

WORLD SYSTEM HISTORY

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Summary

World system history is the study of the systematic relationships that linked the entire old world Afro-Eurasian system over the last 5000 years, and came to include the new world after 1492. That field comprises the nature of the world system, the manner in which we can apprehend it, and its relevant processes and its challenges. Combining the tools of social science with the long-term perspective, students of world system history have adopted both materialist and non-materialist orientations, have looked at the challenging nexus of the social and the natural world, and have explored evolutionary models. Among the fundamental processes in question we find capital accumulation, incorporation, communication and knowledge, trade, urbanization, economic and political cycles (of competition/hegemony), the growth of global public opinion and global democratization. World system history offers an array of tools with which to apprehend the future.

1. What is World System History?

World system history is, of course, the study of the history of the world system. But each of these terms raises a host of questions; so let us put some flesh on the bare bones of this definition.

An early attempt is A.G. Frank's statement specifying that "By world system history I mean the systematically interrelated history of most of the 'old world' in Afro-Eurasia over at least the past 5,000 years. After 1492, the 'new world', and then the whole world was also incorporated into the same world system." Here we have some of the essentials

in greater detail: the search for systematic relationships, the long-term orientation – over 5,000 years, and concern for the whole world of humanity, what Frank called “humanocentricism”.

A definition that takes its cue from the title of the Routledge (2000) volume that brought together the work of a group of scholars at Lund, Sweden in 1995 goes a little further. That title reads: *World System History: the Social Science of Long-term Change*, adding to Frank’s statement the idea that World System History is grounded in the social sciences. That title was intended to reiterate the three most important characteristics of this body of knowledge in somewhat more general terms.

WORLD: that signifies a holistic or macro-analytic concern, a non-parochial, Big Picture conception that employs the whole of the human experience on earth as the object of inquiry and principal unit of analysis. This brings out connectivities and interdependencies without ignoring or dismissing agents;

SYSTEM: that connotes both an empirical and a methodological predisposition. First, a system includes a variety of interconnected processes whose study cannot be contained within the purview of a single social science discipline. Concerns for system are necessarily transdisciplinary. Second, system connotes an anchoring in the concepts, practices and methodologies of the social sciences that tests conceptions of continuity, connectivity and interdependence against data;

HISTORY: that asserts a dedication to a long-term view of some 5000 years, and to a diachronic stance with less emphasis on structures than on processes that might extend from the past into the future.

The nature of world system history suggests that its students can learn much from world history and the more traditional social sciences, and can also contribute to both. Grounded in the social sciences, with a self-conscious employment of concepts, data, and explanations, world system history is qualified to impart both the logic of empirical analysis and a less parochial attitude that embraces horizons that extend to all humans. Grounded in historical concerns, world system history is qualified to impart the longer-term and more fully integrated concerns of humanocentric analysis. Finally, its strongest feature might well be its capacity for future-orientation that is founded not only upon the commonsense insight that ‘history matters’ but also in the more up-to-date and sophisticated consideration that humankind has experienced developments and processes that show continuity, and that such knowledge might yield important pointers to the future.

1.1. A set of questions

What are the main questions addressed by World System History?

Is there a single world system? Students of world system history take the existence of the world system as fundamental, but are not hesitant to problematize this conclusion. Debate over the parameters of the world system is healthy as it provides a chance to illustrate the manner in which the perspective can shed light on a variety of socio-

historical puzzles that continue to perplex scholars from other orientations. Nor is the debate settled within the world system history community. Questions remain as to how, when and where this single system arose, and what its antecedents might have been.

What is the evidence for the existence of a single system? If a single world system does exist, how would we know? What constitutes evidence? How is it to be found and evaluated? The larger and more complex the system, the more difficult this task becomes, culminating in the most difficult challenges at the level of Big History (*Big History*).

What are the elements of the world system? The central question here concerns our ability to conceptualize the world system and to describe and analyze the processes that drive it over the long haul of world history. Early students of the world-system (note the hyphen and see *World-Systems Analysis*) had an essentially materialist orientation that privileged processes of accumulation. The process of accumulation, and questions of its centrality, remains an important theme in much of world system history. Alternative macro-historical processes include tendencies toward the creation of civilizations (*The Silk Roads: Afro-Eurasian Connectivity across the Ages*) and the role of evolution. Is the entire process best conceived in terms of continuity (*One World System or Many: Continuity Thesis in World System History*)? Along with such broad-scale processes we find concern with a series of global processes including those relevant to the integration of areas into the world system, hegemony, urbanization (*Democratization: The world-wide spread of democracy in the modern Age*), K-waves (*The Kondratieff Waves as Global Social Processes*) and other forms of cyclical regularity (*Epistemology of World System History: Long-Term Processes and Cycles*), the emergence of global public opinion (*The Rise of global public opinion*), and democratization (*Democratization: The World-Wide Spread of Democracy in the Modern Era*).

What challenges confront the world system? Tendencies that are noted have a variety of limits and vulnerabilities. Prominent among them is the threat to human survival posed by global warfare, that has been a distinct feature of the past millennium, and now poses the challenge of nuclear exchange among the great powers. History is also punctuated by serious decline and dark ages (*Dark Ages in World System History*). Questions as to whether such periods are endogenous to the working of the system are important. If endogenous, are they driven directly by human actions (deforestation, global warming), might they be the result of natural phenomena (volcanism), or perhaps these dynamics contain elements of both (as in the case of the Bubonic Plague or HIV/AIDS).

What light does World System History shed on the future?

If humankind on earth is not an arena of random events or chaotic conjunctions, but rather one whose trajectory shows significant elements of order, and continuity of process, one that exhibits growth in scope, depth and complexity over recorded history, then we might also say that humanity exhibits a significant degree of self-organization. Is humanity self-organizing? If so, can our understandings of processes like evolution and complexity help us to understand its trajectories?

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Biographical Sketches

George Modelski is Professor Emeritus, Political Science, University of Washington. His most recent

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