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Michael Boyden
Harvard University
Department of English and American
Literature and Language
Barker Center
12 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
USA

e-mail: michael.boyden@iasa-rias.org

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WORLD-SYSTEMING AMERICAN STUDIES

Stephen Shapiro

University of Warwick

Thomas Kuhn argued that theoretical paradigms fall away when they become increasingly unable to explain the material effects that their evidence presents. Something similar is happening within American cultural studies with the recent calls to internationalize its perspective. What institutional impact this rhetoric will mean for the current hegemony by US-based scholars on the conference-journal-press nexus remains to be seen. The slogan, however, accurately reflects a demagnetization of the field's compass first noticeable with the growing interest in postcolonial theory. Could the study of a settler colony cite its own struggle against the European metropolis as authorizing credentials in the project of 'third-world' or 'Southern' anti-imperialism? Or was this desire to incorporate postcolonialist discourse another international division of labor with the consumption of theoretical models produced by those associated with the peripheral regions?

Postcolonialism's reception in American Studies can be traced through the ensuing interest in globalization and oceanic studies, like the New Atlanticism, but its best legacy might be with the interest in redefining American Studies through the historical sociology of world-systems analyses, mainly associated with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein.¹ The grand narrative of world-systems analyses offers a more judicious mechanism for evaluating the place of the United States within the world (which also has implications for how postcolonial studies defines itself), and one, for reasons explained below, that is more open for Americanists outside of US institutions to participate in as equals.

No program for a world-systems cultural studies automatically exists; it remains to be constructed, partially because world-systems scholars emphasize that they

¹ Because Wallerstein's writing builds specific arguments with reference to his entire oeuvre, readers can find it difficult to capture the horizon of a world-systems perspective in any single title. While Wallerstein's *Modern World-System* trilogy (Wallerstein, 1974; Wallerstein, 1979; Wallerstein, 1989) contains most of the basic formulations, new students might find a more enabling starting point with Wallerstein's and Goldfrank's article-length summaries of the project's formation (Wallerstein, 2004b; Goldfrank, 2000) as well as Wallerstein's monograph-length introduction (Wallerstein, 2004a). Other important landmarks to world-systems not authored by Wallerstein include those by Arrighi and Chase-Dunn. Shannon also provides a useful overview. For an attempt to provide a working kit for graduate students, see my syllabus on-line for a seminar on world-systems and world literature.



present a perspective, rather than a methodology, and partially because this approach, mainly developed within the intersection of political science, history, and sociology, lacks experience with cultural hermeneutics. While international relations has already had its ‘moment’ of encounter with world-systems writings, the one for cultural studies will inevitably have different preoccupations and points of debate.²

At its heart, world-systems analysis relates political geography and economic history by mapping long waves of economic expansion and contraction caused by the intrinsic falling rate of profit generated by capitalist regimes of accumulation against the spatial reorganization of commodity chains and production processes within a global core and periphery. These long-waves involve roughly fifty-year periods, so that world-systems is less interested in a historiography of specific dates, decades, or even generations. A commodity chain links all the exchanges between an object’s production, its distribution through geographical transfers, and its consumption. The core is not a static point, but rather a zone, since it is analogous to the term ‘middle-class’, which refers to a set of elites who relentlessly compete against each other for the accrued benefits from accumulation even as they collectively antagonize outsiders. Core regions consist of strong nation-states that define the traffic in goods and commodified labor-power to their advantage, while the periphery includes those weak state regions that become violently seized for the natural resources of its terrain, strategic location, and labor of its peoples. The contours of the topography alter in response to business cycles shaped by the law of (capitalist) Value as Marx described it. World-systems studies look specifically at the cycles within modern historical capitalism, which can often be characterized by the rise to power by an especially dominant State: for example, the Italian city-states of Genoa and Venice in the fifteenth-century, Spain in the sixteenth, the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth, England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United States in the twentieth, and, most likely, China in the twenty-first.

With an explanation for why power relations and human geographies change, world-systems analyses can provide a more analytically rigorous context to our discussions, as well as reformulate our understanding of the historical formation of class and status groups. For instance, rather than talk generally about ethno-racial ‘contact zones’, world-systems notes that because the social action of the core region is too incommensurate with that of the periphery, the former requires a calibrating zone that can mediate and ‘translate’ the cultural and commodity economies of each sphere to one another. The semiperiphery is the sphere that receives, monetarizes, and forwards two kinds of commodities, the core’s ‘fictional’ ones of credit, insurance, and contracts over rights to territorial claims and the periphery’s labor-power and natural resources. As the ‘transistor’ space where two different segments of a commodity chain become articulated and receive their first

² For early debates about the encounter between world-systems and cultural studies, see King. Recent efforts to deploy a world-systems perspective for cultural and literary readings include Baucom, Derluignian, Dunaway, Moretti, and Shapiro (forthcoming).

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pricing, the semiperiphery is the contact zone of socio-cultural transvaluation that makes it possible for the core and periphery to transmit value to the other through socially-conditioned markers, ranging from money to textual artifacts and performances of personal identities.

Because the semiperiphery is the space that mediates the traffic between the societies of the core and the periphery, it should not be considered as neatly contained within the borders of a particular political nation-state, but as a space that intersects and overlays different spatial levels. One example of semiperipheral spaces formed by core/periphery brackets is the city, which links the labor of domestic and foreign immigrants with an internationalized haute bourgeoisie's consumerism and financial dealings. Such a description of the metropolis as formed by cyclical pressures within the world-system overcomes the urban fetish of the 'global cities' school (Sassen, 1991), which often reifies and autonomizes urban experience; helps explain the mechanism of spatial scaling in ways more specific than language of the 'glocal'; and provides a more satisfying critical narrative for explaining immigration flows than the descriptive slogan of 'routes and roots', heard now in ASA circulars.

When the concept of the semiperiphery is thought of as a temporally-influenced materialization of the flows of social energy, it provides a new framework for rethinking the onset of new, mixed cultural forms such as those produced from the collision of highly institutionalized and consecrated 'high' (core) artifacts and popular, folk (peripheral) accents. Much of the arguments about cultural hybridity, heteroglossia, and modern/postmodern aesthetic bricolage could be meaningfully rescued from their current exhaustion when recuperated within a world-systems approach that explains why mixed forms might appear through the pressures of economic cycles that force new trajectories of human movement.

Another defining feature of world-systems approaches involves its emphasis on infrabourgeois competition, the squeezing out of the global petite bourgeoisie, as a key feature to cross-class conflict. Competition within the middle-classes has frequently been downplayed in favor of discussion of (racialized, engendered) bourgeois-plebeian/proletarian class struggle, but the one has no meaning without the other. For instance, while recent whiteness studies has foregrounded the social conditioning of racial identities as the attempt to construct a cross-class hegemony by encouraging the laboring-class to buttress an often national identity by assuming a position of superiority with regards to other exploited peoples, racial distinctions have also been produced as a result of jostling within the middle-classes for preeminence. If the Irish were made white in the nineteenth century, German-Americans were progressively threatened with exclusion from this privilege throughout the early twentieth century. Whiteness is a discursive field that establishes both inclusions and exclusions within hegemonic social formations.

By considering modern racial, gender, and sexual identities as status groups produced by the mesh of bourgeois competition and class-conflict, world-systems approaches have a de-essentializing explanation for the material produc-



tion of these identities via political economy that substantively differs from various flavors of deconstruction and may facilitate a reunion between the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and British Cultural Studies and later Foucauldian-derived modes of cultural discursivity. These two strands have driven major tendencies within American Studies, but their proponents often seem to glide alongside one another. American Studies has often held up its Emersonian lack of a method as a virtue, but this pragmatism has often functioned as a polite means of eliding theoretical encounters that ought to happen. A world-systems approach provides the rubric for such a meeting.

Its emphasis on constantly shifting rearrangements means that world-systems thought tends more to a Gramscian perspective on social and cultural formations that differs from either a formalist generic criticism or a left-wing tradition regarding social ‘totalities’ that runs through Lukács, the Frankfurt School, and Fredric Jameson. Because world-systems approaches descend more from the line of Lenin and Luxemburg on imperialism and Trotsky on combined and uneven development, they provide a means for American Studies to go beyond the cul-de-sac questions of cultural authenticity and the subversion-containment antimony by developing an underused intellectual resource of thought on mixed forms. Similarly, while a strand of postwar cultural studies is often mesmerized by the ethics of personal consumerism (Lee, 2000), world-systems approaches are more interested in treating consumption as a matter of collective markets. This may initially seem a turn away from questions of subjectivity and agency, but only because recent criticism has colored these terms in the tones of individual possession.

Because world-systems sees historical capitalism as operating in widening cyclical reformations, it suggests a new model of comparative studies that involves a non-sequential form of longitudinal study. By looking at similar analogous moments in the cycle, we have both a means of forming comparisons and an escape from arguments about a transhistorical ‘spirit’ or ‘identity’. Simply because certain phenomena appear at similar moments in the cycle of American history with relation to the reformation of the world-system, this does not mean that a continuity or tradition exists. American cultural history has had several instances of evangelistic ‘Great Awakening’ tied to patriarchal cultural pessimism and imperialist landgrabs. Since these often emerge at moments of the transition between one phase of a long wave and another, we might consider them less as instances of essential characteristics than as responses by one alliance of middle-class interests in times of hierarchy reshuffling caused by changing global conditions. Furthermore, the comparison by dynamic similarities indicates ways in which a study of Spain, let’s say, at one point in the cycle of its hegemony during the seventeenth century, may illuminate American developments at an analogous moment during the nineteenth, or how events in America’s nineteenth century may foreshadow events in China or India later in our own. Because world-systems studies takes as its object the formation of historical capitalism as a non-geoculturally determined feature, it has no enduring commit-

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ment to a ‘eurocentrism’ that sustains the separation of ‘postcolonial’ area studies from ‘western’ ones.

Non-US-based Americanists are ideally situated to explore and cultivate a world-systems approach because of its roots in and acceptance of Marx’s economic and political writing. Understanding an intellectual tradition is not the same as endorsing it, yet any attempt to poach these terms without a sense of the underlying debates that produced those terms in the first instance will easily collapse and void their purchase. In the current climate, US colleagues exist within an environment that makes renewed collective education about the foundational terms and debates of world-systems analysis difficult to conduct. For scholars outside of this ideological pressure, our responsibility is to conduct the research our colleagues cannot.

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