2008).¹ And now in his latest contribution, Frank further explores the argument that the contemporary world system is part of a continuous five-thousand-year-old history, providing yet more evidence to contest conventional theories that continue to place Europe at the center of economic development. In contrast, Frank contends that the rise of Western societies is a historical blip in an otherwise Asian-centered economy. As Frank's research challenges, for example, the Marxist and Weberian theories on the rise of capitalism as well as Wallerstein's world-systems analyses, there is no doubt that his work, at a minimum, continues to intrigue, provoke and excite scholars in multiple fields. Frank's research also impacts world-systems scholars by suggesting that they examine the world as one world system, rather than the current search for several world-systems, as he is critiquing theories of Eurocentrism and even the concept of capitalism (cf. Wallerstein 1999).

Al Bergesen, in his essay "World-System Theory After Andre Gunder Frank," aptly explains the differences between world-systems/PEWS (WST/PEWS) theory and Frank's perspective of the world economy. Bergesen (2015) notes:

To do this, begin with a sense of the world economy as economic relations between continents, which means relations over large bodies of water, which are achieved by shipping. In the 21st century as in earlier ones, 90 percent of all international/world economic activity transpires through shipping... This brings us to the theoretical challenge of Frank: If the world economy has to be between continents, which by definition is more about trade than production, and if world trade relations historically preexist the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, does this suggest that the modern world-system is not, in fact, based

¹ We appreciate the substantive and editorial comments by Jennifer Bair. We also want to thank Paul Frank for his thoughtful comments on earlier ideas about this paper.

upon the capitalist mode of production, but is part and parcel of a much larger and historically longer world economic system of multilateral trade relations?

To understand this point in the context of *ReOrienting the 19th Century: Global Economy in the Continuing Asian Age*, it is important to note that Frank was interested intensely in examining the essence of coercion and imperialism, and eventually rejected capitalism as a useful concept. Having lived in countries with overt, oppressive state structures, such as Nazi Germany as a child, and later in Chile after Pinochet's brutal takeover, as well as having been "blacklisted" in liberal democratic states such as the United States for many years, Frank personally experienced the impact of coercion and imperialism. Although he managed to eventually escape these oppressive conditions, his analysis of imperialism underscored the driving role of global oppression, rigid status hierarchies, state intimidation and official cruelty. Frank's perspective upon history and political economy is more complex and provocative than understanding the proverbial "chicken or egg" question entangling WST. Thus, the complex, global trade relations Bergesen explicates, including his discussion of multilateral trade hierarchies via Frank's examination of "invisibles," is both important and inspiring. We want here, however, to modify and extend Bergesen's review to emphasize Frank's work on the singular nature of the world system as a historical entity as opposed to the idea that the modern world-system began in 16th century Europe, and the role of hegemony as an important analytical concept that cannot be reduced to domination.

War, Domination, and the Politics of Economy

Frank's analyses reveal the complexities and manifestations of the world economy that enable certain states to dominate successfully and by what processes. In attempting to examine the nature of economic and social oppression, Frank profoundly revealed their connection with war. He points out that war, for example, historically provided many dominating states with profits. Such profitability is likely to continue, therefore war is likely to continue, and the investments by imperialist states to protect their military strength and security have historically buttressed their foreign trade dominance. As colonies could not pay their debts to the empire, they literally paid with their blood. In *ReOrienting the 19th Century*, Frank (2014: 120) examines numerous examples of this non-symbiotic relationship. He explains that the triangular exchange among Britain, China and India was related to the Opium Wars in the 1800s between China and Britain. Such conflict

...was precipitated when, to contain the opium trade, the Chinese government deliberately confiscated and destroyed large shipments in actions analogous to that of the erstwhile Bostonians who dumped British tea into their harbor. In both cases, the main reason for doing so was not any great dislike of tea or opium, neither for consumption, nor morally nor politically, the latter at least not directly so. Instead, the big problem for the Chinese was that they had "traditionally" been the world's largest inward importer of silver, but payment for more and more opium invoked a greater and greater outward re-export of that silver. Since domestic taxes remained payable in silver, lower domestic supplies raised its price relative to copper cash and other commodities, thereby impoverishing many people so that the opium-for-silver trade then posed a political problem. Nonetheless, foreigners still had to work within and not outside of or against the

Chinese “Canton System.” So, in the First Opium War a small flotilla of British all-metal ships, built especially for river navigation, easily defeated the Chinese and set up the first of the “unequal” treaties.

Frank explored this triangular trade/politics/war dynamic with respect to the contemporary British state’s domination over Northern Ireland; “And what exempts the British state from charges of routine state—and army of occupation—terrorism for twenty-five years in Northern Ireland and in its notorious H block prisons?” (Oliverio 1998: 119). The imperialists’ investment in the military and consequent ability to mobilize the military to defend, oppress or suppress other societies attempting to compete politically and economically allowed their high-status position to be secured in the system of multilateral trade and payments. These high status locations and their occupants were followed by the rest of the world population who were pushed into permanently residing in the lowest status positions. Frank (1998a: xi) gives us another example of how this typically rigid hierarchical system of multilateral trade was intertwined with military strength and war:

A decade ago, American planes bombed civilians in Libya ‘in retaliation’ for Libya’s alleged sponsorship of a terrorist attack in Berlin. Mrs. Thatcher’s Britain gave permission for (and its press took pride in) America’s use of British air bases to depart on their bombing mission to Libya. However, the planes had to fly the long way around the Atlantic (and one was lost as a result) because the allied governments of France, Spain, and Italy remained unconvinced and refused to allow the American war planes into their airspace. The American military attack on civilians, in which, among others, a child of Qadhafi dies, was defined by the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, their governments, and their media as no more than a justified response to the alleged terrorism of others (or the “Other”). Later evidence published by the American press revealed that the responsibility for the events in Berlin did not emerge from Libya at all, but elsewhere.

The complexities of international relations, military strength and security underlie and perhaps extend Bergesen’s (2015) observation that “while the multilateral process may be capable of generating a virtually unlimited number of different trade structures, constraints from other domains (economics, geopolitics, sociology or psychology) seem to have yielded a particular trade structure sequence.” Indeed, politics and war-making provide formidable “constraints” to which Frank became especially perceptive as he uncovered the layers to historical cycles of oppression and rigid hierarchical re-fortification. In *ReOrienting* (2014: 125), he notes:

Most attention has been devoted to bilateral flows of capital to Britain along one of another of the legs of some triangle. But it would be important, perhaps even more so, empirically to investigate and analyze just how these Atlantic and Indian Ocean triangles interacted in Britain, which was at the apex of them all. One obvious way was that an important portion of the textiles that arrived from India was re-exported. Some went to Africa to be exchanged for slaves to ship to the Caribbean, and others went there to clothe the slaves after they arrived. Other

Indian textiles were re-exported to Latin America, where they undermined local textile production. American colonists and then citizens favorably participated in both triangular trades...In particular, since the colonies had a large merchandise import surplus or export deficit with Britain, they had to cover it with money and bills of exchange earned from their participation in the Africa—Caribbean—North American triangle.

Clearly, Frank demonstrates in detail how export oriented solutions to development create detrimental imbalances for some countries more than others, and the creation of “poor” countries, which may be rich in culture, but poor economically.

Moreover, in his examination of the multilateral nature of the world economy, Frank considers the impact of migration, its brutal appropriation of land and its indiscriminate destruction of the people who inhabited these lands, as people also moved from densely populated areas to less populated areas. In both China and Europe, densely populated regions had more workers than available resources. Shipping many of these people either overseas or to another part of the country allowed for slower depletion of natural resources at home as well as slower decline of the land physically, socially and politically. Frank (2014:128) observes that this “out-migration” also served as an important safety valve against political protest and uprising.” In the areas receiving new people, increased labor transformed natural resources into production and income for populations in both new and old areas. The old or “home” areas were able to import more products such as wheat and cattle and at lower prices while not further depleting land needed to produce these products. In the new areas, the use of land and other resources may have been slower in producing physical decline and over time, this process was extended to what is termed “the third world.” Thus, both the Europeans and other settlers to new regions, including their families, benefited from migration in the form of export/import of low-cost products for their ever-growing populations. However, in the “new” countries, the people already living there, who were not “discovered,” the indigenous populations, were coerced and suffered extreme social living conditions and depletion of natural resources and land.

With respect to socio-political strife, Frank examines the use of informal and formal military structures. He notes that Britain as well as other European powers reserved their heavy military arsenal for when it was needed within Europe and simply created military troops “outside” of Europe to control “outside” areas (Frank 2014:18):

Britain fought fifty wars in the colonial nineteenth century and seventy-two military campaigns in Asia and Africa after 1837 when India had already been conquered. Nevertheless, political excursion and intervention by European powers outside Europe never involved the use of major military force. That was reserved for use against each other in the Crimean War and between the North and the South in the American Civil War. Nor was military power used especially to promote European industrial exports and trade, whose amount to Asia, Africa and Latin America was never all that much...Instead, Europeans used relatively small shows of military force, and anyway much more they did not even have available outside of Europe itself. Moreover, in the nineteenth century the British military was manned largely by Indians—130,000 Indians and 66,000 British troops in 1880—and they still maintained a Gurka regiment through the twentieth century.

Britain obliged the Indians themselves to pay for the troops and their own occupation with the “Home Charges.”

Thus, coercion need not be displayed in terms of quantity of arsenal. The illusion of military might often is sufficient. The rest can be achieved through “divide and conquer” strategies. In understanding the essence of the world economy, Frank also was able to enlighten us about the successful systemic use of divide and conquer strategies, violence, rigid status hierarchies, coercion and war (Lauderdale and Harris 2008).

Exposing Historical and World-Systems Myths

As Bergesen (2015) remarks, “World-System Theory’s (WST) basic assumptions have remained largely unchanged since their initial formulation in the mid-1970s (Wallerstein 1974).” While Frank contributed to world-systems theory in some of his earlier famous research, he considered employing Marx’s linear, historical stages of development and economic analyses to be suspect, if not a conundrum. However, from the 1990s forward, Frank explicates the idea that a nation’s economic strength and global power is often impacted by historical circumstances such as geography, and he avidly attempts to debunk several theories hanging on to ideas of the primacy of the West and Western development. Bergesen (2015: 17) aptly quotes Frank, “A substantial portion of British income must have been derived from abroad through interest, profits, and rent, or in a word from its privileged LOCATION (location, location, location via Frank) in the world economy from which Britain derived an important share of its income and its ability to invest abroad and derive further income from that.” Frank examines the implications of geographical location with regard to the economic dominance of China as well as other empires, such as Persia and the Ottoman. Location is one of the key factors influencing the expansion of the multilateral world system, wealth and poverty of nations as well as the dissipation of entropy among and within nations (Frank 2010: 267). Unlike the majority of Western scholars, Frank views British dominance and preeminence in the world as a mere blip over a couple of generations. The fact that scholars still research Britain’s rise to power in the 19th century proves to Frank how asking the wrong questions certainly perpetuates the wrong answers. For example, Frank (2014: 3) writes:

Our (mis)understanding of the nineteenth century is replete with dozens of myths and encased in a whole mythology about *The Rise of the West* that centers on an alleged early “industrial revolution” in Britain spurred by mechanizing the cotton textile industry already in the late eighteenth century, and then carried by coal and steam in the first half of the nineteenth century. By that time, it is alleged that Pax Britannia already “ruled the sea,” was “the workshop of the world,” and had its highest income. So for the past century and a half and still in the above-cited conference, the almost exclusive question has been “how Britain did it.” But as long as we ask the wrong question, we are certain to get the wrong answer. ...no one has yet turned the question around to ask either *why* the West did not remain like the rest, nor even less *when* and *what* happened and *how* and *why* the world political economy turned upside-down to make East and West change places during the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, many of these myths about the preeminence of the West via Britain in the nineteenth century still proliferate and are further perpetuated by most world-systems theory, which to Frank made little sense any longer. His suggestion that there is one World System that formed at least five thousand years ago challenges notions of numerous “world-systems.” Bergesen (2015) emphasizes Frank’s central point regarding the misguided nature of world-systems theory by contextualizing its development, and suggesting that it serves as part of a larger whole—the larger whole now being Frank’s World System and the parts being the numerous world-systems a la Wallerstein:

Essences at one level act as wholes, but when a larger surrounding structure is identified they become parts, and essence shifts a level upward. Individual essences are seen when arguing that individuals buying and selling make capitalism. Social essences are seen when arguing that capitalism makes individuals buy and sell...Yesterday’s totality, society was now but a part in the new essentialist whole, the modern world-system based on the capitalist mode of production. No longer did theory describe societal economies internally evolving on their own by Marxian class struggle or Weberian work ethics.

Yet, the problem with “hanging” on to the world-systems part of Frank’s reformulated World System is its premise that capitalism gave rise to a world-system sometime in the 16th century Europe, feeding the entire Eurocentric myth Frank discredits in *Reorienting*:

The period 1850 to 1873 is often said to be the time of maximum British domination. Yet it certainly did not dominate North America, where in the 1860s Canada became independent, and in the United States Britain’s southern allies lost the Civil War and the northern winners imposed protectionist policies. Also in Latin America, British influence was still being combated by national interests in almost all the states, and/or Britain was challenged by French occupation of Mexico and by American Monroe doctrine expansion. Africans still exercised independent and successful trading positions and the exercise of British political economic power was limited to small parts of Southern Africa and Egypt. In the Ottoman Empire, Britain eliminated the challenge of Mohammed Ali in Egypt and forced unequal commercial treaties on the Turks; yet their domestic *Tanzimat*, a sort of analogue to the Chinese self-strengthening, was still quite successful. In Russia and Central Asia the British had to fight their biggest foreign war of the century to defend their interests in the Crimea, which was really fought about access to Turkey and India (2014: 29).

Bergesen correctly suggests that Frank’s theory of the World System, “identifies limits, contradictions and shortcomings of the standard WST model, and also provides rudiments of an alternative model of how the world economy produces inequality in the wealth of nations.” Thus, simply adding a “trade focus” to world-systems theory does little to revise its basic premise regarding capitalism, the latter concept also viewed as a myth by Frank in his most recent research (and, incidentally on his web site).

Hegemony and the World System

Following Frank, it is clear that the important concept of hegemony needs to be considered more carefully, especially by scholars of world-systems and world system theorists. Understandably, language is dynamic and concepts can be refined, yet unfortunately in world-systems theory, the concept of hegemony is used as little more than a synonym for “domination” or at best “dominant ideology.” It is similar to referring to economy rather than referring to capitalism. Frank suggests that some “poor” societies might be quite developed if we consider factors other than economic ones, such as culture (1996). He explains how rich, developed countries gained from technologically underdeveloped countries when those “poor” nations remained in the global economic system. He demonstrated the impact of persistent structural economic crises on a global scale, and the ineffectiveness of Keynesian and fiscal tactics, which often led to social movements that demanded change. In other words, Frank is aware of the paradoxes that hegemony produces—for example, the simultaneous existence of economic poverty and cultural wealth. In order to understand hegemony and appreciate its impact on the world system, it is important to explicate factors beyond economy, even when these factors appear to be paradoxical (Lauderdale and Harris 2008; cf. Oliverio 1998; Chew and Lauderdale 2010).

Hegemony is a process that involves the interaction between civil and political society in the production of a dominant ideology that is taken for granted. Thus, it is more than simply an ideology that can be easily labeled and articulated, such as liberal versus conservative or traditional versus modern; hegemony produces a way of life, one that is reinforced and reproduced by civil and political institutions in a society (see for example, Augelli and Murphy’s seminal 1998 work on Gramsci and U.S. imperialism). In *ReOrienting*, Frank (2014:38) indicates that “there is no doubt that the rapid spread of Christianity around the world went along with, indeed often went ahead of, or was part and parcel of, the spread of imperialism. And vice versa, imperialism spread with the alleged word of God, which legitimized the ‘white man’s burden’ of the *mission civilizatrice*.” What Frank says about Christianity and imperialism is very similar to what Gramsci observed and wrote about as part of the production of hegemony with regard to the use of Christianity to reinforce the Fascist state.

Yet, religion is but one institution involved in the process of hegemony. Frank notes how the academy as well as the media produce and reproduce hegemony with regard to terrorism (Oliverio 1998; Oliverio and Lauderdale 2006). He maintains that the concepts and analyses are outmoded, and they parade their own ideology, especially American state interests as ostensible scientific discourse about alleged objective truth (Frank 1998b). Indeed, many of the stories that have proliferated about indigenous cultures, facilitating their destruction or disappearance have been reinforced by “scientific” explanations offered by experts such as those anthropologists who try to define the “Other” (Lauderdale 2008). Implicit within these explanations is the notion of “traditional” as backward and scientific as progressive. Museums of indigenous cultures are replete with expert interpretations about their cultures reinforcing ideas such as “Columbus discovering America,” or descriptions of “noble savage.” Accordingly, Nader expands Frank’s ideas on hegemony and indigenous cultures as she employs Frank’s concept of “hegemonic truncation in the world system” to compare relevant structural aspects of the Mongols and Europeans. She emphasizes that backwards history, as Frank terms it, moves from the present to the past. And, she presents it as a method for understanding Euro-American expansions, challenges, and especially conflicting claims about history (Nader 2008; Lauderdale and Harris 2008).

Cracking the hegemonic façade requires more than simply acknowledging who or what ideas dominate (Lauderdale 1996). It involves understanding the process by which such understandings are reproduced and unconsciously accepted as “truth.” Just as Marx and Weber are very specific in explicating the development of capitalism, Gramsci is also very specific in his explanations of the production of hegemony. Hegemony is a complex concept that allows for a deeper analysis, for example, of the perpetuation of Eurocentric ideals, even though Europe’s political and economic dominance, is but a “myopia of our leading lights,” who are still, in the twenty-first century, looking for their “watch not where it was lost or is to be found, but only where the all-too dim and narrowly focused Euro-American street light is” (Frank 2010: 225). Thus, when we consider the complexity of the term hegemony and its heuristic advantages, what does it mean to be a “hegemonic sea power” or to be the “hegemon of the capitalist world-system” or to be a Dutch, or British or American hegemon? In these examples, the term hegemony is either used to obfuscate or simply refer to “domination.” Frank’s work on the World System challenges hegemonic understandings about capitalism and historical interpretations because they are predominantly Eurocentric and because they perpetuate hegemonic understandings of global political economy. Andre Gunder Frank’s entire work has focused upon cracking the hegemonic façade that reproduces Eurocentric ideas and ways of life as central throughout history (Lauderdale and Harris 2008). By examining and explicating the dominant myths, he is challenging the institutions, experts and the academy to rethink their own hegemonic interpretations.

Conclusion

Frank’s research teaches us that the contemporary world system is part of a continuous five-thousand year-old history. His analytical focus upon coercion and imperialism, rather than the dominant theories on the rise of the west over the past five hundred years, led him to expose the hegemonic façade of Eurocentric, Western ideology. Critically, among all of his new insights, Frank’s latest book also explains more deeply how imperialism and coercion continue to dominate the world system. In extending Bergesen’s important discussion regarding world system versus world-systems in a larger context, we can now comprehend more precisely Frank’s intellectual legacy. And, we can understand more clearly major ideas and controversies in Frank’s prior work, which are important in understanding more fully his final book on the world system, edited posthumously by Robert Denemark.

Gunder Frank’s by-line, “We have met the enemy, and it is US,” is more than irony. Rather than viewing “capitalism” as the defining enemy, he increasingly focused upon coercion and imperialism (Lauderdale and Harris 2008). In his life-long participation in social movements he revealed the internal contradictions of many movements in which “progressive” leaders employed the same coercion and rigid hierarchies at the local level, which, at the global level, they despised and viewed as major sources of injustice (Lauderdale 2006). Frank’s writing and participation in such social movements exhibited his life-long concern with equality before efficiency.

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