

# ONE WORLD SYSTEM OR MANY: THE CONTINUITY THESIS IN WORLD SYSTEM HISTORY

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## **Summary**

The continuity thesis in world system history expresses the idea of long-term historical continuity in contrast to the idea of perpetual change and progression through a series of epoch-altering transformations. This perspective has important conceptual roots in non-western philosophical traditions. Drawing much inspiration from historical materialism, the continuity thesis nonetheless problematizes any hypothesized transition to capitalism. There are vital processes that remain unchanged across the period of the alleged transition, and the model itself is (poorly) drawn from the experience of a single world region. Important characteristics of the thesis include concern for economic cycles, the development of core-periphery-hinterland complexes, hegemony and super-hegemony, a set of three dialectical tensions including capital versus *oikos*, unfree labor versus free commodified labor, and organization versus entropy. In contradistinction to the profoundly Eurocentric nature of much contemporary social thought, the continuity thesis is humanocentric.

## **1. Continuity in World History**

Continuity is a concept used to express the idea of long-term historical continuity, in contrast to the idea of (perpetual) change, or periodic epochal transformation. Ever since the onset of the European Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, and modern industrialization and urbanization over the 19th and 20th centuries, the idea of progress has been a dominant concept in historical and everyday experience. However, this idea of progress, so closely associated with the re-conceptualization of time and space which has accompanied modernity and capitalism and their relentless global expansion, is intrinsically linear and is based on the expectation of perpetual (or permanent) change punctuated by critical transformation, affecting virtually all aspects of life and society. This mentality is now so deeply entrenched in the contemporary human psyche that we take it for granted as natural, though it is much better understood as a historical product of specific conditions. Therefore, by posing the contrasting idea of continuity, i.e. that which persists, is perennial, and does not tend toward change, we may also pose a challenge to the common sense understanding of the world, and of world history, as a linear progression based upon perpetual (and radical) alterations, steps or stages in social development.

Linear conceptions of historical time have existed in the past, and some scholars have argued that such a conception is embedded in the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West, and its particular understanding of the origins and future destiny of humanity. Nevertheless, cyclical time and conceptions of cyclical history have probably been more common in the human past and have existed in a variety of cultures and civilizations. These cyclical conceptions either took the form of theological understandings about human fate and the cosmos (e.g. as in the classical Mayan conception) or a secular and political form, such as the historical idea prevalent in many generations of Chinese historians that what has been long fragmented will be united, and what has been long united will become fragmented again. Modern historians call this the dynastic cycle in Chinese history. The great medieval world historian, Ibn Khaldun, held a dialectical view of history and time, but retained the idea that these patterns, which in his case were centered on a dialectic between urban based and rural kinship based social relations, repeated themselves in a recognizable dynamic closely akin to a cyclical pattern. Ancient India's rich philosophical and theological heritage likewise has tended to hold quite strongly cyclical views of human history, often expressed in long cosmic cycles of time (e.g. the *yug* or *yuga* cycles) which take place over eons rather than centuries or even millennia.

There are a variety of ways in which we can understand the idea of continuity. For example, there is the idea of the continuity of a pattern in history, such as the dynastic cycle, or of a cycle of rise and decline of civilizations, great states, empires or hegemonies. There is the idea of a continuity of structure, or of deep structure, which has its intellectual foundations in a materialist philosophy of history, for example in the Marxist tradition. There is the idea of the continuity of the human psyche, human psychology, or more conventionally (and controversially) 'human nature' which reproduces similar behavior (and social relations) again and again, as successive generations replay the same impulses and cognitive patterns. A Jungian approach, based on a depth psychology, psycho-analytical perspective, would help us to understand historical continuity as being based in the realm of deeply embedded archetypes, which

although taking different concrete manifestations in different cultural contexts, nevertheless express universal forms.

Niccolo Machiavelli based his analysis of the art of politics on a historical comparative method which relied on the assumption that human beings remained psychologically essentially the same, despite changes in historical circumstances, and so when faced with similar situations they respond in a similar manner to that of their forebears. Thus a student of these patterns could learn valuable lessons from historical examples. In fact, many ancient texts and treatises on statecraft seem to have drawn upon a similar method, if only innately or unconsciously in some cases. One example of such similar historical reasoning is the *Arthashastra*, attributed to the Mauryan dynasty political advisor Kautilya, in ancient India. This book is believed to be a sole surviving example of an entire genre of similar manuals of statecraft still extant at the time Kautilya compiled his magnum opus.

In this chapter we concentrate on an idea of continuity that is primarily structural, and emphasize recurrence of key patterns in world history, which are both economic and political at the same time (and also not incidentally deeply cultural or civilizational). Our historical perspective is synoptic, a method pioneered by Polybius, in which it is only by combining and comparing the various parts of the whole with one another and noting their resemblances and their differences that we arrive at a comprehensive view, which he contrasted to the method of reading separate and specialized reports. However, before we begin the formal discussion of these ideas in a world system theoretical context, which focuses on a set of macro-historical processes and patterns within a world system structure that persists over some five millennia and perhaps more, we wish to first touch upon some philosophical speculations that have profoundly influenced human history and our understandings of continuity.

Many enduring philosophical and religious ideas crystallized during the formative historical period which Karl Jaspers named the axial age (and which not coincidentally Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills identified also as a pivotal period in the formative history of the world system). The period from c. 900 to 200 BCE was, according to Jaspers, pivotal to the intellectual, psychological, philosophical and spiritual development of humanity. According to Karen Armstrong, the popular historian of world religions, there would be nothing comparable until the great movements that created what we now term modernity. These great traditions of human thought extended the frontiers of human consciousness and provided a transcendental dimension to the human experience. This transcendental dimension was not necessarily interpreted by the originators of these ideas as being of a supernatural character or derivation. It could be discovered and was in fact ever-present in (or via) the mind (or consciousness) of every human being, and could be achieved by cultivating moral virtue and a disciplined (but compassionate) life. The idea of a transcendent and permanent absolute or ultimate ground of all being, which is ever-present and unchanging in nature, and universal in scope, has been an extremely powerful and important idea in human history. We sometimes overlook the fact that even the principal progenitor of the West's scientific revolution, Sir Isaac Newton, was motivated by such ideas and deeply believed that his scientific method would prove the truth of this understanding of reality, not overturn it. Enlightenment *philosophes* were wedded to a view of human

psychology, derived from John Locke and conveyed by Etienne de Condillac, that disallowed any change in human nature. Social change had to come from outside the individual. With fixed eternal laws on the one hand, and an obviously fluid set of social and historical situations on the other, the foundation for a linear theory of progress was put into place.

The deeper origins of the idea of continuity can be traced back into the farthest reaches of human history. In very ancient thought the idea arose that every material thing or being in this world was in truth a mere reflection or expression of a deeper (but hidden) divine or ultimate reality (or transcendent ground of being). The sacred dimension of the universe was therefore the ground for the mundane or profane universe and all its material expressions. In Buddhist philosophy, *Vajrasattva* (Tibetan: *Dorje sem dpa*), is the embodiment of the highest state, the primordial Buddha (*Adibuddha*) from which everything in the universe emanates. Aldous Huxley referred to this state, and the recurring human insight into the ultimate ground of being and reality, as the perennial philosophy, which everywhere and at all times produces very similar insights by those who could perceive reality in this way. One of the very early expressions of this idea appeared in the verses of the *Upanishads*, where the idea of *Brahman* was developed from a previously more deistic conception in the early Vedas into the fully abstract, formless and transcendent ideas of the later *Upanishads*. In ancient China, the idea of the hidden and timeless ground of all being took the form of the *Tao*, an idea fundamental to ancient (and perhaps all subsequent) Chinese thought and which played a key role in the formation of Taoist and Confucian philosophy, but has its origins even earlier in such works as the *I Ching* (reputedly the oldest book in the world). The idea occurs in early Western or European thought via the philosophy of Plato (e.g. the doctrine of the forms) and continuing via the influence of Neo-Platonism and currents in medieval Christian mysticism.

In the Eastern school of philosophy known as the *Madhyamika*, popularized in China by Kumarajiva in the later part of the fourth century, which arose from the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, the emphasis was placed upon an idea of a dialectic, according to which what was true from the point of view of the absolute was false from the point of view of the truths of mere appearance, and vice versa. In this understanding of reality, only the dialectic between the absolute and the phenomenal makes the liberation of the mind possible, and this is the object of Buddhist philosophy and practice. It is from this dialectical understanding of the relationship between historical structure (or deep structure) and historical appearance (or mere events) that we begin to build a new understanding of the meaning of continuity in world system history that simultaneously encompasses both change and transformation.

From this perspective, the continuity thesis suggests that too much scholarly emphasis has been placed on the search for and elucidation of discontinuities and transitions in world history and global social relations. This over-emphasis on change was adopted for two reasons. First, there was the hope that an understanding of change in global social dynamics would point to the key processes in social life. If we understand the real nature of these changes, we can understand why those changes take place, and hence uncover the most important social forces and sources of agency in history. Secondly, there is the tendency to focus on social processes that are close-by. Scholars

study social orders from the lens provided by their own society, and only later compare what has been found with the social orders of other societies. As a result, small changes may appear much more significant and serve as inadvertent focal points.

There is a serious though often unrecognized bias inherent in this focus on change. Much of the social order may be stable in nature. Changes that appear significant in the near-term may actually be minor alterations embedded within a far broader set of patterns. It is easy to over-emphasize the differences that exist between areas, or to draw too sharp a distinction between social forces that exist before and after some hypothesized historical landmark. Before we make any *a priori* decision to focus our analyses on change, it makes sense to consider continuities that exist across time and space. These may be difficult to apprehend. Behaviors that do not change with any speed or regularity can become part of the social landscape and are rendered all but invisible. Such continuities may be considered uninteresting, and are more difficult to study since there appears little to compare them with. There are also important ideological and political issues at stake. A study of 'other' societies may be undertaken to facilitate understanding, but it can also be used to disparage social orders developed elsewhere, and so aggrandize the accomplishments or social patterns of some dominant group. An overly narrow focus on the here-and-now might be used to falsely credit a given set of policies with having generated positive outcomes, and garner support for those who would most benefit from the continued use or re-adoption of such policies. Poorly done, cross-cultural comparisons can all too easily descend into simple bigotry, and even more unfortunately, find use in the justification of all manner of injustice and aggression. From the perspective of the continuity thesis in world system history, however, there is no legitimate or compelling reason to focus on change as the central over-riding problematic of world or global history. Nor is there any self-evident reason to declare that some types of differences are particularly significant, unless they can be appropriately placed in the context of a broader and longer-term comprehensive and holistic analysis of social order. Research on the continuity thesis assumes the elucidation of broader and longer-term contexts, on a comprehensive and synoptic basis, is its primary goal. In other words, only an analysis of the world system as a whole is sufficient to allow us a good understanding of how all the parts of the story fit together. The method requires holism at its core. There is much to be learned from a systematic global study of the constant elements of social order. Many of those processes, social forces, and patterns of behavior that are still too often considered to be unique to the modern era are actually of significant antiquity, and can be understood better when viewed from a long term historical perspective.

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