

WORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

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Summary

World-systems analysis is a knowledge movement elaborated since the 1970's and is a critique of dominant modes of analysis in the nineteenth-century social sciences. It insists on three things primarily: (1) World-systems (and not nation-states) are the basic unit of social analysis; (2) Neither nomothetic nor idiographic epistemologies permit useful analyses of social reality; (3) The existing disciplinary boundaries within the social sciences no longer make any intellectual sense.

World-systems analysis is not a subdivision of the social sciences. It is another approach to, or perspective on, the ways in which one should undertake social analysis of historical reality. As a mode of analysis, it must itself be placed in its historical context, which is where we begin. This will be followed by a discussion of the distinctive features of world-systems analysis. Then we shall turn to reviewing arguments with its critics.

1. Historical Origins of World-systems Analysis

Concepts in the social sciences are seldom without precedent. But it is only when they receive considerable attention and a reasonable amount of empirical elaboration that we can consider that they have entered the purview of the social sciences as a structure of knowledge. In this restricted sense, world-systems analysis came into existence in the 1970s.

The dominant current in world social science from the late nineteenth century to circa 1970 was that social science consisted of a series of specified disciplines with more or less accepted boundary lines. Whereas, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were a very large number of different appellations of university chairs that seemed to

cover matters we today call social science, this list began to be reduced to a select few. As of 1945, the standard list included anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology. The author would include history, even though many historians insisted that history was not a social science. The author would also include Oriental studies, although this was not widely accepted as a social science discipline. And, on the other hand, the author would not include psychology, because the object of psychology treats a different level of reality than social science. This, however, is controversial. This short list of names had become standard in most universities across the world as of 1945, but since then there has been a blossoming of other names, so that by 2000 it had become less clear that there was a standard list.

The logic of the list that had evolved between 1850 and 1945 was that it reflected three intellectual cleavages thought to be most important by nineteenth-century scholars: past/present; the Western world/the others; and the three presumed separate domains of modernity. Historians studied the past and economists, political scientists, and sociologists studied the present. All four of these disciplines studied the Western world and anthropologists and Orientalists studied the "others." The anthropologists studied "primitive" societies, and the Orientalists studied non-Western "high civilizations." Finally, the study of the Western present was divided among the three domains into which, it was argued, all of the modern world had become differentiated: the market (economics), the state (political science), and civil society (sociology). As of 1945, the boundaries between the "disciplines" were considered quite firm intellectually, and they were reinforced organizationally.

This categorization was intellectually defensible in terms of the dominant social realities of the world from 1850 to 1945. But it began to fall apart after 1945 for two separate reasons which combined to undermine the schema. On the one hand, the geopolitical self-assertion (or reassertion) of the non-Western world (decolonization, national revolutionary movements, the Bandung conference of 1955) made it not very useful to Westerners to study these countries via the lens of either anthropology (with its traditional emphasis on "tribes" that had no "history") or Orientalism (with its traditional emphasis on philology and the analysis of esoteric non-Western, but essentialist and therefore unchanging, cultural patterns).

In the post-1945 period, historians, economists, political scientists, and sociologists were all encouraged to include the non-Western world in their domain of research. When that happened, anthropologists decided to abandon their exclusive concern with the non-Western world and study the cultural patterns of the Western world as well. And the Orientalists, under considerable political pressure, committed organizational suicide, for the most part renaming themselves (cultural) historians. The epistemological gap between studying the West and studying the "others" more or less ceased to exist.

The second new element was the enormous expansion of the world university system after 1945 in terms of numbers of universities, numbers of faculty, and numbers of students. For faculty and for doctoral candidates, this led to the search for more niches into which social scientists could claim a specialty, and for doctoral students an original topic of research. One way to do this was to add a second discipline's name as a modifying adjective to one's specialty (economic anthropology, social history, etc.) which expanded the domains of

acceptable research for persons in the separate disciplines. However, at the same time, it led to a breakdown of the disciplinary separations that had been predicated on presumably the radical distinctions between different spheres of social life.

The response to these two breakdowns of the logic of the distinctive disciplines was multiple. All sorts of concepts and methodological assumptions that had seemed so useful and so obvious now were open to reevaluation. One major way of handling some of these problems that obtained wide purchase from 1945 to about 1970 was the newly-fashionable concept of "modernization" built around a social process called "development." In one sense, modernization was not at all a new concept. It is easy to demonstrate that most of the great binary distinctions developed by nineteenth-century social scientists - status/contract, mechanical/organic solidarity, *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*, traditional versus rational-legal legitimation, etc. - were after 1945 being simply collapsed into one overall category of traditional/modern.

Development, which was of course an avatar of the eighteenth-century concept of progress, had two virtues which made it into a useful operational tool for post-1945 social scientists. On the one hand, it allowed the social scientist to distinguish between various kinds of development - economic, political, social - and thereby maintain intact the classical distinction that undergirded the three great nomothetic disciplines of the social sciences. But on the other hand, it allowed the social scientist to overcome the Western world/"others" distinction now out of favor by adding the codicil that different countries were at different "stages" of development. This had the advantage of being universalist. The operations of all states worldwide were explained by the same concept of development and therefore were said to be pursuing the same trajectory or model of development. On the other hand, the states were also different (or particular) at the present time, because they were at different "stages" of the same developmental process. In addition, "development" had a third virtue. One could derive from its study useful parables for political advice: if "underdeveloped" countries copied the wisdom of "developed" ones, they would advance more rapidly along the universal path of societal development. As a result, the gap between the "developed" and the "underdeveloped" would inevitably close. In this way, modernization theory put forth a very optimistic view of the future of those states that were still poor and struggling.

This intellectual patchwork seemed for a while to be a promising solution to the intellectual and political issues of the post-1945 world. Within 20-25 years, however, it fell apart under multiple assaults. By 1970, it had become reasonably clear that the real-world gap between "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries, far from closing, was growing wider. The reinvigorated militancy of both women's movements and movements of ethnic/racial/national understrata found no explanatory or political berth within the framework of modernization theories, or at least none that these movements found useful. And the world revolution of 1968 threw the cozy dominance of modernization theories and theorists out of kilter altogether by challenging both their substantive and their methodological premises.

It is at this point that world-systems analysis presented itself as a knowledge movement that made a series of arguments which called into question first modernization theory and then, more fundamentally, the whole structure of the social sciences as they had been constructed in the nineteenth century. There were three basic elements to world-systems analysis. One had to do with space, one with time, and one with epistemology.

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Biographical Sketch

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