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Abstract

This article argues that world-systems theory commits itself to analyses whose form and content is shaped by its own choice of explanatory metaphors. After considering metaphor in academia in general, analysis proceeds from a reading of work by Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein. These scholars rely on systems metaphors because of their explanatory and conceptual power. Metaphors inescapably illuminate some facets of human social life while cloaking others because of the images and connotations they conjure up. Conceptualizing the modern world as a system has the advantages of highlighting patterns, coherence, and regularity. It has the disadvantages of de-emphasizing unique events, irregularities, and isolated trends, and risks reifying fluid boundaries and simplifying complex relationships. The article calls not for world historians to be more literary, but for recognition and further exploration of the fact that world history is already literary.

World History and Its Metaphors: The Case of World ‘Systems’

World history, as with all approaches to the past, focuses the reader on particular kinds of topics, questions, and viewpoints, highlighting and making clearer certain aspects of human history. In the process it leaves aside other topics, questions, and viewpoints better considered from the perspective of, say, diplomatic or family history (to say nothing of other disciplines such as anthropology or literary criticism). Metaphorically, world history can be conceptualized by comparing it to a journey, in this case a journey beyond the familiar shores of national histories and across distant seas. Such an enterprise asks its practitioners to be bold and willing to make broad statements, to pioneer new approaches to understanding the past, and to risk the censure of more established research programs. Employing this metaphor asks us to conceive of world history in a particular way. This is the nature of metaphors and of understanding, for human thought is fundamentally and inescapably metaphorical. Thus families may be houses and societies ships, politics may be theater and life full of crossroads. Metaphors organize knowledge in specific ways by drawing our attention to shared features of two objects or events which at first glance seem quite different. By giving us the words to describe the unknown, they lead us to generate new hypotheses about the world. However, while the metaphors we choose to apply provide insight and clarify, they also restrict other ways of seeing.

This article examines the formidable influence exerted by what may be world history’s most successful and widespread metaphor: the system. For my purposes, the foundational work in this vein is Immanuel Wallerstein’s 1974 *The Modern World-System*. To explain the origins and persistence of global inequality Wallerstein articulated a sophisticated view of global developments which traced the increasing integration of formerly autonomous regions and societies into a single world-system dominated by northwest Europe beginning around 1500. Since its publication, critics have noted shortfalls in Wallerstein’s analysis and in the process posited the existence of previous or even simultaneous world-systems. However, no one really doubts that the modern world-system exists, only why and how it originated, spread, accelerated, or was confounded. The metaphor of a world *system* has been immensely influential and appears to be an inherently persuasive way to view the events and interactions of human history.

After a short consideration of metaphor and its relationship to historical scholarship, this article examines use of the system metaphor in two foundational works in world-systems analysis: Fernand Braudel’s *Civilization and Capitalism* (especially volume 3) and Wallerstein’s *The Modern World-System* (especially volume 1). These two monographs hardly exhaust the body of literature in which world systems play a crucial analytical function, but they provide an excellent representative sample of the advantages and disadvantages the metaphor

of the system has for world history. Moreover, in volume 3 of *Civilization and Capitalism* and volume 1 of *The Modern World-System* these two authors can be credited with establishing and demarcating the very concept of the world-system which so many subsequent authors take for granted, making their articulation of the term particularly influential and noteworthy.

The Work of Metaphors

The most accessible and influential work on metaphors may well be George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. The authors resoundingly argue that all but the most literal and wooden statements and concepts are inescapably metaphorical. As they put it, "Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do everyday is very much a matter of metaphor" (1980, p.3). For example, the metaphor "argument is war" pervades how we describe arguments, as in statements such as "I've never won an argument with him" and "He *shot down* all my arguments." But we do not just describe arguments in terms of war, we actually argue as if we were fighting a war: we defend positions, shift tactics, counterattack, and see the people we argue with as opponents. Similarly, the metaphor "time is money" so influences our thought that we not only ask people how they "*spend* their time" but now think of our time as a precious commodity to be rationed out, spent, squandered, or saved (1980, pp.4-9).

As much as everyday life, scholarship is pervaded by metaphors. In the discipline of anthropology, for example, Clifford Geertz's metaphor of culture as a text that can be viewed and read has been enormously influential (1973). A recent volume of essays is dedicated to exploring how this metaphor has changed anthropological research as well as the limitations and implications of "entextualization" (Silverstein and Urban 1996). Closely related to the metaphor of text or textuality is the much-used term discourse. Perhaps no other term currently demands more attention from scholars. The works of Michel Foucault and Edward Said have played a particularly critical role in making us aware how our research is situated within, contributes to, and investigates discourses.¹ More broadly, what several authors have called the spatialization of postmodern social theory has had a tremendous impact on the kinds of topics, analyses, and conclusions that now pervade the disciplines of sociology, history, and anthropology (Smith and Katz 1993, Soja 1989). As one pair of authors noted, "'Theoretical spaces' have been 'explored', 'mapped', 'charted', 'contested', 'colonized', 'decolonized', and everyone seems to be 'travelling'" (Smith and Katz 1993, p.68). Metaphors from geography — landscape, terrain, position, frontier, juncture, intersection, formation, mapping, and more besides — provide the framework

and conceptual tools which do not simply neutrally describe, but actively shape how we have come to view social relations and interaction.

Alejandro Lugo has argued that the shift in social analysis from seeing cultures and nations as unified wholes to seeing them as divided, contested, and disordered is tropological. Whereas Durkheim saw ordered societies and shared patterns, scholars in the late twentieth century are more apt to see fragmentation and dispersal. In Lugo's words,

Perhaps what is of major importance here is that our metaphors of social life have also been transformed along with our notions of culture, society, and state. There has been a very persuasive replacement, not only displacement, of a metaphoric trope: the biological organism, which was supposed to maintain itself in equilibrium through systemic (political) order and (social) harmony, has been decidedly supplanted by the "war" metaphor, which sheds light on how "society" and "culture" constitute hegemonic battlefields where contestation itself (instead of reciprocity) is inescapably pervasive (1997, p.52).

In part, Lugo seems to be saying, the rise of postmodernism and its differences from modernism are the result in a change in thinking that depends on a change in terminology. The strength and tenacity of metaphors is exemplified in the organic metaphors of roots, trees, and branches. How natural it seems to envision society as a tree, rooted in the soil of the past and possessing diverse branches that all stem from the same trunk! As Deleuze and Guattari remark, "It is odd how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy" (cited in Malkki 1992, p.28).

It is not possible to separate the rhetorical or tropological effects of choices in language from the vision of the world the scholars who use particular metaphors possess. Text and discourse, landscape and border are not mere descriptive terms, nor can they easily be dismissed as superficial or faddish. These and other metaphors have exerted a powerful influence on not only what scholars study, but on how scholars conceive of the act of scholarship itself. Exploring the mental landscape of past societies, working at the intersection of two or more disciplines, translating across cultural frontiers, and entering discursive formations have become part and parcel of what scholars do and how they think about their activities. World history is not immune to these developments, but world historians have not reflected on their own conceptual metaphors. By a reading of the work of Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein I hope to begin this process.

Civilization and Capitalism

Fernand Braudel prefers the term “world-economy” to “world-system,” though he makes clear that he is indeed speaking of a system characterized by boundaries, an urban center, and an internal hierarchy (Braudel 1984, pp.25-45). An accomplished and evocative writer, Braudel uses several kinds of system metaphors in the interest of describing and characterizing the European world-economy as it developed between 1500 and 1800. The three most recurring and effective of these are the circulatory system, the solar system, and the machine. In other words, medicine, physics, and mechanics supply the conceptual grounding for the world-system metaphor as it is presented in *Civilization and Capitalism*.

The most obvious metaphor Braudel draws from the circulatory system is the description of money and trade as the life-blood of the world-economy. Thus Braudel writes that, “the heart of world-economy centred on Venice” (p.124) and “the life-blood of Venetian trade was the Levant connection” (p.132). Moreover, Venice carved its fortune “out of the living heart of the Byzantine economy” (p.130). Letters of credit and gold both circulate along trade routes like blood through arteries (pp.155, 168). At the center of any world economy were “pulsating capitalist cities” (p.31), and indeed the urban center is “the logistic heart of its activity. News, merchandise, capital, credit, people, instructions, correspondence all flow into and out of the city” (p.27). At the same time, exchange between urban and rural regions drives “the elementary circulation of the economic body” (p.39). In the clearest example of the presence of the circulatory system metaphor Braudel concludes, “From the earliest times, the core or ‘heart’ of Europe was surrounded by a nearby semi-periphery and by an outer periphery. And the semi-periphery, a pericardium so to speak enclosing the heart and forcing it to beat faster... was probably the essential feature of the structure of Europe” (p.56). Even when not explicitly invoked, the presence of the idea of the human circulation system can be felt, as when Braudel describes the vibration of the world economy that “closes and opens once again the gates [one can easily read “valves”] of the complex flow of the conjuncture” (p.83). Through these and other instances, the pumping of the human heart emerges as one of the main analogies by which the world-system centered can be placed, made familiar, and thus understood.

The solar system is also part of the conceptual backgrounding that Braudel’s description of the world-economy draws upon, particularly the gravitational forces that make planets orbit the sun. If an urban core is the heart of a world-economy, it is also its “centre of gravity” (p.27). Indeed, Braudel argues that both economic zones and cultural zones have centres of gravity (p.67). Except during upward swings of the economy when “a multi-polarity of centres was possible,” there could be only one urban center: “The success of one sooner or later means the eclipse of another” (pp.86, 33). Braudel explores the monumental implications of a shift in this “centre of gravity” at several historical

junctures, but these all pale in comparison to the “cosmic upheaval” initiated by European expansion beginning in the late fifteenth century (pp.116, 173-4, 138). In general the early history of the modern world-economy or world-system is the story of the succession of dominant cities that “oscillated between [being] strong and weak centres of gravity” (p.35). These cities were surrounded by concentric rings of trade and production that together form a “microcosm” of the universe (p.38). Initially, this European world-economy had two “poles of attraction,” one in the north and one in the south (p.97). At the same time, within European society, “It would no doubt be possible to map the way in which these different ‘orders’ of society existed in space, to locate their poles, central zones, and lines of force” (p.47). Finally, as with the circulation system metaphor, Braudel gives one example that leaves no doubt about the usefulness of the solar system metaphor. He writes of Venice’s trade links, “But the string of glittering towns continued north over the Alps, like a milky way: Augsburg, Vienna, Nuremberg, Ratisbon (Regensburg), Ulm, Basle, Strasbourg, Cologne, Hamburg and even Lebeck, ending with the still-brilliant constellation of the Netherlands, with Bruges as yet its leading light” (p.124). Like the heart pumping blood throughout the body, then, the image of the world-system as a sun surrounded by planets which gravitate toward it and move to its rhythms appears to be an inherently satisfactory analogy that Braudel draws upon to great effect.

The third prominent system that Braudel metaphorically associates with the world-economy is the machine. Braudel commonly speaks of “differences of voltage” between regions of the world economy (p.26). Most notably, the world-economy has “highly charged central zones” and is driven by “differences of voltage and current” (p.51). The Netherlands is singled out as a paradigmatic example of “a high-voltage urban economy” (p.180). If one held strategic locations within the world-economy and maintained key monopolies the system continued to operate “in good working order - as we [maintain] machines today. Such monopolies often continued to operate out of a kind of force of inertia” (p.89). Often the physics behind how machines operate is deliberately evoked in asides. For example, Braudel notes how the world-system seems to have, “periodic movements, which carry on in endless succession. Such movements, harmonious or discordant, bring to mind the vibrating cords or sounding-boards of schoolday physics” (p.71). And later he remarked again, “To clarify (I cannot say resolve) this impossible problem, one should perhaps have recourse to the periodic vibrations we are taught about in elementary physics” (p.82). Other times, the metaphor is made concrete: “So whether one considers a world-economy in terms of its area on the face of the globe, or in terms of its depth at the centre, one’s astonishment is the same: the machine seems to work and yet (especially if one thinks of the earliest outstanding cities in European history) it seems to have such a modest power supply” (p.44). As with the other metaphors too, even when not explicitly employed, the idea is there. In this case, the unspoken but vital analogy is to an engine: “At the centre of the world-economy, one always finds an exceptional state, strong, aggressive and

privileged, dynamic, simultaneously feared and admired” (p.51).

What is the significance of making use of these other kinds of systems to describe and conceptualize a historical world-system? One answer, of course, is that Braudel is simply making use of language at hand, and for that reason it is of no real significance. Yet I believe this denies both Braudel’s effective and much-admired prose and the inescapably metaphorical or tropical nature of language and language use.² Moreover, it overlooks the significance of variations among these metaphors, for each has a particular use or context in which it excels. Generally speaking, invoking the flow of blood through the circulation system is an especially apt way to speak of trade. Similarly, to communicate the unequal distribution of power and dominance by the center within the world-system, the language of the solar system and of gravity is most effective. Finally, to capture how the system is a interlocked unity that operates cyclically over time, the image of a machine and the electrical current which powers it is of particular cogency. Though all three of these systems share common features, the way they are used capitalizes upon and emphasizes different characteristics. In part it is this suppleness, the ability to draw for sustenance on so many other systems that has helped make the world-system a powerful theoretical model. If this conclusion is validated by a reading of *Civilization and Capitalism*, it is reinforced in additional ways by considering *The Modern World-System*.

The Modern World-System

As with Braudel, Wallerstein’s use of figurative language to effectively and evocatively communicate his ideas has not gone unnoticed. Charles Ragin and Daniel Chirot note how Wallerstein “falls prey” to the lure of the metaphor of the world-system as a living organism. “His discussion of the world system is spiced with organic analogies. The modern world system was ‘born’ in the long sixteenth century. It matured and went through stages of growth. Its aging and ultimate ‘demise’ are predictable, and it will then turn into a new organism, the socialist world system” (1984, pp.301-2). In the conclusion to volume one Wallerstein summarizes his perceptions of the world-system in explicitly organic terms.

A world-system is a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence. Its *life* is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension, and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remold it to its advantage. It has the characteristics of an *organism*, in that it has a *life-span* over which its characteristics change in some respects and remain stable in others. One can define its structures as being at different times *strong* or *weak* in terms of the internal logic of its functioning.

What characterizes a social system in my view is the fact that *life* within it is largely self-contained, and that the *dynamics* of its development are largely internal” (p.347, emphasis added).

At the same time Ragin and Chirot remark that Wallerstein did not want his model of the world-system to be considered merely an analogy or heuristic device: “The notion of a single world system is not meant to be taken as a metaphor or simply as an injunction to be comparative” (1984, p.296). In this sense to describe the world-system as a metaphor — as merely *like* something — would water down the fundamental premise of all systems theory: the whole cannot be understood by investigating its parts, for the parts are shaped by and only explicable in terms of the whole. Yet as was the case in *Civilization and Capitalism*, money and trade are the “life-blood” of Wallerstein’s world-system. Depending on whether it flows rapidly or slowly the system’s body as a whole either flourishes and grows or withers and dies. Unfortunately, while the metaphor of the system as an organism provides easy and useful terminology it is vague and lacks analytical precision. World historians have long described civilizations as organisms that are born, grow, decay, and die, but this has not helped clarify or define the nature and dynamics of civilizations, culture areas, or systems. For this Wallerstein would need other metaphors.

At the beginning of *The Modern World-System* Wallerstein noted the daunting abundance of information available to historians and the difficulty of managing this abundance. To get out of what Wallerstein called his “conceptual morass” required instruments that would provide a “simplifying thrust” (pp.6-7). Wallerstein found this thrust in astronomy. The relevant passages are again worth quoting at length.

It was here that I was inspired by the analogy with astronomy which purports to explain the laws governing the universe, although (as far as we know) only one universe has ever existed.

What do astronomers do? As I understand it, the logic of their arguments involves two separate observations. They use the laws derived from the study of smaller physical entities, the laws of physics, and argue that (with perhaps certain specified exceptions) these laws hold by analogy for the system as a whole. Second, they argue a posteriori. If the whole system is to have a given state at time involves two separate observations. They use the laws derived from the study of smaller physical entities, the laws of physics, and argue that (with perhaps certain specified exceptions) these laws hold by analogy for the system as a whole. Second, they argue a posteriori. If the whole system is to have a given state at time y, it most probably had a certain state at time x.

Both methods are tricky, and it is for this reason that in the field of cosmology, which is the study of the functioning of the system as a whole, there are wildly opposing hypotheses held by reputable astronomers. Just as there are in the explanations of the modern world-system, a state of affairs likely to remain so for some time (pp.7-8).

There are two operations at work in this passage. First, world-systems analysis is associated with the scientific precision, deductive reasoning, posing of hypotheses, and the search for underlying laws which characterize physics and astronomy. In this, Wallerstein's use of the solar system analogy differs from Braudel. In an essentially poetic move Braudel draws upon the language used by scientists to describe the solar system, but Wallerstein with methodological intent hopes to inject a scientific rigor and objectivity into historical scholarship while recognizing the difficulties of achieving this aim. Second, in this critical early passage the way is prepared for readers to comprehend the world-system as an entity operating like the universe or the solar system. This is the model readers are to keep in mind throughout the book, and unlike Braudel's constant sliding between system metaphors, Wallerstein remains loyal to this image above all others. Scattered throughout the text are reminders and reinforcements of this analogy; a host of subordinate metaphors from physics and mechanics that apply to the solar system — most notably gravity, vectors, velocity, and lines of force — enable Wallerstein to describe the form and functioning of the modern world-system. Indeed, it seems that to explain what a world-system is and how it operates Wallerstein cannot do without metaphorical language. With Braudel's and Wallerstein's metaphors explicitly brought to the fore we can now consider the advantages and disadvantages of the system metaphor in world history.

Strengths of the System Metaphor

It is important at the outset to note that this is not an assessment of world-systems theory as practiced by Wallerstein or a general critique of the themes and conclusions advanced by Braudel. Rather, it is an assessment of the metaphor of a system as evidenced in the works of these authors.³ As Janet Abu-Lughod noted, the Oxford Dictionary defines "system" as "a whole composed of parts in orderly arrangement according to some scheme" (1989, p.38n). In the examples cited above, the circulatory system, the solar system, the organism, and the machine represent types of systems readers are already familiar with. They provide the conceptual framework or network of references in which the formulations and analysis of Braudel and Wallerstein are placed. The repeated use of terms and figures of speech from medicine, physics, astronomy, and mechanics insure that these more familiar systems are never far from the reader's mind.

These familiar systems that anchor the idea of historical world-systems share

common characteristics. In addition to being composed of parts (arteries, planets, cells, gears) ordered to form a whole which in turn regulates the parts, they share other salient features that by implication affect our conception of world-systems. Of central importance here is that the use of the term system establishes a coherent framework of inquiry. Faced with a well-nigh infinite number of possible events, trends, and activities to consider, the system metaphor organizes and suggests connections between these whirling atoms. It presumes that the system has underlying structures and rules which govern the system and which can be discovered and confirmed through careful observation, whether by doctors, astronomers, physicists, or historians. This internal logic suggests that, though to some degree porous at the edges, the system will function cyclically at an equilibrium unless major changes in input take place. Given close scrutiny of these patterns the operation of the system in the future is predictable. The focus of attention in all cases is on the links between parts; indeed, the system is formed by its relationships: "All these links made for coherence, stability, habits in common and a shared pride. Force of circumstance did the rest" (Braudel 1984, p.103). In addition to being bounded and ordered, then, systems in general are coherent, regulated, repetitive, and predictable. Without these characteristics systems lose their appeal. With these characteristics, the metaphor of the system has considerable advantages.

The most noted advantage of systems analysis is its ability to order and make sense of a jumble of information. By focusing on patterns, cycles, and regularities, a chopping and cutting takes place that eliminates from consideration data not relevant to these questions. The assumptions of unity, coherence, and equilibrium that the system metaphor summons provide the organizing structure within which much of the past all of a sudden seems to make sense. In the process most would agree that by centering on what formerly seemed chaotic or ambiguous, and by showing that there are deeper systemic forces at work, new questions are raised and old problems resolved or made clearer. In this manner systems analysis can guide research efforts towards more precise and meaningful conclusions.

A recent article by John Voll entitled "Islam as a Special World-System" is testament to the strengths and insights system metaphors can provide world historians (1994). Voll argues that when applied to Islam the already troubled term "civilization" is vague and unsatisfactory, implying a coherence that simply does not exist among the varied Islamic societies of the world while offering little theoretical precision or utility. On the other hand, employing Wallerstein's concept of a world-system has great possibilities. To begin with, Voll notes that the defining characteristics Wallerstein notes as basic to a world-system — boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence — all seem to apply to the Islamic world. Members and boundaries are clearly demarcated by the five pillars of faith, for example, which helped to create a sense of the Dar al-Islam as a coherent unity spanning political and cultural borders. Voll devotes special attention to Sufi *tariqahs* as vehicles for

bringing this unity to fruition in the wake of the political disintegration of the Muslim world. These networks of teachers and students linked varied peoples and *madrasahs*, giving them “an identity that could be recognized throughout the Islamic world” (1994, p.222). Voll further argues that Wallerstein’s modern world-system’s privileging of economic exchange examines simply one aspect of human life capable of providing the integration necessary for the creation and sustenance of a world-system. The Islamic world-system was a discourse-based world-system of a community of believers.

In making this argument, Voll has extracted the fundamental elements of the system metaphor and extended them in a new direction. This is an excellent example of how metaphors transfer from one object to another and in the process clarify and illuminate what was formerly difficult to grasp or perceive. Describing Islam as a world-system provides an interesting and insightful perspective from which to look again at Islamic history. Hopefully this re-examination of the systemic elements of Islamic history may help clarify global trends and developments within the Muslim world that were hitherto difficult to explain. Herein lies the great strength of the system metaphor, but in others ways it is equally concealing.

Weaknesses of the System Metaphor

The assumption that there are systematic forces driving historical events and experiences which can be known and explained is also the most evident weakness of the system metaphor. Like other disciplines in which the focus is on systems, in world-systems approaches attention to and recognition of non-systemic trends is discouraged. Such trends or events become “less important” because they do not have systemic consequences. They become mere impediments which once removed or remade, allow the system to function properly. Furthermore, recognition of what may be unique events is hindered, historical aberrations are downplayed, and forces that are local or isolated lost under a thick veneer. Ultimately, scholars run the risk of mis-diagnosing and misleadingly describing non-systemic events as systemic. To some these hazards are simply risks that must be taken in order to gain a wider or deeper understanding of human history, but there are still other conceptual limitations to be considered as well.

The spatial model of a system with a heart or center of gravity surrounded by concentric circles and radiating out to the fringes of the system has its own blinkers. Actual variations in power or importance do not recede as uniformly as the metaphor suggests. The existence of internal peripheries within core regions and what might be called regional cores in peripheral regions is easy to admit, but hard to deal with within the spatial model of a system as it is commonly conceived. Similarly, the regularity implied by the term system — whatever the disclaimers or admissions to the contrary — may be a poor

fit for historical reality. Often the “world-system” seems to operate in fitful pulses of varying strength rather than with the smooth and efficient regularity of circulatory or solar systems, to say nothing of gravity. Again, this is not to say that many world-systems analysts do not recognize the ruptures and lags in historical systems, but that this aspect of their work is sidelined and never challenges the presumption that a coherent system is in fact operating. At some junctures we might be prompted to ask to what degree are episodic or limited interrelations really systemic? At times world-systems scholars seem to work in a surprisingly circular manner: if we follow Andre Gunder Frank’s injunction to trace history systematically, how could we find anything but systems? (Frank 1991, pp.1, 17). The result is a misleading extension of the system to cover nearly all of human history, by which point the concept loses all utility.⁴

An important implication of these limitations on the system metaphor is that many of the criticisms of Wallerstein and others can in fact be read as critiques of the metaphor itself and its inescapable flaws once the decision to rely on the metaphor is made. In this respect, the literary limitations of world-systems theory, the area in which the system metaphor becomes most strained and unconvincing, concerns the problem of boundaries. For example, Wallerstein is hard pressed to make a clear and workable distinction (as he himself admits) between peripheral and external areas. “Russia outside, but Poland inside. Hungary inside, but the Ottoman empire outside. On what basis are these distinctions determined?” (p.301). The main indicator Wallerstein offers is the nature of trade with core states. Regions exporting low-value bulk goods such as wheat or timber to the core are peripheries, and would suffer grievously from contractions that would cause this trade to decline. Regions exporting modest quantities of high-value luxury items, and which could decline in times of contraction with comparatively little consequence, are external to the system. Though these distinctions can be difficult to measure in some cases, the common sense difference seems to be that when trade is significant enough to restructure economies and societies we are confronting the internal dynamics of a system.

Yet there are examples of regions where economies and societies were re-structured, but which Wallerstein argues are external rather than peripheral areas. Most notably — and with a near-audible sigh of relief — Wallerstein declares Asia external to the modern world-system before at least 1750. But in Southeast Asian history there is a vast amount of data suggesting that long-distance trade with the European world-system profoundly changed many areas of Southeast Asia before 1750. As early as the sixteenth century societies in the Indonesian archipelago were re-structuring to establish export agricultural industries devoted to pepper in response to European demand. From the same period Europeans (especially Spaniards in the Philippine archipelago) began efforts to spread Christianity, a form of influence that had significant effects apart from economic change (Lieberman 1990). If we accept Voll’s idea of discourse-based world-systems this raises important questions. More obviously, with the arrival of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) in the Indonesian

archipelago during the seventeenth century, the Dutch conquest of Melaka, Maluku (the Spice Islands), Banten, and Makassar disrupted existing Asian trade networks and created a new one centered on the VOC capital of Batavia, again with dramatic repercussions for the political and economic landscape of the region. Indeed, Anthony Reid has devoted a two-volume study to Southeast Asia between 1450 and 1680 which sees rising global commerce as the driving force behind massive political and social changes in the region (Reid 1988, 1993). In others words, the categories core, periphery, and semi-periphery clearly fail to do justice to historical reality. It appears there can be systemic relations or forces which indicate something short of full participation in a system. What do we do in such cases where boundaries blur and the system's unity and coherence threatens to dissolve around the edges?

The most ambitious effort to rigorously demarcate the boundaries of world-systems is undoubtedly K. N. Chaudhuri's *Asia Before Europe* (1990). Chaudhuri presented an elaborate methodological edifice based on mathematical set theory. Through this he hoped to discover reliable principles of selection and analysis that would allow him to locate and describe the limits of civilizations and identities within the Indian Ocean. A main task was to establish the continuities and discontinuities within the complex and varied unity known as the Indian Ocean. Sensing the need to present his ideas more clearly than the cumbersome and often difficult exposition in *Asia Before Europe*, Chaudhuri returned to the topic in a later article (1993). Here he stated that food, climate, and so forth were variables, and that one could identify sets of all those who ate bread rather than rice within the Indian Ocean, for example, or who lived in tropical rather than arid regions. To some degree these postulated sets corresponded to felt identities as Muslims, Southeast Asians, etc. Unfortunately this mathematical language seems only to clothe common-sense observations with specialized terminology rather than yield real advances. As Chaudhuri himself notes, some historians may discover "they have been using the logic [of set theory] for a long time without being aware of it" (1993, p.21). Is the Indian Ocean a coherent unity? The answer before or after Chaudhuri seems to be the same: in some ways yes, in some ways no. In addition, set theory does not allow Chaudhuri to adequately mark the limits of the Indian Ocean as a whole; sets (mental constructs of the historian) would seem to ramify unendingly from the Indian Ocean across the globe, and in the process the entity known as the Indian Ocean threatens to fragment entirely. While it possesses great strengths, the metaphor of a system requires strained and ultimately unsuccessful efforts on its behalf to overcome the limitations inherent in the model. At this point it seems useful to step back and consider the career of the system metaphor and other metaphors that might be employed to open up new ways of seeing the past.

Systems and Fabrics

One could make a strong case that systems have supplanted organisms as the dominant models for how we view large-scale social processes. If so, this transition is essentially literary in nature. Early world historians spoke of cultures or civilizations as organisms (Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* is the clearest example). This metaphor is in fact still employed despite its long-recognized inadequacies. Wallerstein's use of the world-system as organism metaphor was noted above, and the same can be said of Braudel. To cite only two examples, Braudel spoke of the "gestation process" in which the world-economy "was born," and used language like "the infant Antwerp," the "career of Antwerp," and the "death" of Antwerp (pp.92, 151, 152, 154). Despite this seeming continuity, however, systems are replacing organisms as the preeminent conceptual model in world history because the system metaphor brings with it associations and concepts that make it a more flexible and useful tool to describe historical reality.

The "rise of systems" within world history is part of a larger intellectual movement in which it has seemed increasingly apt to describe the world in terms of systems. The guiding work in this movement is Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications*. He described the premises and goals what has become known as general system theory as follows:

There appear to exist general system laws which apply to any system of a certain type, irrespective of the particular properties of the system and of the elements involved.

These considerations lead to the postulate of a new scientific discipline which we call general system theory. Its subject matter is formulation of principles that are valid for 'systems' in general, whatever the nature of their component elements and the relations or 'forces' between them (1968, p.37).

Von Bertalanffy also foresaw the relevance of general system theory to history, writing that, "Ultimately the problem of human history looms as the widest possible application of the systems idea" (1968, p.195).⁵

If we recognize that the system metaphor — like all metaphors — has advantages and disadvantages, it is useful to explore at least briefly another metaphor for studying large-scale historical processes that can contrast with or complement the idea of world-systems. One such alternative metaphor is the *fabric* of human societies. This, of course, is not a novel idea. A recent collection of essays entitled *Cloth and Human Experience* explores the material and symbolic

richness of cloth as a metaphor (Weiner and Schneider 1989). We commonly see societies as knit together, for example, social relations as threads, and exchange as tying people together. The metaphors of societies woven or bound together and of the texture or threads of an increasingly more integrated globe are not absent in the work of Braudel, Wallerstein, and other world historians, but they are distinctly subordinate to system metaphors. On one occasion, for example, Braudel speaks of the world-economy as a fragile network whose “fabric” could be torn, and on another describes how Venice harnessed earlier trade routes by saying, “All she had to do was to bring them together, like so many threads” (pp.89, 36).

Like all metaphors, the metaphor of a fabric draws upon more familiar domains, and in doing so encourages us to focus our attention on different facets of human experience. If conceiving of the past in terms of systems prompts one to look at structural interrelationships, conceiving of the past in terms of a fabric prompts one to look at how the threads that bind peoples together are woven. In place of guiding terminology such as boundaries, rules, cycles, linkages, dynamics, and elements, the metaphor of fabric compels scholars to write about threads, textures, tears, holes, wrapping, and tying. Instead of assuming that systemic factors exist to be discovered, it assumes that unities are woven into a dense fabric by a large number of threads which can yet, like cloth, fray, grow thin, or unravel. Merely the vocabulary one chooses, then, plays a decisive role in the kind of analysis that is done.

To provide a concrete example of the value of shifting metaphors, I turn again to Southeast Asia. As noted above, the emphasis on zones, boundaries, and coherent exchange relationships between regions in Wallerstein’s analysis of the world system before 1750 poorly fits Southeast Asia. The region was undeniably transformed by a European presence beginning in the sixteenth century, but cannot be categorized as either peripheral or semi-peripheral. A more illuminating way to understand Southeast Asia during this period begins by abandoning the dichotomous view of an expanding European world system absorbing regions across the globe. If we view the structures of the region as woven from many threads, as a fabric knit together, we are in a better position to appreciate the historical complexity that marked premodern Southeast Asia and its entanglement with other areas.

Here I take up the argument of Heather Sutherland, who has written that our way of seeing (and describing) the premodern Malay world has blinded us to some of its central characteristics. Most importantly, the socioeconomic pyramid of European shipping merchants, Chinese middlemen, and Southeast Asian peddlars grants a greater superiority to Europeans than they possessed. Significant networks of Southeast Asian and Chinese traders existed not merely in the *interstices* of a European-dominated economic system. In significance and effects these may well have outweighed the highly visible colonial presence. “Any reassessment of modern Indonesian history may well come to the

conclusion that the supra-local economy was Chinese and Japanese, with only marginal enclaves dominated by Europeans, and that largely because of political protection” (Sutherland 1995: 145).

The effort to map the economy of this region in terms of zones and boundaries is unhelpful. What existed was extraordinarily complex, supple, and not easily resolved into stable hierarchies or relationships. Tracing the history of these different threads, how they became woven together, the way they both supported and pulled against each other, and the larger social, economic, and political structures thereby established is a project worth pursuing, but it is a project and way of seeing that cannot be reconciled within the systems framework described by Wallerstein. It entails applying a metaphor that allows us to see that place and time in a new light, and in so doing to encourages reassessments of existing sociological and historical interpretations. As an additional tool at our disposal, the effort to describe the historical reality of premodern Southeast Asia in terms of a cloth woven from many threads captures features of the region that eludes systems’ metaphors.

To make an over-simplified contrast, searching for systems provides what Wallerstein called a “simplifying thrust” that seeks to undercover essential properties and guiding principles, while searching for the warp and weft of history asks the historian to unravel the past in all its tangled complexity. Of course, this boils down to making a choice between what kind of history one wants to write. But this is not simply quibbling over vocabulary. To say it one more time: the literary choices one makes play as significant a role in shaping research and analysis as do the explicit methodological positions and models historians more consciously adopt (cf. White 1973). Having said this, some other conclusions are in order.

Conclusions

World historians can only benefit by examining more carefully how they choose to describe the past. Recognition of the conceptual baggage all metaphors bring to world history will provoke more careful reflection on our models and methods, and through that lead to more nuanced and sophisticated scholarship. In the case of world-systems, the powerful mental images of regularity, pattern, and unity evoked by the system metaphor shunt aside recognition of the significant degree to which world history is full of irregularities, conflicts, aberrations, isolated trends, and unique or precedent-setting events. These must not be lost in our eagerness to grasp and make sense of the world’s histories. It is certainly too glib to say with Frank that we can leave “micro” studies to specialists or simply regard local studies as the bricks and mortar for grander edifices (Frank 1991, pp.1-2). The bifurcation of scholarship between micro and macro is a disagreeable methodological dinosaur, for the two are never separable. It is

precisely the ever-present and pressing dialectic between local and global that should be at the epicenter of world history.

This is not a call to be more literary in world history, but a recognition that world history is already literary. By reflecting on the models and metaphors we choose to employ we become better historians. World-systems analysis is one powerful tool for organizing perceptions of the past, but it must be complemented by other tools. If some historians have unconsciously let the direction of their research be influenced simply by the language they choose to employ, it is time to see how far a deliberate choice for others terms and concepts can lead. Metaphors such as interpreting history as a fabric woven over time and composed of varied strands is only one possibility. It is commonly recognized that explicitly constructed models can have such a captivating elegance that scholars become carried away and apply them beyond what is prudent, but it is less commonly recognized that language carries with it connotations and assumptions that can be equally elegant or equally distorting. Attention to the wide range of metaphors available to world historians may give new meaning to Fernand Braudel's friendly caution, "we shall have plenty of time to consider the merits, novelties and limitations of this systematic approach — one that is a little too systematic, perhaps, but which has proved itself to be extremely stimulating" (p.70).

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Endnotes

1. Said's reading of Foucault's often elusive use of the term "discourse" and his own more concrete explanations of the concept is found throughout Said 1978.
2. For a wider discussion of the poetics of Braudel and other Annales historians see Carrard 1992
3. Assessments of world-systems theory are in any case plentiful. A good introduction and bibliography is found in Ragin and Chirot 1984.
4. I am referring to Frank's idea of a 5000-year world system. See the essays in Frank and Gills 1993.
5. I would be remiss if I did not note Talcott Parson's *The System of Modern Societies*. A seminal text in the development of modernization theory, Parson's contributions theorizing social systems make him an important foundation upon which world systems theory built.

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