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## CONFERENCE REPORTS

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### *Processes of the World System*

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The third annual Political Economy of the World System conference was held at Binghamton, New York May 11-13, 1979. It was co-sponsored, fittingly, by the Political Economy of the World System Section of the American Sociological Association and by the Fernand Braudel Center at SUNY-Binghamton. The latter is currently the main locus of world system research, and it is presided over by Immanuel Wallerstein, whose *Modern World System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974) represents the major statement to date of this particular approach to social and economic history.

If we may oversimplify a bit, the essence of this perspective is the notion that the origins and subsequent transformations of capitalism must be grasped geographically, i.e., as a world phenomenon. The division of labour necessary for capitalist development has occurred not only within the industrial nations, but also between countries or regions of the world economy. Core countries have produced the manufactured goods, directed and profited from the flow of capital, and generated a "progressive" agriculture; peripheral areas have exported primary products (often produced with forced labour systems) and have tended toward monoculture, dependence and underdevelopment. The functions of semi-peripheral areas in the theory are less clear: they may have combined core and peripheral functions in a sort of dual economy, represented zones of transition, or served as accomplices of the core countries in the exploitation of the periphery. Change in the world system implies reciprocity between core, periphery, and semi-periphery, and an intimate link between the external and the internal, between a region's or nation's position in the overall system and its internal social structure. Thus, qualitative advances in productive technique and organization have been associated historically with the extension of the periphery or its more intensive exploitation. Conversely, the economic progress of the core has been severely retarded when, for one reason or another, the scope of economic activity has been constricted.

These fundamental insights generated by the world system approach have been surprisingly well received by economic and social historians, who seem quite ready to grant the geographical dimension to the origins of capitalism. But even its most ardent advocates recognize that enormous problems remain in applying the ideas to the history of the world economy since its establishment in the early modern era. The Binghamton conference focussed on three such problems: cycles and trends in the world economy; the processes of bourgeoisification and proletarianization throughout the system; and the methodological implications of this model of development.

Papers at the conference ranged over a broad span of topics and terrain, from Kenneth Barr's case study of a Lancashire textile firm to Edward Friedman's enlightening rendering of "The Maoist View of World Class Structure". What unified the diverse contributions was the opening discussion of cycles and trends by Wallerstein and David Gordon. Wallerstein began by arguing that the evolution of the world system, going back as far as the XIVth century, has proceeded through regular cycles of about a half-century duration. These "long waves", linked in the literature with the name of Kondratiev, have been associated in their upward phases with rising prices, population and production, and, particularly critical for Wallerstein, expansion in the world system. This expansion may take place via the simple incorporation of new areas, or through the rather more complex processes by which aspects of new areas, or through the rather more processes by which aspects of daily life are commercialized, by which previously unpaid labour becomes a wage-earning proletariat, and by which the production of goods is increasingly mechanized. In this formulation, the upswing of long waves is the time when these various expansive processes proceed rapidly, the downswing represents their slowing down. In addition, Wallerstein suggests a connection between the phases of long waves and struggles for hegemony between different core states in the world system.

For Wallerstein, then, the rhythmic behaviour of the world economy is linked to its social structural transformation and the shifting geographical relations this entails. The connection between structural change and cyclical patterns was argued even more forcefully by David Gordon. Gordon claimed that the upswings of long waves were tied not only to the expansive trends noted by Wallerstein, but also to fundamental alterations in the "social structure of accumulation" within core countries. The upward phase of a Kondratiev wave ushers in spurts of technical innovation, new patterns of labour control, novel spatial arrangements (i.e., new types of cities and relations between cities, suburbs and countryside), and different levels and styles of mass consumption. Though Gordon and Wallerstein disagreed on several minor points, the thrust of the exchange was to expand the framework of the world system perspective to deal more effectively with economic trends of medium duration (the 20-25 years of a Kondratiev half-cycle), with social structural evolution, and with the

political conflicts and transitions accompanying the succession of hegemonic powers. To this writer, it seemed an altogether critical exercise in making operational the broad insights of the world system perspective and in building bridges to more traditional analyses of social and political change.

Few of the participants in the conference were privy to such theoretical considerations prior to the meeting, so that their contributions, for the most part, at best served as unconscious and accidental confirmations or applications of Wallerstein's and Gordon's generalizations. Valon Burris' paper on class relations in advanced capitalist societies, for example, took as its terms of reference a tradition of social analysis quite distant from the world system approach, but its argument was nonetheless compatible. The same could be said of papers by Cynthia Enloe and Charles Ragin on ethnicity, of a variety of informative essays by Charles Bergeuist comparing labour in Argentina and Chile, by Martin Murray on South Africa agriculture, by Thomas Holloway and Jason Clay, whose papers explored the peculiarities of Brazilian class structure, and by James Toth on Egypt and Suzanne Jonas on Latin America. Most often, these papers on different peripheral or semi-peripheral regions of the world economy focussed upon changes in social structure with little distinction between the secular and the cyclical, but the overall impact was to flesh out in some detail the social processes underlying the stages of capitalist development.

Other contributions made more explicit use of theory. Nicole Bosquet explored the relation of economic trends to the political hegemony of different states, while Albert Bergeson searched for long waves in colonial expansion. In a session devoted to the consequences of long waves, Kenneth Barr showed how they shaped the behaviour of an individual firm and James Cronin claimed that they determined shifts in labour and social movements in Britain and other parts of Europe since 1850. It is argued that the upswings in long waves, by stimulating major technical reorientations, and by effecting shifts in leading sectors and in urban spatial arrangements, regularly have remade the working class in its very composition and internal social networks. The stress upon social structures and their transformation was also critical in Walter Goldfrank's insightful, comparative study of the different fates in Italy and Japan in the interwar years.

The conference concluded with a lengthy, original argument from Robert Bach "On the Holism of a World-System Perspective". Bach made explicit many of the unspoken methodological assumptions and implications of the conference papers and the approach they embody. The piece will be of special interest to those concerned with methods of social research, and constitutes an impressive demonstration of the potential usefulness of the insights developed by Wallerstein and his growing group of like-minded colleagues. For those who seek further evidence of the value of the approach, a selection of the conference papers will be published as the *World System Annual 3* in early 1980.

