

Commentary on "Leadership, Production, and Exchange: An Evaluation of World-Systems Theory in a Global Context"

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v. 7/8/96

As we expand and extend our applications of world-system theory, as we explore the shifting interplay between cores and peripheries, as we see boundaries emerge and dissolve, we also fix world-systems theory itself on the map table. What is its core? What are its peripheries, or would it claim that all human interactions fall within its sway?

Thomas Hall, for example, does not take quite the entire map, but takes "intersocietal interaction" as the world-systems domain, since

*A focus on change in individual "societies" or "groups" fails to adequately attend to the effects of intersocietal interaction on social and cultural change.*

Acknowledging that such broad scope leads to some criticism of world-systems approaches, he comments that

*the general proclivity of some anthropologists and historians and other social scientists to become engrossed in primary data--ethnographic or archival--led them to be extremely suspicious of broad generalizations.*

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Although anthropologists appear to have Balkanized themselves into a plethora of theoretical factions, many of which still fervently embrace broad generalization, what remains common experience and practice is precisely a commitment to primary data. We all do fieldwork, even if we are not all primarily ethnographers. However, the romantic appeal of this, especially to humanities disciplines, seems to have led some to imagine that anthropology is ethnography or it is nothing.

Anthropology has always been more than ethnography, so I shall not now argue that position. However, I do think that world-systems theories will have to meet the challenge of ethnographic, archaeological, and historical particularities. Most of us have been exploring what world-systems can do for anthropology, but let us also beware the old problem of the hammer (when what you have is a hammer, it seems everything needs nailing). Let us turn away from that old saw (to mix metaphors) to ask what anthropology, archaeology, and history can do for world-systems.

For a start, anthropology, and here I would mean especially ethnography, offers a response to another problem Hall has noted:

*...world-systems has been criticized for being overly economic and for being Eurocentric (i.e. core-centric), state-centrist, and for paying too little attention to states, culture, and gender.*

In response, Hall cites a growing body of work that begins to correct these shortcomings. Anthropologists, archaeologists, and ethnohistorians are certainly ideally situated to carry forward a non-Euro/core-state-centric research program. And certainly, to give ethnography its due, fieldworkers (including those of decisively materialist persuasion) know that economic forces account at best only partially for why the people we learn from do what they do. Ethnography raises questions concerning system, structure, and agency that cannot simply be dismissed as out of scope for world-systems theory.

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**Culture Wars within the Discipline**

One way of viewing the discipline as a whole is to suggest that two overarching issues shape our orientations. Although I would not want to revive the old materialist/mentalistic debate, many anthropologists seem to center more on

(1) issues of adaptation, evolution, ecology, and economy,

while others center more on

(2) meaning, symbols, and the cultural construction of experience.

Following different emphases, we seem to have aligned ourselves into contending tribes and factions, sometimes ignoring one another, and sometimes trying to shout one another down. Is this really the apocalyptic struggle for anthropology's soul and future, or is it little more than the combat of different grasshoppers from different fields?

Small matters, as Aristotle observed, often cause disputes, even though the fights are not really about the small matters. The world-systems approach, precisely because it is a systems approach, may find itself marginalized if it fails to address some of the issues in contention within the discipline at large.

I would propose addressing the problem in these terms:

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### **Ethnography and Agency, Faction and Identity, Structure and Systems**

Fieldworkers, whether they be ethnographers, archaeologists, linguists, or ethnohistorians, are quite thoroughly engrossed in the "primary data". Or, more precisely, they are in the midst of whirling, buzzing confusions of people enacting their daily performances. As Radcliffe-Brown (among others) once told us, people do things (so we won't get confused about the superorganic--a warning for world-systems theorists). Even without Radcliffe-Brown's help, ethnographers quickly notice that people do things. And that leads most of us to wonder "Why? Why do those people do things?"

Ethnography draws us into the problems of agency, especially now that the long Boasian tradition of cultural determinism has lost its steam. To "explain" human behavior as a

product of culture or cultural rules is simply to rephrase the question. It would seem reasonable to expect general theory of any sort to offer some accounting of the mechanisms, processes, or fundamental causal connections that link it to actual human behavior. Theory, above all, is supposed to tell us why, but it still needs to translate that so that it may tell us who does what. (1)

Surrounded by the swirling kaleidoscope of people doing things, I have recently been looking more at the colors they display, the signs, the flags and banners, the gestures. It is not semiotic theory that leads me to this, but Aristotle. I look for the little things that people contest in lieu of the big things. I find them sometimes before I step out the door. For example, I almost never wear a necktie, yet I have chosen to do so on a few occasions. Only recently have I been driven to the agony of the tie as a political sign. If I wear a tie, would anyone think I'm Republican? I don't think anyone would make that mistake, but it didn't really matter until Rush and Newt invaded not only my nightmares but even my wardrobe.

My decision on whether to wear a tie can, of course, be connected to world-system considerations. My tie ties me to J. Crew, who tells me it is made in the USA, absolving me of complicity with the tyranny in Burma. Nonetheless, the silk comes from unspecified foreign sources, so we're in the world-system. We could also explore the economics of tie

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ownership. However, none of this would have much to do with why I choose to wear or not to wear a tie. That is an agony of another stripe.

Dressing is a form of struggle (this is the Greek meaning of "agony"), whether it be Ongka preparing for his big moka, or the businesswoman dressing for power, or an academic trying not to give a damn. Even if we don't give a damn, it still says something about who or what we are and who or what we are not. Even for the unwitting, in many urban areas in the U.S. clothing choice may be a matter of life or death. Although athletic wear can be expensive enough to attract the odd armed robber, I do not think economic orientations carry us very far toward understanding youth violence.

Although the struggle, the agony, may start from a piece of clothing, a gesture, a word, or even a color, everyone knows it's not really about the small stuff. It's about the big stuff, even if the participants themselves aren't always sure just what that is. But then trying to uncover that is why we have anthropologists.

What is at play, what is at stake, is part of identity. No one sets out to be Everyman, but instead to be someone or part of something in particular (even if that means being part of a large group or organization that limits apparent individual differences). The approach I

would suggest does not intend to center on the issue of how individual identity develops, but looks instead to group identities.

Sometimes group identities may be apparently as low-key as necktie choice. For example, we may find people in southwestern Madagascar who say they are distinct from other Malagasy because

*They pronounce "l", for example, in positions where other people pronounce "d". Thus, the Gasy words for "taboo" and "wife" are respectively faly and valy and not fady and vady. (Eggert 1986:331)*

Others may, given other circumstances, be more vehement:

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*We are Cheyenne, and all the shit of the world can't change that. [From the film Powwow Highway]*

Group identity requires differentiation from others who may appear to be very similar, or who may in fact share a common recent history. From an emic perspective, the stakes may be higher precisely because the differences are so slight (or at least initially so) from an etic perspective. This makes for big fights over small stuff. The term I would use for groups in conflict not because they are greatly different from one another, but instead because they are in many ways similar is faction.

As Elizabeth Brumfiel argues,

*...factional competition is implicated in developments as diverse as the spread of ceramic technology and maize agriculture, the origins of permanently instituted leadership offices, the expansion and collapse of states, and the European domination of indigenous New World peoples. (1994).*

Studying factional competition takes us from the "primary data" of ethnography (and we can hope to spot its correlates in archaeology as well as in the archives) directly into world-system issues. It draws our attention to the importance of the small stuff that might be dismissed and overlooked from an economic perspective. Even if we as academics aren't easily impressed with fashion (but that's one of the things we use to mark our status), we cannot say that those athletic shoes, those designer labels, those colors don't matter. During a recent visit to Madagascar, I was (perhaps pleasantly) surprised to find that many, if not most, of the Malagasy we met were not greatly interested in the U.S. Nonetheless, it was clear that some of the most highly prized

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clothing items were t-shirts celebrating the various cast members of Beverly Hills 90210. Signalling identity or membership places a premium on access to special markers -- objects, signs, and symbols that are not available to just anyone. Access may be restricted in a number of ways, but one of the most common is to seek markers that are rare because they have come a long distance. That long-distance trade in "preciosities" is important in elite competition and display is no longer news. I mention it now as one example of how studying factional competition gives us processual links between ethnography and world-systems theories.

A further example of the value of exploring factional competition is that it offers a correction to some of the Eurocentric assumptions that may still be associated with world-systems theory. Hall, among others, notes the Marxist ancestry of world-systems theory and its continuity as left analysis. One important critique of classical left analysis is the concept, or assumption, of class solidarity. As should have been painfully apparent even in Marx's own time, "class solidarity", if it exists at all, repeatedly fails to transcend national, ethnic, or even local boundaries. We might offer the counter-argument that conflict is more likely between persons or groups sharing similar conditions than between those in differing situations (Brumfiel 1994).

Factional competition between groups sharing many similarities may then intensify the politics of identity and reputation (Herzfeld 1987). This increases the value of signs of difference, and, in time, may allow a budding off of a "new" group. Especially if such a new group is able to claim its own territory, it may then form the core of an ethnicity.

Ethnogenesis may then result from processes I described earlier under the rubric of the anthropology of meaning. In other situations, it may also be understood in terms of adaptive radiation, as a parent group moves into new environment and smaller groups bud off into their own niches (Barth ; Kottak ). This latter ethnogenesis process would

come under the rubric of the anthropology of adaptation. Whatever the process promoting differentiation from prior commonality, the result is a structural change.

Ethnogenesis then increases the number of players in competition. Where once everyone was alike, and everyone pronounced their d's as d's, now we find different people, who pronounce their d's as l's, and for that (among other things) they may believe they are a better people. In time, the differences appear to harden into essences. In time, they are taken

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as coming from time immemorial. In time, they become, as Bourdieu puts it, things that go unquestioned because they come unquestioned.

In time, then, what were once intra-group relations become intersocietal relations, and we are brought back to the threshold of world-systems theories. The path I have outlined is rooted in what we may observe on the ground ethnographically. It does not begin with system, but with human action, human agency in the context of structures shaping and shaped from that agency. The focus on factional competition draws our attention to contests over group boundedness, which may then be discussed in such terms as

- (a) standoffs, peer polity interactions,
- (b) domination, hegemony, standoff, and varying terms of incorporation in world-systems
- (c) adaptive radiation and ethnogenesis.

I would also emphasize that such an approach is neither economic nor idealist. By exploring what people do, particularly on behalf of factional competition and the politics of identity, we find that in some cases substantial material interests are at stake, while in others the crucial markers may be less tangible.

### **Does World-Systems Theory Work?**

My point of departure was to address the "fit" of world-systems theory to the empirical materials or "primary data" that anthropologists and archaeologists are engrossed in. My general reading of the papers in this session (and others in anthropological and archaeological venues) is that the fit ranges somewhere from too damned baggy to too damned tight, with few reports of much in between. Complaints of baggy fit would be

expected if world-systems theory is seen as applicable to any and all intersocietal interactions.

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What then is not a case for world-systems theory?

Complaints of too-tight fit would be expected if world-systems theory requires all the baggage associated with the quest for comprehensive theories of capitalism. The more we are wed to Wallerstein 1974, the more we are squeezed into formal wear (and, as I noted earlier, that's not what anthropologists typically do).

Suggested solution---let's stop buying off-the-rack theory. Whether Wallerstein 1974 fits our materials doesn't matter. What does fit? Let's do some alterations both for fit and for getting past 1974's latest fashion. A great deal of new work has been done to get beyond the Euro/core centric bias of world-systems theory. Let's use it, and continue to work on the fit. We need the people engrossed in the primary data in ethnography, archaeology, and ethnohistory.

[Alexander's](#) paper seems to suggest a fit that is simultaneously too loose and too tight! She cites Barbara Price's complaint that world-systems theory is loose in identifying specific archaeological correlates. She then proceeds to argue that in her study area in the Yucatan the expectation from world-systems theory that we should find core dominance and greater marginalization, or "disenfranchisement" in the periphery apparently does not hold. This, however, is not surprising. Although a too-tight version of w-s-t may lead to such a predicted outcome, the ethnographic and archaeological evidence does not sustain the inevitability of core dominance or hegemony at local levels, especially over considerable distances. The empirical cases, among which hers is another valuable contribution, should show a variety of degrees of incorporation, standoff, or perhaps indifference in w-s encounters.

As Alexander observes, it is important to consider the significant role local conditions play in w-s interactions. The bottom-up approach of ethnography and archaeology is crucial for correcting any top-down bias still latent (if not dominant) in w-s-t.

[Shutes](#) also underscores the importance of tailoring w-s-t from the bottom up:

*It is frequently the case that those who exhibit an acute interest in ethnography are often chary about the use of broad-based theories to explain the incredible richness and diversity of human behavior that they encounter in their work.*

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By focusing on local production strategies, Shutes centers our attention on human action and thereby demystifies the focus on systems behavior endemic in systems approaches. By comparing two different regions within the European Union, he documents the different conditions of incorporation contested and negotiated at local levels. By doing so, he explores not only the diversity in w-s interactions, but puts human agency at the center of our view rather than at its periphery.

As Jeske explores the question, "does it (w-s-t) work?" for the Mississippian, the response seems to be a qualified "maybe...if." Much of the qualification is consistent with Alexander's complaint that the archaeological correlates of w-s-t still need clearer definition. As Jeske puts it, we still need to sharpen "...how to devise testable hypotheses that would differentiate a w-s approach from other concepts such as interaction spheres".

Jeske urges particular attention to problems of geopolitics and logistics in intersocietal power relationships. In concert with Stein, Jeske argues that "power distance decay" is a crucial problem for any claim of core coercive power over peripheral areas. Given ancient transport technologies, we must not overlook the severe limitations on long-distance power projection in archaeological cases.

Kuznar finds, as I have myself, that the military-expansionist Inca state offers promising terrain for w-s analysis. The archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence allows us to see expansion from Cuzco across a variety of regions that were home to a considerable variety of ethnic polities. One of the most intriguing aspects of the Inca case for w-s-t is that, as Kuznar quotes Morris and Thompson (1985),

*The Inca polity...appears to have emphasized the maintenance and manipulation of diversity rather than an attempt to integrate through the creation of cultural uniformity.*

This offers intriguing opportunities for exploring a multiplicity of ways that incorporation or resistance may be played out in different regions. As Kuznar explores some of these, he raises important questions regarding the role of not only material but ideological interests. Several of our participants have criticized a bias in w-s-t (though I would suggest w-s-t of an older vintage) toward material exchange as the central dynamic. Again, by exploring the role of ideological contest and factional competition we may hope to gain greater insights on human agency than might be afforded through excessively economic approaches.

Kardulias draws together a number of these themes as they apply to the Aegean. With Shutes and Alexander, he draws our closer attention to changes in production. Reprising a common theme in these papers, Kardulias urges us to break out of economic shackles. As we see argued also in Chase-Dunn and Hall, and as he cites Edens

*trade is just one facet of core-periphery relations and cannot be comprehended without consideration of warfare, diplomacy, cultural hegemony, and the social contexts of production and consumption.*

As he traces multiple levels of interaction in the Bronze Age World-System, Kardulias again underscores the variety in w-s interactions, so that it is not simply a unidirectional incorporation into a world economy. In doing so, Kardulias makes perhaps the strongest case for making a fit between local cases and w-s-t. First, he leaves behind the struggle to force early versions of w-s-t to fit cases they were not designed to cover, but instead suggests appropriate corrections as well as building upon other reformulations such as those offered by Chase-Dunn and Hall. Second, the Aegean is a particularly promising region for w-s analysis in part because sea transport allowed movements (including bulk goods) and contacts otherwise difficult or precluded in other ancient polities.

A world-systems analysis of the Aegean allows us to transcend some of the insularity that has afflicted some of the traditional historical discussion of the region. Some of our predecessors seem to have resisted the notion that Greece even was connected to a wide r

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world. More recently Walter Burkert has commented that

*The "miracle of Greece" is not merely the result of a unique talent. It also owes its existence to the simple phenomenon that the Greeks are the most easterly of the Westerners (1995:129)*

From this, perhaps it would not be such a great step to reach the observation of w-s theorists such as Andre Gunder Frank and Chris Chase-Dunn that in fact the Greeks were simply the most westerly of the Easterners!

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### **Endnotes**

(1) Although I am sure my experience is far from unique, I have recently clashed with an exasperating form of "theory" that seems to be generated largely by applying a set of grammatical stunts:

[1] Write a sentence.

[2] Convert as many words as possible into polysyllabic variants, preferably with latinate endings.

[3] Whenever possible, transform verbs into nominalizations.

[4] Once nominalizations are in place, try to modify them with one or more additional nominalizations.

[5] Translate active constructions into passives.

[6] Is the sentence now in any way clear? If yes, then repeat steps 2-5.

[7] Does the reader have any idea whatsoever about what the sentence says? If NO, then you have composed theory.

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(2) During a recent visit to Madagascar, I was (perhaps pleasantly) surprised to find that many, if not most, of the Malagasy we met were not greatly interested in the U.S. Nonetheless, it was clear that some of the most highly prized clothing items were t-shirts celebrating the various cast members of Beverly Hills 90210.

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