

What is World Systems All About? An Introduction for Human Ecologists

Robert J. Gregory

School of Psychology, Massey University Palmerston North, New Zealand
Phone: 64 6 350-5799 ext. 2053, E-Mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz

KEYWORDS Ecology. Relationships. Systems Theory. Power. History

ABSTRACT Ecology teaches us that all things are related, whereas human ecology focuses on the interrelationships of human beings and of human beings in their environments. Studies by world systems theorists lie within that large framework, and focus on two major themes of direct interest to human ecologists: analysis of historical data to predict, and issues related to power. The scholars who call themselves world systems theorists study, examine and analyze historical data, including information on the economy, in politics, and on related areas, to try to understand the past and predict the future. A second arena concerns the gathering up, holding, and use of power, illustrated for example, by economic and political decision-making and decision-makers. Power, of course, defines those with the strength and position to make and enforce decisions that affect others, that is, a core and a periphery. Human ecologists can generate important studies and focus their analyses by becoming more acquainted with the concepts and approaches of world systems theorists.

The role, activities and work of human ecologists ranges widely - one has only to glance at the table of contents of the Journal of Human Ecology to note the broad scope. While virtually all topics relating to human behavior and the environment are of interest, some particular topics may be of greater importance in addressing the many crises currently facing our Planet Earth and its inhabitants. A research group, the world systems theorists, are firmly focused on the role and activities of key decision makers, both historically and now. Their work may be of special interest to human ecologists.

World systems can be formally defined as "intersocietal networks in which interactions (such as trade, warfare, intermarriage, information, etc.) are important for the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affect changes that occur in these local structures" (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997, p. 275). Chase-Dunn and Hall further state that the world-systems paradigm "analyzes a new level of social organization - a global hierarchical division of labor that includes households, neighborhoods, communities, firms, regions, states, the world market, and the interstate system of competing states." They also claim that social change should be studied not in local states or even regions, but only with regard to the entire world (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997, p. 1).

When asked to "explain world systems theory ... in brief" (wsn@csf.colorado.edu) Christopher Chase-Dunn (1999) in a web discussion group stated that:

"there are many different theories depending on what is to be explained. There is a perspective that focusses (sic) on the whole system of important interactions (trade, investment, warfare and alliances, communications, cultural contact and differences) including local, regional and inter-regional. This is a different emphasis from approaches that see societies as substantially independent systems of interaction.

Consideration of intersocietal networks and structures conceptualizes patterns and features of the whole system of interaction - the world-system. One important structural pattern is the core/periphery hierarchy, a feature of the whole system. This does not require that everything is determined by whole-system features or processes."

These weighty definitions are difficult to follow, unless and until a reader becomes familiar with the words, concepts, and style of those involved in developing world systems theory. An interpretation is that this group of people, including historians, political scientists, sociologists and members of a few other disciplines, are trying to understand the economic and political patterns of human history, so they can predict the likely course of events in the political, economic, and social realms of the entire globe. For the most part, they see that capitalism has been relatively successful in monopolizing wealth. Through greed induced motivation, capitalism has enabled financial resources, i.e., capital to control people, technology, and nations, albeit sometimes far too effectively for

sustainability. For example, Wallerstein (1998, p. 89) states that, "The current world-system is capitalist and is based on the principle of endless accumulation of capital." The world system theorists would argue that a few people, tightly organized as an elite, now have extreme levels of wealth and power, as compared with a majority of humankind, who are not only poor, but are also relatively powerless. They see, based on historical and contemporary data, that a global hierarchy of power and control does exist, and that this situation makes the future problematic at best. Presumably, the future may witness the collapse of society as we know it, either through environmental degradation or social revolution, although technological disaster could play a part as well.

One of the strongest themes running through world systems theory is the notion that a powerful center or elite controls a weaker periphery. The core-periphery concept provides one fulcrum for understanding and analysis, and it is important to note that the core typically holds and enhances its power at the expense of the periphery. Various strategies may operate however, and at times, peripheries can stem the loss of resources and capital, turning the tables at least temporarily on the core. The money flow in the long run however, operates so that the rich get richer, and the poor increasingly become "surplus to requirements." The elite and those high up in hierarchies hold power, and use market mechanisms, capitalism, mass media, and technology to maintain and build their power and control.

A Marxist approach and flavor is one major tool of analysis, but certainly, is not the only such mechanism. In an interpretation, values are another one of the core issues for world systems. Individuals have and hold values, which lead them to join with others and form groups that in turn have and hold values. These groups serve as pressure groups or social forces that in turn promote those certain values, which also unite and organize the groups. Each individual and group may compete with other individuals and groups, or collaborate and cooperate, in an effort to enhance the values held. The strategies of some work well, and for others, they lose out. Over the sweep of history, occasional new cores emerge, form, and create social change, and on the other hand, some cores may weaken, disintegrate and disappear or become reduced to peripheral status.

A MORE DETAILED VIEW

The key authors in this field of study seek to build a general model that is useful to examine the history of the world, presumably to be better able to predict and perhaps, enable emerging leaders to control or at least influence, the future. The world system advocates divide the modern world system into core and periphery, that is, the most powerful nation states such as Japan, the United States, and Europe, are arrayed against the less dominant states (semiperiphery) and the least dominant (the remainder). What happens on a global scale also occurs on local levels, such that local hierarchies of power emerge and control those with less power. One of the great strengths of world system analysis is the detailed exploration of theory with data sets and cautious, even sceptical, examination of historical information.

The world system network has an active discussion group operating on the world wide web and is accessible at Wsn@csf.colorado.edu by writing "subscribe wsn" in the body of a message to listproc@csf.colorado.edu. Access to the journal, *Journal of World-Systems Research* is located at: <http://jwsr.ucr.edu/index.php>. Discussions, reports, analyses, critical reviews, plans for conferences, and other information sources are freely available to subscribers. Recently as one example, the group focused on the possibilities of design and development of a "world party" that could unite humankind globally so as to limit the power of the few extremely rich and powerful. The discussion roamed widely, running from a few advocating use of the Internet as a means to hard-line Marxist activities to questions about violence versus non-violence, and so on.

Much of the world systems view is available in literally dozens of books, and the bibliography that follows provides access to that literature. One of the best books to begin with is Shannon (1996). Beyond that, the recent writings of key authors such as Wallerstein (1974, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1989, 1990), Chase-Dunn (1989), Arrighi (1979, 1994, 1990), and Braudel (1984) should be useful. An excellent reader is available as well (Hall, 2000).

A CRITIQUE

World systems theory is probably anathema

to members of the vested elite, to those holding power, and to those who are content with the mundane details of much scientific research in other fields. The masses, the world systems theorists would claim, have been tranquillized and captured through television, drug (alcohol) induced impotence, materialism and consumerism, and skilled propaganda or brainwashing (Sutphen, 2000). The mass media appear to avoid real discussions about who is in charge, or about world systems and the wielding of power.

Relatively few academic scholars are fluent in the content and substance of this field. This avoidance of such issues, this ostrich like behavior, is undoubtedly due to the reluctance of upwardly mobile scholars, to do other than support rulers and conservative political positions. Because of the drive for power and control by elites, for example, the New World Order promoted by George Bush as President of the United States and his colleagues, an apparent suppression of democracy and open debate has occurred. These leaders do not want to advertise their plans, planning, and activities, except as carefully crafted or shaped for public dissemination. Thus world systems theory borders on conspiracy theories, however, the vision-quest and the careful and systematic attention to history, scientific hypotheses, and documented details prevents world systems theorists from falling into this trap. For those bravely studying and addressing the big issues of contemporary societies locked together in our globe, and for those who are sceptical of the presentations in the media, the world systems approach has much to offer.

A PERSONAL VIEW

Back when I was but eleven or twelve years old, a great uncle of mine passed on, but left three slender books for me as an intellectual inheritance. My great-uncle had immigrated to the United States from Russia, and like many swept up in such enormous moves, he remained intrigued with the big questions, the concerns about hierarchies, social controls, political dominance of countries over one another, the use of power, the concentration of wealth, and elite-peasant relationships. One of those books spelled out a world vision so radically different from everything I had learned from parents,

teachers at schools, and available literature, that at first, I grandly imagined I was a spy, suddenly seeing a brand new world in an entirely different way (Marion, 1949). My cultural set, or cognitive structure, had been truly and forever shattered (Pearce, 1983, 1988) as I suddenly realized how utterly naive my little world had been. Education or the lack thereof, propaganda, the mass media, and the limiting effects of a closed culture prevented me, like so many others during that era in the United States (Sutphen, 2000), from truly being able, in the words of Carlos Castaneda (1972, 1974), to "see." Of course, age was one, but certainly not the only, factor. The specific book, *Bases and Empire*, detailed the plans of the elite in the United States to take over the entire world through armed military force. After some thinking about these grand ideas however, I realized that, whether or not these particular ideas were correct, alternative ways of seeing the world were possible, desirable, and yet, were something to be kept secret. After all, this was the height of the McCarthy era in the United States, and aberrant beliefs were quickly labelled as "deviant" and even worse, "communist." I did not dare, and so was unable, to share my newfound intellectual discoveries with anyone else.

So it was, until during secondary school, and again in my many years of university education, when I found fascinating books by some of the thinkers in this world, people like Toynbee (1934) and Sorokin (1937) and much later, Solzhenitsyn (1974) and similar visionaries. I puzzled through carefully, not the abstracts or excerpts, but the entire 8 or 4 and 3 volumes, respectively. These authors were not hesitant about asking the big questions, in fact they fought strenuously for ways to wrestle with the issues that transcended their daily life.

Again, during a post-doctoral study opportunity at the Duke University Department of Anthropology, a visit by Dr. Margaret Mead just a month or two before she passed away provided another intriguing glimpse of a great mind at work. She requested a separate meeting with advanced students, then advised the graduate students present to relegate to second place the teachings of the current crop of academicians, the researchers, the "detail" people, as she so eloquently called them. "Go back to those early scholars who asked the big questions," she advised.

Well, after many years of working in human services and university level teaching, my age and those experiences of the past, if nothing more, permit me the opportunity to go back to those big questions, not as retreat, but as essential steps to understanding the future directions in our world. Asking simple questions, such as “who is in charge,” or “who sets agendas for the direction we are taking,” rarely leads to tangible answers. The bits and details of data, the paths of information flows and the glimpses of scholarly insights, when assembled and synthesized, organized, and integrated, these days quickly lead to those who ask the big questions, that is, the world systems researchers. Unfortunately, most academic and scholarly research is still relegated to seeking and answering questions as relevant to our future as arguing about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. Not so the world systems people, for they are concerned about real power, current attempts at world control and domination, how the rich gain money and wealth, and how the various parts of the “system” works.

Those studying human ecology would be well advised to become familiar with this approach and the work of these theorists, for the ecology and relationships of human beings are characterized again and again by both time and power issues. Making better sense of the interrelationships of people and as well of people operating within their environments, i.e., human ecology, can be clarified when these two major issues or themes and the underlying theoretical frameworks are brought to bear on data, or ideas, or interpretations.

REFERENCES

- Arrighi, G.: The process of peripheralization: Changes in production processes. *Review*, **III**: 2 (1979).
- Arrighi, G.: *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. Verso, London (1994).
- Arrighi, G.: The three hegemonies of historical capitalism. *Review*, **XIII**: 3 (1990).
- Braudel, F.: *The Perspective of the World: Volume 3 of Capitalism and Material Life*. Harper and Row, New York (1984).
- Castenada, C.: *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan*. Simon and Schuster, New York (1972).
- Castenada, C.: *Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. Pocket Books, New York (1974).
- Chase-Dunn, C.: *Global Formation: Structures of the World-economy*. Basil Blackwell Inc, Cambridge, MA (1989).
- Chase-Dunn, C. and Hall, T. D.: *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-systems*. Westview Press, Boulder, CO (1997).
- Chase-Dunn, C.: Message sent 28 October 1999 at 13:42:53 0400 at wsn@csf.colorado.edu (1999).
- Hall, T. D. (Ed.): *A world-systems Reader: New Perspectives on Gender, Urbanism, Cultures, Indigenous People and Ecology*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, UK (2000).
- Marion, G.: *Bases and Empire: A Chart of American Expansion*. Fairplay Publishers, New York (1949).
- Pearce, J. C.: *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg: Challenging Constructs of Mind and Reality*. Julian Press, New York (1983, 1988).
- Shannon, T. R.: *An Introduction to the World-systems Perspective*. Westview, Boulder, CO (1996).
- Solzhenitsyn, A. I.: *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. 3 volumes. Collins and Harvill Press, Sydney (1974).
- Sorokin, P. A.: *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. 4 volumes. Bedminster Press, Totowa, New Jersey (1937).
- Sutphen, D.: The battle for your mind: Mass mind control techniques in America, <http://www.rense.com/ufo6/mindcontrol.htm>, (2000) accessed 30 July 2003.
- Toynbee, A.: *A study of History*, 8 volumes. Oxford University Press, London (1934).
- Wallerstein, I.: *The Modern World-system, Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-economy in the Sixteenth Century*, Volume I. Academic Press, New York (1974).
- Wallerstein, I.: *The Capitalist World-economy*. Cambridge University Press, New York (1979).
- Wallerstein, I.: *The Modern World-system: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-economy, 1600-1750*, Volume II. Academic Press, New York (1980).
- Wallerstein, I.: *The Politics of the World-economy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England (1984).
- Wallerstein, I.: *The Modern World-system: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-economy, 1730-1840s*, Volume III. Academic Press, New York (1989).
- Wallerstein, I.: World systems analysis: The second phase. *Review*, **13**: 365-408 (1990).
- Wallerstein, I.: Utopistics: or historical choices of the twenty-first century, New York: As reviewed in *Global Futures Bulletin* #73, 1 December 1998 (1998).
- wsn@csf.colorado.edu for entry to the World Systems Network. <http://jwsr.ucr.edu/index.php> for entry to the Journal of World-Systems Research.