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ABSTRACT

By utilizing world systems analysis and dependency theory in world history, ways that students can raise questions and integrate ideas at the high school and undergraduate level are identified. A discussion of the origins and design of the 14th century world system demonstrates how it is set apart from the modern world and how conveying that difference to students offers a sense of cultural variation in the face of global integration. Through the use of sources, students can contrast European exploitation of the Americas to European exploitation of Asia. By the deconstruction of the entrenched historical assumption that a world system is positive and desirable, students begin to understand the formulation of more meaningful questions. As an example, Egypt provides a micro level test case as to the necessity or desirability of a world system. In the case of Egypt as a regional microcosm, the evidence illuminates that it was not the existence of a world system of foreign trade that was crucial to Egypt's prosperity, but it was the control of an adequate, revenue-producing, agrarian base that was essential. On the macro level, it was not European control of the world network of long-distance trade that contributed to the rise of power in the west, but it was the European disruption, diversion, and control of the agrarian tax bases of first the Americas and then the Eastern hemisphere that gave rise to a western-dominated world system. (CK)

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A recent publication, J. Abu Lughod, Before European Hegemony, Oxford, 1989 documents the existence of a fourteenth century world system, thereby attacking the myth of the uniqueness of the current western-dominated, world system.

However, the origins and design of this fourteenth-century, world system set it apart from the modern world system. This difference is vital to conveying to our students a sense of cultural variation in the face of global integration. The fourteenth century "system" came into being through the efforts of individual merchants who linked together the regions of the world.(1) Noteworthy is that within that network, no single region sought to dominate the others. By contrast, the current world system came into

being by design and with the support of the crowned heads of European nation-states who sought from the outset to monopolize world trade.

The question becomes, why hadn't any nation tried to dominate the earlier world "system"? What is truly different about the 16th-century beginnings of the world system, as Professor Abu Lughod indicates, is the desire on the part of the Europeans to control the whole. Herein lies fertile ground for students at all levels themselves to compare and contrast the foundations and attitudes of the world's major civilizations. Herein is a truly global issue which gets at the heart of cultural differences. Students can readily contrast, for example, the values of Confucian ethics or of Muslim communitarianism with those of mercantilism through the sources presented in any good collection.

In fact, the fourteenth century world "system" was a world trade "network," not a "system." While, both world "systems" encompassed world trade, the focus of Professor Abu-Lughod's book on trade, to the exclusion of any larger economic considerations, reflects an earlier bias. Modernization theory saw trade as the causality behind the "Rise of the West," as the issue was phrased. Trade was, however, only the West's entree into what Abu Lughod demonstrates was a pre-existing trading network. That

entree eventually enabled the West to create a world system which the West would dominate. But trade per se was not the generator of real economic growth. Herein is room for an elementary lesson in economics for students. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the overwhelming majority of the world's population lived in villages and worked in agriculture. Agriculture remained the basis of wealth. Trade was never more than supplemental. The lack of interest in trade on the part of the Ming, as later the Ottomans, makes sense if we focus our attention on agriculture and not trade.

To emphasize this point -- Was China's success in the Tang, Sung, or Ming periods the result of a world system of foreign trade? Or was China's success the result of a well-managed agricultural administration, an administration which maximized agrarian revenues brought into the center? These are issues accessible to investigation by students at any level. The key is to point students in the direction of, or outright assign, specific short excerpts in any collection of historical sources which will allow them to ask these questions.

China, into the 19th century, and the Ottoman Empire until about 1550, constituted self-sufficient, closed economic systems. Their economies were based on extractive agricultural taxation. Revenue from foreign trade never

constituted a significant proportion of Chinese or Ottoman revenues. These were agrarian-based empires.

Prior to the 19th century, trade in and of itself was an important source of tax revenue only to those states poorly endowed with an agricultural tax base. For example, Portugal did not have and could not acquire an agricultural hinterland sizeable enough to generate significant tax revenue. And Spain had ecological limitations on its agrarian tax base. England had limitations of size, so too the Low Countries. These states would become maritime empires, increasing national wealth through overseas trade. This is in contrast to agrarian empires such as the Chinese and Ottoman, or France for that matter, which increased their wealth through territorial expansion.

France lost out to Britain in India and the Americas because France's interests were continental. France's agricultural tax base was, let's say, on the order of four times that of England's, and France (as later Germany) had ambitions of dominating (i.e., taxing) contiguous real estate, i.e., all of Europe. France had no need to take ship and acquire distant colonies. It could colonize the European hinterland. Isn't that what Napoleon was all about? France can easily be compared with the other agrarian empires -- and contrasted to its European maritime neighbors who couldn't compete with France on the continent.

Those states not endowed with an extensive agricultural base from which to generate revenues, sought to generate revenue by access to maritime trade. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century trade became the "apparent" generator of expansion. The actual result was that while European middle-men made a profit, Europe developed a trade deficit with the East. Europe's role in world trade prior to the Industrial Revolution was to reroute middleman profits away from Asia and the Middle East. But by so doing, European middle men generated minimal additional revenue.

Through the sources students can contrast European exploitation of the Americas to European exploitation of Asia. The new world system was based from the beginning on colonial relationships that spurred European economic growth.

It was only in the 19th century, when Europeans took control of taxation, production, distribution and marketing in the East, that the world trade network now dominated by Europe ended Europe's negative balance of trade with the Eastern hemisphere. The British Empire was about controlling taxation, production, distribution, and the marketing of raw materials as well as manufactured goods. The economics of empire were much thicker than simply controlling trade. In short, overseas empire was what distinguished the 19th century world system from that of the 14th century trade

network.

An additional question for students to consider is the necessity of a world system, or even network. Professor Abu Lughod argues that only when there was a symbiosis of agricultural and industrial production, as with China in the case of silk, or India in the case of cotton, was the economy solid. In these two cases, I would argue, the economy was, in fact, solid without foreign trade. Professor Abu Lughod aptly discusses the ephemeral role of trade where there is not an agricultural basis for success - as in the Straits of Malacca.

While pre-Columbian trade generated a world trade "system," the necessity of such a system for the prosperity of China, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, or Moghul India remains to be established. Behind current scholarly interest in world systems lies the lurking assumption that a world system is positive and desirable. By the deconstruction of this entrenched historical assumption, students can begin to understand how to formulate more meaningful questions.

By way of example, Egypt provides a test case as to the necessity, or desirability, of a world "system." Egypt represents a less well known microsystem comparable to that of China or Moghul India. And, Egypt, as a micro-system, also clearly exemplifies agriculture, and not trade, as the

generator of economic growth.

Between 1250 and 1350, the period under study in Abu Lughod's study, transit trade accounted for a disproportionate share of Egypt's GNP. During an earlier period, however, 850-1070, transit trade through Egypt while important, made up only a small percentage of Egypt's overall GNP. The bulk of earlier revenue was generated by a vertically-integrated, self-sufficient, textile industry which involved all segments of Egyptian society, from the peasants to the rulers. This was Islamic Egypt's period of fabled prosperity.(2)

The peasants grew the flax which generated tax revenue. State officials and land contractors reaped the profits from tax and rent. The same state officials and landholders operated rural factories in which the peasants processed raw flax. The same officials and landholders controlled the spinning, but did not monopolize, weaving and finishing of linen textiles and clothing. Officials as high as the rulers of Egypt controlled the ships which exported the textiles. But, bear in mind that the court at Cairo, and the population in Egypt also remained primary consumers of local production.

Scholarly opinion is unanimous in its analysis of the evidence. It indicates that Egypt was much more prosperous

between 850-1070 than in the century from 1250-1350. In the earlier two-century period, the Egyptian economy was characterized by a vertically integrated, self-sufficient textile industry. In the fourteenth century Egypt had become an entrepot for the exchange of Asian and European goods by foreign merchants.

Ir the later period peasants were compelled to cultivate sugar. Students can be introduced to the effects of plantation cultivation of sugar in contemporary Brazil via PBS documentaries.(3) Peasants cannot subsist on sugar cane, nor does wage labor for sugar plantations enable them to feed their families.

In the fourteenth Sugar was in great demand on the world market and turned a quick profit for the rulers of Egypt who established a monopoly on its export. Flax cultivation (Egypt's other premier commercial crop) necessarily declined because sugar, grain, and flax competed for the same acreage. But, while flax and grain were annual crops and could be expanded or contracted on a yearly cycle -- sugar tied up acreage for seven years, after which the soil was exhausted failing the kind of fertilizers that are now destroying the Florida everglades. Egypt had a finite area of arable land. More sugar meant less of something else.

By 1250, the beginning of the period under study in

Professor Abu Lughod's book, Egypt's major agricultural and industrial exports had become sugar and raw flax, not finished textiles and clothing. By the time of this "golden" period of trade, Egypt's agriculture and, therefore, economy were in decline. This was a result of the transformation of Egypt's exports, from value-added, processed Egyptian agricultural products to raw materials and reliance on transit trade. Egypt's economy was taking on the profile of a modern underdeveloped economy.

High school students, as well as undergraduates can investigate the history of sugar cane cultivation and processing. Such an investigation will lead them into a history of Arab expansion to India and the Atlantic, the Crusades, and the impulse toward the European voyages and expansion, including the triangular trade among Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. It can also plug them into an examination of the effects of sugar cane cultivation in Brazil, the political economy of gasahol, and the devastating effects of sugar cultivation on the Florida everglades over which a legislative battle is brewing.

Similarly investigation of the history of the textile industry -- cotton, silk, linen, and wool -- will take them around the globe from ancient technology, through the industrial revolution to the recent GATT negotiations in a very focused and meaningful manner. We can provide some

framework, but let them fill it in on their own.

To further emphasize the centrality of agriculture to regional economic well being, we may compare the effects of the demographic slump in Europe. Abu Lughod advances the conclusion that the demographic slump in Europe resulted in a reemphasis on agricultural production. She then posits a parallel sequence in Egypt whereby the demographic slump resulted in a decline in industrial production.

Neither conclusion can be supported by the evidence. First, the demographic slump in Europe resulted not in a reemphasis on agricultural production, but in the commercialization of agriculture.

That is, as a result of the decline in population due to the plague, there was a switch from the cultivation of low value-grain to high-value, high-demand crops which required less labor. Given the catastrophic drop in the work force and the precipitous drop in the market for grain, extensive grain cultivation was unprofitable. Dairy farming, viticulture and sheep ranching -- land usages which required less labor and resulted in higher returns -- were introduced. A small boy could herd 100 sheep. And the value of the wool his sheep produced skyrocketed because of the sudden demand for luxury woolens.

This phenomenon was part of a rise in demand for luxury goods by a market which, as a result of demographic collapse, was half as big but twice as rich, a dispirited market which turned to sack cloth and ashes, or, to eat, drink and be merry. Students can research when and why the Low Countries became so-called, when the Dutch began specializing in cheese, when France became a vineyard and Germany specialized in beer, when and why Spain became a sheep ranch.In Europe the demographic slump led to a rise in industrial production.

Without reference to the effects of the plague on Egyptian agriculture, Professor Abu Lughod posits a severe industrial decline in Egypt and Syria as a result of the demographic slump following the plague. She specifies a decline in flax and cotton textile production and in sugar processing.

The problems with this theory are, first, industrial production of flax had declined at least a century prior to the Black Death. As for industrial production of cotton, there is no evidence that cotton had ever been grown, or processed, in Egypt prior to the nineteenth century. Third, sugar did continue to be grown and processed in Egypt. But within the half century following the Black Death, because of the exorbitant monopoly price of Egyptian sugar, Europeans sought and found alternative sugar suppliers, most notably, Sicily and soon thereafter the Atlantic Islands.

There is additional evidence indicating that the demographic slump in Egypt and industrial decline were not causally linked. In Egypt as in Europe the plague hit urban areas. But in Egypt, unlike in Europe, the industrial sector was rural. And rural areas were least affected by the plague. Therefore, the industrial population in Egypt did not suffer a precipitous decline as it had in Europe. The Egyptian industrial sector was tied to agriculture. Sugar and flax had always been processed where they were grown. Sugar cane cultivation and processing required massive labor in the countryside. And rural areas were least affected by the plague.

Egypt's urban centers, particularly Cairo, had always been administrative, military and redistribution centers, not industrial sites. In Eygpt the population decline in urban centers was in the military and administrative sectors. Rural labor could not have moved into the city and taken up employment in elite occupations.

In Western Europe prior to the Black Death, rural labor had been engaged in grain cultivation to feed urban areas. With the severe reduction in their urban clientele, it made sense for European peasants to relocate into urban areas filling industrial job openings. But this market mechanism did not operate in Egypt. In Egypt the market for rural labor, i.e., labor intensive sugar, remained strong until the drop in

European demand due to alternative suppliers in the fifteenth century.

Therefore, while in Western Europe the demographic slump caused by the Black Death resulted in the commercialization of agriculture, in Egypt the effect was quite different. Following the Black Death Egypt began to abandon commercial agriculture. By the fifteenth century, with the decline in European demand for Egyptian sugar, the countryside reverted to subsistence farming and/or nomadism. Subsistence farming and nomadism did not generate an adequate tax base to maintain the elite's economic foundations. It is for these reasons, and not a simple function of the Black Death, that, "After the Black Death, Egypt's economic foundations grew more dependent on long distance trade." And while long-distance trade through Egypt increased in the second half of the 14th century, it was an increase in <u>transit</u> trade. Egypt had become an underdeveloped economy.

Conclusions

In the case of Egypt as a regional microcosm, it wasn't the existence of a world "system" of foreign trade which had been crucial to Egypt's prosperity. It was control of an adequate, revenue-producing, agrarian base that was crucial. And on the macro level, it wasn't European control of the

world network of long-distance trade that contributed to the "rise of the West." It was European disruption, diversion and control of the agrarian tax bases of first the Americas and then the Eastern hemisphere that gave rise to a western-dominated world system.

NOTES

#) This paper was delivered as part of a panel discussing Janet Abu Lughod, Before European Hegemony, The World System A.D. 1250-1350, Oxford, 1989 at the First National World History Association Conference held at Drexel University June, 1991.

1) See K.N. Chaudhuri, Trade and civilization in the Indian Ocean: an economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750, Cambridge, 1985; and Khaldoun Hasan al-Naqeeb, Society and state in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula. A different perspective, Routledge, 1990.

2) Frantz-Murphy, G., "A New Interpretation of the Economic History of Medieval Egypt: the Textile Industry," The Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient JESHO 24, 1981, pp. 274-297.

3) For example, the two hour film, The Politics of Food, has a half hour segment on the political economy of sugar cane cultivation in Brazil.