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The Longue Durée and the Status of “Superstructures”

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The “superstructures” in the title refers to the offhand, but telling, way analysts of many stripes continue to categorize and think about a set of social institutions in relation to the material underpinnings of the social world, particularly those of production and distribution. When I first came to Binghamton, now more than twenty years ago, I was already interested in this domain of “superstructure”; in my case it was the realm of language, literature, and the arts, or what many would assign to the cultural arena along with religion and law.

The idea is prevalent in Marx’s German Ideology, but the classic formulation is in his 1859 “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structures of society, the real foundation, on

which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx 1859: 4).

He reiterates the idea in 1852 in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life (Marx 1963[1852]: 47).

Although it is always clear that Marx had a relationship in mind, that is, of base and superstructure, the actual substance of that relationship remains far from settled. Formulations like “relative autonomy” or “determine in the last instance,” which allude to some effectivity, reciprocity, feedback, or uneven development, do not really alleviate an unease with a derivative status—super-structures, or sometimes even reflections—consigned to such elements of social life that seem, at least existentially, so fundamental.

Marx’s metaphor is spatial; it is basically static. I shall contend that the idea of a “*longue durée*” of historical capitalism as a unique and singular duration over which the structures of the modern world-system have been reproduced points to a useful, more thoroughly historical, reconceptualization of this relationship.

Historical social systems come into being as an indivisible set of unique and singular structures recognizable over the long term. The processes of reproduction of

these structures are manifested in secular trends and cyclical rhythms that may be observed over the life of the system—it has a history. Eventually, however, these processes run up against asymptotes, or limitations, in overcoming inherent contradictions and the system ceases to exist.

The structures of the modern-world system came into being in Europe at the beginning of the long sixteenth century. By the end of the Hundred Years' War an axial division of labor was developing between a western European core where high-wage, skilled workers produced low-bulk, high value-added products and an eastern European periphery where high-bulk, low value-added necessities were produced under a regime of lower-cost labor. The long-distance trade in these commodities resulted in the accumulation of capital in the core. The processes reproducing this relationship over the long term, that is, the “accumulation of accumulation” or profit making for reinvestment in a circular and increasing fashion underwent periodic fluctuations, and the expansion of the system to incorporate new pools of low-cost labor provided the solutions that turned periods of world economic downturn into periods of upturn.

This “endless” accumulation resulting from the extraction, appropriation, concentration and centralization of surplus produced by labor, however, could only take place within the context of what developed as an interstate system. At about the same time as the axial division of labor was forming between the European core and periphery, political organization based on “parcellized sovereignty” (Anderson 1974), or the overlapping geographic jurisdictions of feudal “realms,” mutated into a set of multiple states with reciprocal rights and obligations, at least to the extent that their territorial extensions and the monopoly on the use of force within them, were recognized by other

states. Here, however, it is crucial to differentiate between the singular entity, the interstate system, and the elements of that system, states: the first a long-term structure or system of relations, the second, physical manifestations or products of the system that come and go, even change physical shape or conceptual form as the system as a whole reproduces itself. If one might be tempted to think of the “capitalist state” as superstructural, one can hardly think of the primary *longue durée* structure of coercion and decision making in the world-system as reflective or derivative of the structures of production and distribution; the axial division of labor and the interstate system are mutually dependent, reinforcing structures whose reproduction by expansion over time has grounded accumulation on a world scale.

The organizational structure of the interstate system allowed fluctuating flows of goods, capital, and labor to be controlled across semi-permeable borders. Strong states worked to loosen controls during periods of world economic upturn and tighten controls during periods of downturn to favor accumulation and contain and mitigate the consequences of class conflict. Controls over the movements of people (labor) were always more stringent than those enforced over the movement of commercial goods, while the weakest controls were exerted over financial flows. Like its economic processes, the geopolitics of historical capitalism also underwent periodic fluctuations. Competition among elites resulted in “world wars,” the outcomes of which were short-lived states of “hegemony,” a status of the system during which one strong state exercised military, commercial, financial, and cultural dominance, before other parts of the world-system “caught up” to become once more competitive and the cycle repeated.

World-systems analysis has not only identified a unique and unitary "world,"

exhibiting both long-term regularities and constant change, the "world" that constitutes its unit of analysis, but has also taken steps to give scholarly legitimacy to the phenomenological wholeness of human reality as well. Over the past three decades, significant progress has been made in developing modes of integrating the analytically distinct arenas of production and distribution, the economic, and decision-making and coercion, the political, in terms of long-term processes and medium-term fluctuations. Certainly, the literature on Kondratieff waves or waves of capitalist development is immense, as is that treating hegemony or world leadership. What is clearly still up in the air, however, is the status of those other elements of social life that have to do with the production of meaning. So although progress has also been made in the study of the social or cultural sphere, what I have called the "third arena," we remain to a surprising degree where we were a quarter century ago when Hopkins, Wallerstein, et al. asserted that "little is systematically known about [the broadly 'cultural aspect']" as integral to world-historical development (1982: 43). However, if the "broadly 'cultural' aspect" of the modern world-system is just as constitutive as the economic and political realms, then ad-hoc, particularistic conceptualizations would have to give way to a specification of the *longue durée* structures of this "third arena" of cognition and intentionality, including the cyclical rhythms and secular trends of the reproduction of those structures. They would have to be recognizable over the entire life of the system—in other words, what we need is a conceptualization that would be analogous to those we use in the economic and political arenas (see Lee 2003). The structures-of-knowledge approach is the outcome of this conceptual work in the arena of cognition and intentionality.

From the beginning of the long sixteenth century, the practices of knowledge

production have taken the form of an intellectual and institutional hierarchy, or set of structures, within which authoritative knowledge, that is, where truth values could be established, was progressively defined as the “other” of societal/moral values. This is the primary *longue durée* structure that accounts for the dominant relational setting “disciplining” human cognition and intentionality, and thus framing the “cultural” parameters of possible action.

The progressive privileging of formal rationality, that is, disinterested calculation as a generalized means of instrumental action, over substantive rationality or the normatively-oriented pursuit of specifically situated ends, drove the processes of rationalization, the secular trend in the arena of the structures of knowledge. Depending on the arena of discourse this might be variously labeled “scientization” or “secularization,” in any case it amounted to the pursuit of objectivity and the marginalization of agency and history, of subjectivity in whatever form. The structures of knowledge of the modern world-system are, like its economic and political structures, unique; no other historical system has created two antithetical, contradictory epistemological bases for the production of knowledge, one excluding human values as a basic constituent of the search for knowledge and one in which human values are an inseparable part. Along these two lines, the long-term intellectual and institutional opposition of the sciences and the humanities, what has come to be called the “Two Cultures”, reached a clear delineation over the course of the nineteenth century (see Lee and Wallerstein 2004).

Within this basic structure, the social sciences emerged in the nineteenth century as a medium-term solution to the tensions internal to the structures of knowledge that no

longer offered practical ways of addressing the evolving geopolitics of the world-system. In the aftermath of the French Revolution it was no longer possible to imagine a static world; but how one interpreted social change depended on contradictory appeals to values. The alternatives were mutually exclusive; the world could be one in which order was achieved through the authority of tradition or one of chaos arising from unfettered democracy. Neither offered a solution, on which any consensus seemed possible, to the political confrontations between conservatism and radicalism that threatened capital accumulation. Eventually, from the late nineteenth century, the objective, value-neutral, problem-solving spirit of science was advanced to resolve the stand-off in the English-speaking world and the connection between meaning or values and systematic knowledge was argued rigorously, and vigorously, in the *Methodenstreit*. The result was the institutionalization of a set of disciplines, the social sciences, which would function to guarantee ordered change in the name of “progress” through “scientific” control. Social scientists were to be “experts” and produce “value-neutral” knowledge based on “hard facts.” In political and economic terms, this amounted to liberal incrementalism maximizing accumulation and minimizing class struggle.

The evolving hierarchical structure of the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities privileged and gave maximum cultural authority to the universalism asserted in the sciences, the empirical and positivistic sphere of “truth.” The particularistic knowledge produced in the humanities involving the impressionistic and anarchic human realm of “values” simply could not muster the same legitimacy that practical relevance afforded to the natural sciences. In this great fluctuation in the processes of reproduction of the structures of knowledge, the social sciences came to be situated in-between the two

great super disciplines, resolving in the medium term the nineteenth-century crisis of social knowledge production. The social sciences divided the study of the human world into isolated domains separated intellectually in disciplines and institutionally in university departments. However, from the moment of the greatest intellectual and institutional success of this structure in the period immediately after 1945, the scholarly legitimacy of the premises underlying the partitions separating the disciplines and the practical usefulness of the distinctions became less and less self-evident, and after 1968 were overtly contested.

Summarizing the periodic fluctuations in the processes of reproduction of the structures of knowledge, which I have called logistics, the first logistic corresponds to the period of secular inflation and deflation identified by Rondo Cameron (1970, 1973) running generally from the middle of the fifteenth century through the first third of the eighteenth century. The process of rationalization began with the embryonic separation of facts from values, the true from the good, and the division of the earthly from the heavenly. The Thirty-years war, the Westphalian solution, and the establishment of Dutch hegemony fall in the middle of the period. The second logistic matches up with the second period of secular inflation and deflation that runs from the mid-eighteenth century through the late nineteenth century. A thirty-years-long world war and the reestablishment of a state of hegemony in the interstate system with England as the leading power again fall about in the middle of the period. The medium-term resolution of the first logistic, the Newtonian synthesis, is confirmed and consolidated, and marked symbolically by La Place's rejection of any place for God in his system of celestial mechanics. The third logistic that begins in the late nineteenth century seems just to be

sputtering out. It also witnessed a thirty-years-long world war that resulted in a new state of hegemony. The political tensions of the second logistic were resolved in the medium term with the new liberal consensus of popular sovereignty and the welfare state extrapolated worldwide as developmentalism and self-determination of peoples.

These then are the three analytically distinct but functionally, and existentially, inseparable structural arenas of the modern world-system: the axial division of labor, the interstate system, and the structures of knowledge. Over the past three decades, the crisis in the processes reproducing the organizational patterns of the modern world-system in all three has become apparent (see Hopkins, Wallerstein et al. 1996), despite neoliberal efforts bolstered by the rhetoric of globalization (the idea that there is no other choice) to extend them. The major mechanisms through which accumulation has been guaranteed over the past five centuries by keeping costs of production down—the incorporation of new pools of lowest cost labor, the externalization of the costs of infrastructure and ecological degradation, control over transfer payments resulting in higher taxes, and state's ability to contain the political initiative of popular political forces—have all run up against their limits resulting in rising costs of production at the world level that can no longer be offset locally.

Such statements are a product of a *longue durée* perspective and must weigh heavily as we evaluate the impact of the concept over these two days. When we look at the realm of superstructures from a *longue durée* perspective, it becomes apparent that here too we are in the throes of a secular crisis. The structuralisms ran a knife through the heart of both European humanism and positivism, and from the late 1960's, developments at the level of theory paralleled what was happening on the ground. Those

groups which had theretofore lacked a “voice” secured admittance to the academy and began to transform it from the inside by applying their differently situated knowledge of the workings of the social world and their alternative value sets to highlight especially the link between a-historical categories of social being and human subordination.

The crisis of rationalization is a crisis of the separate epistemologies of the two cultures and thus of the relational organization of the superdisciplines. That chance and necessity are indivisible and give rise to irreversibility and creativity in natural systems (see Prigogine 1997)—reinstating the idea that authoritative knowledge may not necessarily, even at the limit, offer possibilities for prediction—are moving the sciences back toward the “human studies.” Contingency, context-dependency, the collapse of essentialisms, and multiple, overlapping temporal and spatial frameworks are closing the gap between the humanities and the historical social sciences.

Just as the realization that most natural systems are deterministic but unpredictable does not spell the “end of science” and their subject matters, the subject matters we now think of as composing the humanities will not disappear. What is changing is the overarching structure itself that categorizes and separates the humanities and the sciences and leaves the social sciences adrift somewhere in between. Fernand Braudel saw the *longue durée* as one of the ways a *rapprochement* might be achieved among the human sciences. The intellectual sanctions and practical justifications for independent disciplines in the social sciences are disintegrating, but we are hardly at the “end of history.” To the contrary, we are on the frontier “after history” when time and space can no longer be treated as neutral parameters but must be viewed as socially constructed and interdependent categories. Indeed, the *longue durée* has altered our

concept of history by supplying us with the conceptual tools to overcome the dilemma of being constrained to think in either idiographic or nomothetic terms. So today we can certainly imagine a possible future in which not just history, sociology and economics find more common ground, but music and literature, biology and astrophysics will cease to live in worlds apart defined by their differing epistemologies and recognize equally their stake in the human condition.

A reevaluation of the way we conceptualize “superstructure” as suggested by the *longue durée* approach has important consequences for us as analysts as we imagine and work for those possible futures that we believe will make for a better world during this period of systemic transition. The first is in underlying subject matter. We are on the cusp of a transformation not just in epistemology, but to a post-modern (world-system) ontology. It is already changing the way we view the world from one of autonomous, pre-existing but interacting, units—individuals of all persuasions—to one of relational systems which create their elements as observables as they reproduce themselves. The effect will eventually be to alter the possibilities for human action that we are able to imagine as legitimate and efficacious. This will entail a methodological revolution, as well, as the heyday of the comparative method in its most classic forms fades and we begin to learn to exploit fully the tools offered by analogies or homologies. Finally, as values are incorporated directly in our analyses and not relegated simply to the attitudes of the analyst, we will have to constantly ask the “for what,” “for when,” “for where,” “for whom,” “from whose point of view” questions on a regular basis. In short, consciousness, social being, may find not only its structural location but its historical dimension as well in world-systems analysis.

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