



Introduction:

Coloniality of Power and Hegemonic Shifts in the World-System

Andrea Komlosy

University of Vienna

andrea.komlosy@univie.ac.at

Manuela Boatcă

Freiburg University

manuela.boatca@soziologie.uni-freiburg.de

Hans-Heinrich Nolte

Hannover University

cnoltevgws@aol.com

We had the privilege of hosting the 39th Annual Conference on the Political Economy of the World-System (2015) of the American Sociological Association at the Institute for Latin American Studies of the Freie Universität, Berlin. The conference addressed the theme of “Global Inequalities: Hegemonic Shifts and Regional Differentiations,” drawing attention to how the *longue durée* shapes contemporary struggles for hegemony. More than 40 researchers from all five continents presented and discussed research on the conference theme. To help readers appreciate the context of the discussions that have shaped the following articles, we provide excerpts from the texts that provided the organizing framework for the conference:

During its 500-year history, the modern world-system has seen several shifts in hegemony. Since the decline of the United States in the 1970s, however, no single



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System, University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

core power has attained a hegemonic position, such that the 21st century world-system, while not dominated by one hegemon, has continued to move toward increasing polarization. As income inequalities have become more pronounced in core countries, especially the former hegemons, the United States and the UK, global inequalities emerged as a “new” topic of social scientific scholarship, ignoring to a certain degree the constant move toward polarization that has been characteristic of the entire modern world-system. At the same time, the rise of new states (most notably, the BRICS) and the relative economic growth of particular regions (especially East Asia) have prompted speculations about the next hegemon that largely disregard both the *longue durée* of hegemonic shifts and the constraints that regional differentiations place on the concentration of capital and geopolitical power in one location.

As conference organizers, we sought to focus attention on the following questions related to historic and contemporary struggles and shifts in world-system hegemony:

- 1. Reconsidering Semi-peripheries: Evolutionary, Epistemic, or Antisystemic Potential?** With the collapse of state socialism, the Eastern European and the former Soviet states have experienced a high degree of fragmentation and differentiation. Piecemeal integration into the European Union for some states has been accompanied by the “Third Worldization” (A.G. Frank). Does the building of the EU regional block play an increasing role in the peripheralizing new regions (“inner peripheries” of the European South, the Arab world)? Are the BRICS the new semiperipheries and, if so, is a new hegemonic shift to be expected from them?
- 2. Latin America and Eastern Europe Facing the East Asian Challenge.** On the one hand, Latin America and Eastern Europe have been seen as the “first large-scale laboratories of underdevelopment” (H. Szlajfer) as well as to solutions for it. On the other hand, Latin America and the Caribbean have long been the prime examples of “persistent inequality,” frequently traced back to colonial rule, while Eastern Europe’s inequality rates have risen considerably since the 1990s. In contrast, some hope East Asia to become a model for “growth with equity.” How are such regional differentiations helpful in understanding overall system dynamics of inequality (re)production? Are these neat patterns blurred by the relative decline in inequality and poverty in parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe?

3. **Coloniality of power and the imperial difference.** Inequalities of race, ethnicity, gender, epistemic status, and economic position put in place during colonial rule have largely translated into enduring inequalities in postcolonial times. While the corresponding term, “coloniality of power,” coined by A. Quijano has been used in relation to colonized regions, especially Latin America, its workings are harder to pinpoint in the absence of former colonial rule in other parts of the world. Can we therefore speak of the “racialization” of Eastern Europe along the lines of a system-wide coloniality of power? Is “imperial difference” (W. Mignolo) in those regions never colonized by the Western core the counterpart of “colonial differences” put in place by European great powers’ overseas colonialism? How do these different positions in the power hierarchies of the world-system translate into opportunities and disadvantages today?
4. **Migration as global social mobility.** Recent legal as well as world-systems scholarship has suggested that migration to wealthy regions is the most effective means of global social mobility for populations in most countries of the world, far surpassing the prospects awarded by a better education, a better job, or one country’s economic growth. Are there recognizable patterns for this reversal of the century-old trend of migration from the core to the periphery? Which sending and receiving regions are primarily involved? What are the main constraints on transnational migration as a form of social mobility?

Immanuel Wallerstein led off discussions by reiterating his view that the immanent end of the World-System will offer the possibility of more freedom, equality and solidarity “in the spirit of Porto Alegre.” In contrast, Salvatore Babones argued that the world is now governed and led by the American Empire, while Andrea Komlosy highlighted the decline of U.S. hegemony. She considers it probable that the system would be rejuvenated in the context of stronger participation of the BRICS countries, and that this might offer chances for greater non-core self-determination.¹ Selected contributions to the conference are published in four different venues.

Volume 1 is dedicated to Global Inequalities in World-Systems Perspective,² and it discusses the role of semiperipheries as agents that are both aiming to compete within the existing

¹ For a report on the conference see www.vgws.org/Projekte/pews.tagungsbericht.pdf or <http://geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net/tagungsberichte/id=5937>:

² Boatcă, Manuela, Andrea Komlosy and Hans-Heinrich Nolte, eds. 2016. *Global Inequalities in World-System Perspective*, forthcoming. Boulder/Col. & London Paradigm Publishers,

order and an accelerating factor on the dismantling of the current world-system. The volume concludes with Immanuel Wallerstein's keynote address "Prospects for the World Left?" Volume 2 presents research on World regions, migrations and identities,³ addressing the consequences of the rise in inequalities worldwide on the movement of people and on processes of identity-building. Volume 4 contains Hans-Heinrich Nolte's keynote address on Religions in World- and Global History,⁴ which proposes ten examples from the 12th century to today illustrating the role of religion in structuring the world-system.

This special issue of the *Journal of World-Systems Research*, "Coloniality of Power and Hegemonic Shifts in the World- System," focuses on hegemonic shifts in the world-system, relating rise and decline, as well as attempts to catch up, with the historical position of specific regions in the world-system.

The first pair of articles makes use of the concept of "Coloniality of Power" in the context of Eastern Europe. Taking the example of the Habsburg province of Galicia in the 18th century, Klemens Kaps points to the double process of socio-economic peripheralization, going hand in hand with ascribing backwardness to the region and their inhabitants, as conceived by Edward Said's *Orientalism*. He argues that this legitimated the annexation and economic integration of the region into an unequal division of labor. While Kaps focuses on Habsburg times, Agnes Gagyí addresses post-socialist transformation in Hungary. There, the historical legacy of peripheralization has overshadowed debates about the appropriate way of catching up ever since. Today, Gagyí claims, both the liberal, Western-oriented factions and the conservative, national factions of the Hungarian political arena are caught in a vicious cycle of a specific type of "coloniality of power" that channels internal strategies of development into the external requirements of dependent accumulation.

The second pair of articles challenges the widespread assumption that the rise of the BRICS indicates a shift towards more global equality. Lindsay Jacobs and Ronan van Rossem present results of their network analysis, comparing BRICS states with the United States from 1965 to 2005. On the military level, the leading role of the United States is evident. On the economic level, the upward mobility of China comes at the expense of growing disparities between cores and peripheries world-wide. Their findings conform with the conclusions of Pedro Vieira and Helton

³ Nolte, Hans-Heinrich, Manuela Boatcă and Andrea Komlosy, eds. 2016. *World Regions, Migrations and Identities. Political Economy of the World System*, Vol. 2. Gleichen: Musterschmidt-Verlag.

⁴ Nolte, Hans-Heinrich. 2015. *Religions in World and Global History. A View from the German-language Discussion*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang. Online: [Kobo Europe SA, https://store.kobobooks.com/de-de/ebook/religions-in-world-and-global-history](https://store.kobobooks.com/de-de/ebook/religions-in-world-and-global-history).

Ricardo Ouriques, who also stress the continuity of the global power system that has constrained recent political attempts to introduce social democracy in Brazil. Brazil's golden age under President Lula was based on the commodity boom, which allowed the government to finance social programs while satisfying the demands of the global monetary institutions. BRICS membership did not offer a way to overcome internal conflicts over distribution and external constraints imposed by global financial regimes.

The last articles in the issue share the observation that the stability of the world-system, and its capacity to overcome cyclical crisis, is coming to an end. They draw different conclusions, however. Leonardo Figuera Helland and Tom Lindgren present a radical critique of capitalist accumulation processes and the post-colonial elites who failed to reject the "coloniality of power." Their article reflects indigenous and eco-feminist analyses and proposals of alternatives to the hegemonic model of growth. Andrea Komlosy is neither convinced of the inevitable collapse of the capitalist world-system nor the onset of a new imperial era under U.S. dominance.⁵ Today we are witnessing both attempts by the United States to curb its demise and maintain the existing hegemonic regime and the rise of new hegemonic aspirants, including alliances from Europe and East Asia. Multiple crises and conflicts over succession might also generate chaos, fueling the struggles of varied anti-systemic movements (represented by both governments and by non-governmental organizations). In this respect, Komlosy discusses the options and probabilities of broad cooperation among different strands of anti-systemic movements advocating for a more equitable and just world-system.

From the six contributions to this volume we can see the importance of historical legacies. In the case of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, historical processes of internal peripheralization are mirrored in today's conflicts: in Hungary (Gagy) they shape the antagonism between Western-oriented liberal and nationally-oriented conservative forces, which are both trapped in a structural dependency that has been renewed under the EU enlargement. The Galician case-study (Kaps) concentrates on the 18th and 19th centuries. However, it provides the grounds for understanding today's dividing lines in the Ukraine between west-oriented and Russian-oriented factions. The Habsburg case is a good example that Coloniality of Power is not restricted to overseas colonial powers only.

At the same time, the potential for a hegemonic shift in the world-system is overshadowed by historical legacies. Both contributions on the BRICS are very skeptical about the possibilities these states offer for world-system transformation. Rather than acknowledging their rise as counter-hegemonic contenders from the Global South, they insist on the persistence of the old

⁵In *World Regions, Migrations and Identities* (vol. 2), another PEWS conference participant, Salvatore Babones, takes issue with this claim.

core's dominance. Both statistical data analysis (Jacobs/van Rossem) and the case-study on Brazil (Vieira and Ouriques) show the limited possibilities for mobility within the structures of the capitalist world-system. However, it might be too early to dismiss the BRICS' contribution to a new global architecture, especially with regard to China.

Historical legacies also matter in the case of the West in general and the United States in particular. In spite of obvious signs of decline, the U.S.-led Western alliance is defending its core position vis-à-vis ambitions of the semi-peripheral Global South for more participation: they rely on military supremacy, one (US\$) or two (US\$ and Euro) leading currencies, control of strategic companies and commodity chains as well as the (soft) and attractive power of the American/Western way of life. Coloniality of (U.S. and EU) Power is deeply implicated in the acceleration of multiple crises and conflicts, giving way to a highly explosive, dangerous situation.

Nobody can predict the outcome of the present crisis: whether or not local military conflicts will develop into a global war, whether or not the environment will survive "green" restructuring and semiperipheral catching up, whether or not we will face a new hegemon, an age of multipolarity or the rise of a more egalitarian post-growth society. While Helland/Lindgren are convinced that the crisis will lead to a demise of the capitalist world-system, overcoming the Coloniality of Power, Komlosy is sorting out potentials of anti-systemic coalitions within the capitalist world-system that eventually, in the moment of collapse, might be a basis for a more egalitarian world.