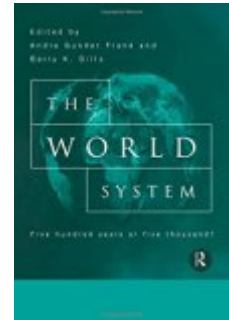




Andre Gunder Frank, Barry K. Gills, eds.. *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. xxii + 320 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-07678-4.



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Published on H-World (February, 1995)

During the past two decades, world-system studies have deeply influenced scholarship in several disciplines. Elaborated as an alternative to modernization analysis, the world-system approach originally seemed relevant particularly to the modern world. Yet its main premise--that individual lands and nations do not develop in isolation, but rather in the context of a larger system that shapes their political, economic, and social experiences--might well have some application in premodern as well as modern times. Indeed, in *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Janet L. Abu-Lughod argued that a world system quite different from the modern capitalist variety influenced political, economic, and social development throughout much of the eastern hemisphere during the age of the Mongol empires.

Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills accept Abu-Lughod's argument, but they hold further that the notion of a world system is applicable much earlier than the Mongol era. Indeed, Frank and Gills argue that the world has generated only

one world system, that it originated about 3000 B.C.E. with interaction between Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies, and that it has expanded in size and scale ever since. Thus Immanuel Wallerstein's modern capitalist world system--now about 500 years old--represents only the latest phase of a world system that reaches back some five millennia. The volume under review brings together eleven essays--seven of them reprinted, the other four published here for the first time--that grapple with the notion of premodern world systems. Writing individually or jointly, Frank and Gills contribute six of the eleven essays. K. Ekholm and J. Friedman contribute an article, originally published in 1982, on imperialism and exploitation in ancient world systems. David Wilkinson offers fresh thoughts on the categories of civilization, core, world economy, and oikumene. Samir Amin reprints an article of 1991 distinguishing between ancient and modern world systems. Janet L. Abu-Lughod provides an essay, previously circulated in manuscript, that recapitulates her understanding of the world system of the Mongol era. And Immanuel Wallerstein contributes a brief essay, originally published in

1991, restating his contention that the modern capitalist world system represents a historical phenomenon qualitatively different from anything that preceded it.

In the nature of things, the views of Frank and Gills set the agenda for this volume, and they warrant particularly close attention. Frank and Gills argue that the hallmarks that Wallerstein attributes to the modern capitalist world system--most importantly the process of capital accumulation, the establishment of core-periphery relationships, the operation of cycles of expansion and contraction, and the existence of hegemony and rivalry relationships--all apply equally well to premodern as to modern times. This contention leads them to deny the usefulness of the long-revered categories of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism, as well as the almost equally long-honored effort to chart transitions from one to another. Since they believe that these artificial constructs obscure more than they clarify, Frank and Gills suggest that historical scholarship should abandon them altogether and focus instead on "center-periphery structures, hegemony/rivalry within them, the process of capital accumulation, cycles in all of these, and the world system in which they operate" (p. xv). This complex of themes they trace back some 5,000 years to the beginning of regular interaction between ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies.

A thesis as large and novel as the one that Frank and Gills advance calls for detailed substantiation. Unfortunately, in this volume, Frank and Gills do not attempt to sketch even briefly the structure of their world system. Their work thus differs considerably from that of world-system analysts like Wallerstein and Abu-Lughod, who described in some detail the economic and political relationships that served as foundations for the world systems they envisioned. The work of Frank and Gills differs also from that of economic historians like Philip D. Curtin, K.N. Chaudhuri, and S.D. Goitein, all of whom reconstructed trade

networks that helped to integrate large-scale economic zones in premodern times. Frank and Gills deal with real historical experiences--as opposed to analytical recommendations, methodological suggestions, or theoretical reflections--in only a single, jointly written essay that charts eight long cycles that they believe drove the economic and political history of the eastern hemisphere between 1700 B.C.E. and 1700 C.E. Their identification of cycles, however, is largely unpersuasive. They rarely introduce economic data when discussing their eight cycles, but rather depend almost exclusively on the rise and decline of imperial states as an index to cyclical expansion and contraction. Indeed, the criteria for identifying cycles are so loose and uncontrolled that it would be possible to make a case for either cyclical expansion or cyclical contraction for several of the eight cyclical periods proposed here. Furthermore, Frank and Gills rely on scholarship that is long out of date (works by E.H. Warmington, Frederick Teggart, V. Gordon Childe, and others) or even downright unreliable (Luc Kwanten's study of nomadic empires) when seeking to ground their cycles in historical experience. As a result of these problems, the notion of eight system-wide cycles remains an interesting hypothesis, but one that will require thorough investigation and solid documentation before scholars can accept the cycles with any degree of confidence. Quite apart from these cycles, of course, other features of the proposed 5,000-year world system that do not receive any detailed attention here at all--institutions, trade flows, economic and political relationships, and the like--also call for documentation that this volume does not provide.

Another general problem with the thesis of Frank and Gills has to do with the term "system." The authors never offer a precise definition of the term, but they associate it most closely with inter-societal transfers of surplus production: "if different 'societies,' empires, and civilizations, as well as other 'peoples,' regularly exchanged surplus, then they also participated in the same world sys-

tem. That is, 'society' A here could and would not be the same as it was in the absence of its contact with B there, and vice versa" (p. 93). The world system of Frank and Gills is thus a much looser affair than that of Wallerstein, which always exhibits an axial division of labor that distinguishes the core, periphery, and semi-periphery from each other. It differs also from Abu-Lughod's world system, which featured multiple cores, but which stood on the foundations of the Mongol empires and long-established trade routes linking an archipelago of cities from China and southeast Asia to western Europe and north Africa. Many historians would agree that cross-cultural interaction was a prominent feature of the premodern world. Some would agree further that premodern trade in luxury goods had much larger significance than Wallerstein would allow. Even at that, however, the term "system" may seem rather strong for the relationships that Frank and Gills have in mind. In any case, their usage certainly dilutes the term: it is clear that the world system of Frank and Gills was a creature very different indeed from those described by Wallerstein and Abu-Lughod. Even if the term be allowed for the past 5,000 years, it demands more careful thought and more thorough elaboration than it has so far received.

A third general problem with the world system of Frank and Gills is that it does not deal very well with change over time. Most scholars would recognize the expansion of European influence in the larger world and the process of industrialization as major turning points in world history, and most would consider processes of cross-cultural interaction in modern times qualitatively different from those of premodern times. Apart from their cycles of expansion and contraction, however, Frank and Gills have little if any apparatus to explain European prominence and industrialization. Frank and Gills have sought diligently to avoid Eurocentric conceptions of the past—including the residual Eurocentrism that many historians find in Wallerstein's vision of the modern cap-

italist world system—and it certainly makes excellent sense to take a problem-centered rather than a Eurocentric perspective on cross-cultural interactions. Yet a vision of world-system history that ignores European prominence in modern times and the process of industrialization—a vision that jettisons the notions of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism and offers nothing in their place to help conceive, analyze, or explain large-scale historical change—is inadequate.

In spite of these general problems—as well as a number of smaller difficulties with their argument—Frank and Gills have provided a valuable service by initiating a debate about cross-cultural interactions before modern times and before the Mongol era. My own opinion is that the notion of a single, 5,000-year world system is not persuasive. Yet there remain many dimensions of cross-cultural interaction in premodern times—including long-distance trade, imperial expansion, mass migrations, biological and ecological exchanges, and the spread of cultural and religious traditions—that historians have only recently begun to examine seriously. Even if it is excessive, the bold thesis of Frank and Gills may stimulate additional useful research on cross-cultural interactions and their effects in premodern times.

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Citation: Jerry H. Bentley. Review of Frank, Andre Gunder; Gills, Barry K., eds. *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. February, 1995.

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