# DISCONTINUITIES AND PERSISTENCE

One world system or a succession of systems?

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I've recently published a book on the world system in the thirteenth century, entitled *Before European Hegemony.* It was intended in pan as a corrective to Immanuel Wallerstein's work on the sixteenth-century *et seq.*world-system.[2] My criticism was that Wallerstein, while creatively extending the work of other historians and correcting for some of their biases, had still accepted the main line of western historical scholarship: namely, that the "story" becomes interesting *only* with the "Rise of the West" after 1450.[3]

This, I contend, is much too late. Because his account begins essentially with the sixteenth century, Wallerstein tends to overemphasize the *discontinuity* between the new Eurocemered capitalist world economy that began to come into being then and the system of world-empires and world-economies that had preceded it. And what is less defensible, he refuses to "dignify" any pre-sixteenth-century patterns of global trade by applying the term "world-system" to them. Indeed, he defends reserving *that* term only for the *modem* world-system, with its capitalist structure.

In contradistinction, my position is that a very advanced world-system already existed by the second half of the thirteenth century, one that included almost all regions (only the "New World" was missing) that would be reintegrated in the sixteenth century. Indeed, nascent capitalism was present in various parts of that system, without actually succeeding in dominating all parts.[4] However, it was a world-system that Europe had only recently joined and in which it played only a peripheral role. Furthermore, this earlier world-system was organized in a very different way from the one over which Europe would ultimately exercise hegemony. The major metatheoretical dilemma in my work was (a) to see elements of continuity and discontinuity between what I conceptualized as successive but linked world-system stages; and (b) to account for *how and why* the transition occurred *when* it did.[5]

Andre Gunder Frank and I are now having a friendly debate – conducted by long-distance mails in which, I confess, he has been writing more regularly and voluminously than I have been answering. Like the earlier one I had by mail with Wallerstein when I was writing my book, this disagreement also has no resolution.[6]

Both debates have been over some "simple" (but ultimately unanswerable) questions:

1 Has there been *only one* world-system, the one that began with the *sixteenth century?*

*2* Have there been *several successive world-systems,* each with a changing structure and its own set of hegemons?

3 Or has there been only *a single world-system* that has continued to evolve *over the past 5,000 years*

Wallerstein espouses the first position, I have taken the second, and Frank and Gills contend the third. The present volume is part of this debate.

Is this a real controversy or is it merely a frivolous debate of the kind in which academicians sometimes engage for the sake of selling more books? I hope not the latter. What I would like to explore here is not whether one answer is right and the others wrong; cleanly, there is. no right answer. Rather, what I want to do is challenge us to think about what can be gained, intellectually and in terms of a research agenda, from a strategy that emphasizes continuities, versus one that emphasizes discontinuities.

It might be useful, however, to distinguish two levels of the argument: one on the regional level, the other on the international. On a regional (or what I have called a subsystem) level, one can argue not only

for *continuity*but even development and expansion of economic and cultural linkages, without having to assume that the international system itself exhibited such continuities. To put it another way, one might find that local patterns persist and even prosper, while, at the same time, acknowledging that the role of the local region in a wider system has undergone a real transformation. Such an approach might help to explain long-term consequences in a more fruitful way.

First, then, I would like to support the argument about persistence. This might best be illustrated by reference to the series of maps (based on McEvedy) that were prepared for and appear in *Before European Hegemony* (pp. 138-40, reproduced here as Figures 9.1, 9.2, and 9.3). If one examines only the right halves of the maps, one is struck by the remarkable continuity in trade routes and volume in *** discussion. But one can make an equally good case for *systemic* transformation. The left halves of the maps illustrate that the context within which this continuity existed was undergoing a radical expansion and restructuring, which made its meaning in the larger system more problematic.

The ediof this volume have asked me to set the historic stage by describing what was going on in the world in the thirteenth century. I shall do this, but I cannot resist moving beyond that time period to describe how the containing system drastically altered after the middle of the fourteenth century and especiallafter the early fifteenth century. It would be totally transformed by the sixteenth.

**THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY WORLD-SYSTEM**

As can be seen from Figure 9.4, I have conceptualized the thirteenth-century world-system as one that stretched between north-western Europe and China at its geographic extremes and have hypothesized that it was internally organized into eight overlapping circuits of trade that connected three (or possibly four)[7] core regions that were politically and culturally distinctive. While each of these core regions had one or more hegemons, no single subsystem exercised hegemony over the entire system. Rather, a rough and somewhat stable balance existed - not necessarily because of *detente,* but because, given the technological level of transport, as well as*siynfiunt cultural-religious barriers, there were real limits* ro span *of* control that fell far short of the entire system's scale.[8]

My book traces the processes whereby these subsystems were formed and gradually linked to adjacent ones in the centuries between, roughly, the eleventh through the opening decades of the fourteenth, when the peak of commercial integration was reached. By that time, high levels of surplus were being produced throughout the system, as evidenced, *inter alia,* by a cultural and artistic efflorescence that was remarkable for its level and extensiveness. My thesis is that this level was not only a *symptom* but a *product* of the connections that had been forged and were stimulating local economies throughout the system.

Some time after the opening decades of the fourteenth century, however, signs of decline were already evident - although it is hard to make a case that all of them were related to what was happening in the world-system. By the mid-fourteenth century, however, the case becomes clearer. Along the pathways that connected the various subregions a pandemic outbreak of bubonic plague occurred. It spread widely (see Figure 9.5), decimating populations along its path, shaking dynastic power bases, creating fissures and breaks within and between subsystems, and disturbing the *modus vivendi* that had, at its height, permitted almost frictionless trade and exchange.

One century later, one could observe these discontinuities very clearly. At the eastern extreme, where the plague evidently had originated, a process was set in motion that led first to the Ming Rebellion (1368), which overthrew the Yuan dynasty that for two centuries had unified China with Central Asia and facilitated trans-Eurasian land trade, and eventually (after 1430) to the withdrawal of the Chinese fleet (and its subsequent port rot) which had previously played so important a role in maintaining the eastern sea connections. Once again. Central Asia was poised in opposition to China - as it had traditionally been[9] - and presented a barrier rather than (what I have called) a "frictionless medium" through which trade and exchange moved relatively freely. Even after the closing of the Central Asian frontier, however, the sea trade from the Red Sea to the east persisted, as we shall see. It was only *after* a later Ming policy shift that

its final destinations - the ports of south-east China - were closed, which further reduced volume and viability.

Within the Middle East, the effects were no less dramatic. The Egyptian-based Mamluk system underwent a similar cycle.[10] The apogee of that subsystem was achieved under the Ayyubids and their successors, the Bahri Mamluks, during which period both Crusader incursions were thrust out and Mongol threats repelled, albeit not without the loss of Baghdad. Especially under the long, if discontinuous, rule of Sultan an-Nasr Mohammed between 1293 and 1341, prosperity was great, thanks to the operations of the so-called-Karimi merchants who sustained and mediated the Mediterranean sea trade of the Italians, conducted the eastern sea trade via port entrepots along the Islamicized west coast of India, and finally reached a working arrangement with the newly Islamicized Ghazanids in Iraq, along the overland route of reopened trade.

This prosperous period peaked roughly in the first few decades of the fourteenth century, but it was short-lived. The plague hit the Middle Eastern region with particular virulence, and the eventual transformation of the Mamluk system under the Burji Mamluks (after 1381) may be seen as parallel to the Chinese changes. In Egypt the fifteenth century was a period of increasing inflation during which the currency was debased, and one in which the Mamluk state expanded its active role in controlling trade, monopolizing export crops, squeezing local producers, and intimidating external traders.

Finally, the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 must be viewed in the context of a shift in the European subsystem, which had also been set in motion by events of the preceding century. The major European actors in the sea trade that linked northwestern Europe to the Middle East were the Genoese and Venetians, whose rivalry for sea control in the Mediterranean constituted a continuing plot-line in how the post-twelfth-century world-system was organized.

Between 1204 and 1261, Venice had been the major power in Constantinople and thus the guardian (and major beneficiary) of the northern gateway to Central Asian trade. The fall of the Latin kingdom in the latter year, or rather the restoration of Byzantine rule with the assistance of Venice's arch rival, Genoa, led to a redirection of Venetian trade via Egypt. It was a partnership that would benefit both for decades to come.

But Genoa's relative exclusion from the system was not without its eventual effect. By the last decade of the thirteenth century it .had already turned its attention to the Atlantic, effecting a sea link with Flanders that bypassed central France and making forays down the western coast of Africa along a path that would eventually be opened by Portugal, Genoa's new rival in the Atlantic.

In the mid-fourteenth century, however, both Venice and Genoa were hard hit by plague mortalities. Thanks to their sea connections with the Black Sea, from which the plague spread from Mongols to Europeans, the two port city states suffered proportionately greater mortalities than any other parts of Europe that were more peripherally situated. This led to a mid-century depression in both- cities, from which Venice eventually recovered, but Genoa did not." Indeed, the period 1378-84 marks the substantial defeat of Genoa in the Mediterranean rivalry between the two powers, although the final *coup de greice* was not administered until the end of the fourteenth century.

The relevance for Middle Eastern developments, and particularly for the subsequent rise of Ottoman power, should now be clear. In the course of the thirteenth and early" fourteenth centuries, a division of labor, or a *modus vivendi,* had been worked out. Genoa gained pribrity over the northern land route via its preferred status in Constantinople and its dominance over the Black Sea and the trading ports on it. (Genoese traders also benefitted from their role as providers of new recruits to the Mamluk dynasty centered on Egypt.) The middle route, which went overland from Palestine to the Persian Gulf, underwent a severe decline as an attractive alternative, after the last Crusader kingdom was eliminated towards the end of the thirteenth century (the so-called "fall" of Acre in 1291). This left, as the major rival to the Black Sea-overland route to China, the southern route, in which, thanks to the increasingly close symbiosis between the Mamluks and

the Venetian traders, the Venetians were becoming more important in the sea trade with the farther east. The Egyptians still dominated that trade via their monopoly over the Red Sea route.

With the reduction in trade over the northern land route, by the plague and then the break-up of the Mongol empire that had unified Central Asia with China, the Genoese were no longer in a strong position vis-a-vis their rival, Venice. Indeed, there are no records of any Genoese traders in China after 1340. Thus, Genoa was weakened economically and, consequently, militarily. Texpansion of the Ottoman Turks into (newly named) Istanbul was in part the fruit of Genoa's final defeat in the Mediterranean.

This left the southern, mostly sea, route as the only one to which Europeans (largely through Venetian traders) had access. While throughout the fifteenth century this route continued to prosper, the peculiar alliance between the Mamluks, who controled access to eastern markets and suppliers, and the Venetians, who transshipped most of the eastern goods to European markets, was controling a larger share of a declining amount of world trade. This monopoly was finally broken by the Portuguese, beginning in the early sixteenth century.

**THE FALL OF THE EAST PRECEDES THE RISE OF THE WEST"**

This is the final argument in my book. In it, I contend that the entire Indian Ocean arena lay open to foreign "conquest" for two reasons. First, patterns of nonhegemonic trade had prevailed for many centuries in that arena.[13] Multiple naval powers not only shared the trade, but even carried each others' goods and merchants. This meant that the powers involved in the Indian Ocean trading system had absolutely no preparation to resist the Portuguese incursion into their waters in the early decades of the sixteenth century. The second reason, of course, was the prior Chinese withdrawal from the sea and the rotting in port of its former navy.[14] Since the Chinese fleet was the only force that (earlier) could have marshaled sufficient strength to offer resistance to the Portuguese, the latter's ability to "skim" the surplus from the continuing sea trade could not be prevented.[15]

The successful conquest of the Mamluk empire by the Ottoman Turks, which was roughly contemporaneous with Portuguese expansion into the Indian Ocean, must in part be attributed to these changes in the larger system. When Egypt came under Ottoman rule in 4516, the ease with which the former was defeated was not unrelated to the setbacks it had earlier experienced in the eastern trade.

The rest is, as they say, history. By the latter part of the sixteenth century, not only had the Ottoman fleet been defeated by the Venetians (in the battle of Lepanto in 1571) but they ceased any pretensions to remaining a sea power. After that, the Mediterranean was not a Muslim "lake." Furthermore, the major arena of the world system had begun to shift to the Atlantic. Braudel documents the eclipse of the Mediterranean in his two-volume work on the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II,[16] while there is voluminous work on the growing importance of the so-called "New World." There is no need to document this.

However, these naval defeats did not mean that Ottoman power declined, nor did they mean a break in the continuity of the land system that connected Anatolia with south-eastern Europe (notably the Balkans) or with northern India and beyond. But they did mean that thereafter the Ottoman strength was to be over land. The importance of Turks and Arabs in the sea trade of both the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean was at an end.

**WHAT CAN BE GAINED BY CONCEPTUALIZING THE TRANSITION AS A STRUCTURAL REORGANIZATION OF THE WORLD-SYSTEM, I.E. PERSISTENCE**

None of this global analysis implies that regional subsystems disappeared, or even declined, if measured in absolute terms. In this sense, Gunder Frank is correct to speak of one long march, rather than a set of equal cycles. My own metaphor is one of a very long up-cycle with fluctuations that at times are so extreme that it is analytically useful-to speak of "breaks" and restructuring. There is, then, no necessary contradiction

between seeing the persistence and even improvement in economic activities over time *within a given region* and seeing that this region was falling increasingly below the average change for the system or the exponentially increasing shift in a region that, due to restructuring, was far outdistancing the subregion in question.

It is not enough to fight the stereotype of decay in the Ottoman-north-India region, because, despite its prominence in historical discussions, it was just not true. At least, my readings of the serious work that has been done by scholars of the seventeenth century on that region is a sufficient refutation of the stereotype.

I would suggest, however, that we need to pay more attention to the changed role of the region in question in terms of the larger system. In the final analysis, although the Venice-Cairo axis continued to operate down through Ottoman times, and the rumors of the demise of the spice trade were exaggerated, the fact is that the context of this trade, had undeniably altered. The Venetian fleet did vanquish the Ottomans. The world-system did eventually restructure away from the Mediterranean and the sea powers that controled it. The real arena did move outward to the Atlantic and the Atlantic rim nations of Portugal and Spain, before shifting to north-western Europe. The fact is that the axis of Central Asia, Anatolia, northern India, and the Levant-Egypt - an axis of central importance in earlier times which was scarcely destroyed by the seventeenth century -never again occupied the center stage of the world-system. I urge study of not only the continuities at the subsystem level, but also the discontinuities most evident at the large scale.

## NOTES

This chapter first appeared as a manuscript in 1990 as "Discontinuities and persistence: one world system or a succession^of systems?" from the New School of Social Research in New York.

1 See *Before European Hegemony: The World System a.d. 1250-1350,* New York:

Oxford University Press, 1989.

2 Particularly Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modem World-System,* vol. 1, New York; Academic Press, 1974.

3 The term is, of course, drawn from the title of William McNeill's famous book, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, even though the lengthy text of his book stresses the earlier and continuing importance of the East.

4 Contention over the meaning of "capitalism," and over when it began (whether in the thirteenth century or the sixteenth), has been going on for a very long time, and I have no wish to enter that debate in this article. It is, however, amply covered in my book.

5 See my "Restructuring the premodern world system," in *Review* 8 (spring 1990): 273-85.

6 See his review essay of *Before European Hegemony* in *Journal of World History* 1 (2) (fall 1990): 249-56, in which he sets forth his own views. He has been sending me materials and book outlines for the past year.

7 At the minimum, the cores were north-western Europe, centered on the triangular axis of Flanders, central Prance, and northern Italy, the Middle East, radiating from Baghdad and then Cairo, and China, along the axis of the Grand Canal that connected the Yellow River with the Yangtze. The intervening zone - including the Indian subcontinent and the East Indian archipelago - is harder to conceive of as a "core" since its mixed character and shifting limits often fragmented it into parts that were within the orbits of separate cores. I would not argue strongly against viewing this central region as a core, so long as political factors were excluded.

8 In the thirteenth century these limits had expanded considerably over those that prevailed in the two preceding world-system formations: the first which centered on the Mesopotamian-Indus Valley connection several millennia before Christ, the second which connected the western Mediterranean with the west coast of the Indian subcontinent in the centuries just before and after the start of the Christian era. The limits of the second era were somewhat widened during the early centuries of Islam, eventually expanding to encompass those in force in the thirteenth century.

9 Barfield's book is significant for our purposes because itindicates that the thirteenth century Yuan period was the *only* exception to the long history in which nomads from Central Asia were pitted against the settled population of China. See Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empire and China,* Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

10 These vicissitudes can best be traced through stuthe capital city of that empire, Cairo, whose growth and decline sensitively reflected Mamluk fortunes. See my *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1971.

11 See, among others, B.Z. Kedar, *Merchants in Crisis: Genoese and Venetian Men of Affairs and the Fourteenth-Century Depression*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

12 See my "Did the West rise or did the East fall? Some reflections on the thirteenth century," presented to the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association in Chicaco in summer 1987 and subsequently printed as Working Paper No. 50, New York: New School for Social Research, Center for Studies of Social Change, 1987.

13 In this evaluation I depend heavily on (he prior work by K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

14 The Ming withdrawal from the sea is a subject of considerable debate in the field. While scholars disagree on why, they do agree on when. The scuttling of *****, the Chinese fleet did not occur as soon as the Yuan dynasty was overthrown. In fact. Admiral Cheng-Ho's "treasure ships" continued their voyages up through the early 1430s in a remarkable show of force that carried them to the Persian Gulf, as well as to all important intermediary ports. Nevertheless, the Chinese navy was left to rot in ports after that, which meant that they could offer no resistance to Portuguese men-of-war when they arrived some seventy years later.

15 A small fleet mounted jointly by the Mamluks and the Indian Muslim rulers to protect their control over the Arabian Sea between them was easily defeated near Diu in the first decade of the sixteenth century by far superior Portuguese armed ships.

16 See Femand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World m the Age of Philip II, 2* vols. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.