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"SOCIAL CHANGE? Change is eternal. Nothing ever changes."

Immanuel Wallerstein

I have included in my title the opening sentences of *The Modern World-System: "*Change is eternal. Nothing ever changes." It is a theme that seems to me to be central to our modern in-tellectual endeavour. That change is eternal is the defining belief of the modern world. That nothing ever changes is the re-current wail of all those who have been disabused of the so-called progress of modern times. But it is also a recurrent theme of the universalising scientific ethos. In any case, both state-ments are intended to be assertions about empirical reality. And of course both often, even usually, reflect normative preferen-ces.

The empirical evidence is very incomplete and ultimately un-convincing. For one thing, the kind of evidence one can offer and the conclusions one can draw from the evidence seem to depend on the time periods measured. Measurement over short periods of time in some ways best captures the enormity of social change. Who does not think that the world looks different in 1996 from 1966? And even more from 1936? Not to speak of 1906? One need only look at Portugal — its political system, its economic activities, its cultural norms. And yet of course in many ways Portugal has changed very little. Its cultural specificities are still recognisable. Its social hierarchies are only marginally different. Its geopolitical alliances still reflect the same fundamental strategic concerns. Its relative rank in the world's economic networks has remained remarkably constant in the twentieth cen-tury. And of course, the Portuguese still speak Portuguese — not a small matter. So, which is it? Change is eternal. Or nothing ever changes.

Suppose we take a longer time period, say 500 years — the duration of the modern world-system. In some ways, the changes seem even more striking. In this period, we have seen the emer-gence of a worldwide capitalist system, and along with it extra-ordinary technological changes. Airplanes circle the globe today and many of us, while sitting in our homes, can instantly contact persons at the other end of the globe via Internet, and download texts and graphics. In January 1996, astronomers announced that they are able to "see" so much further than ever before that they have quintupled the estimated size of the universe. We are now talking of there being billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars, covering a distance of I cannot begin to imagine how many light-years. And at the same time these astronomers have just uncovered planets similar to the earth around two of these stars, the first such planets they have found, ones they assert to have the climatic conditions that could support complex bio-logical structures, in short, possible life. How many more will we soon discover? Five hundred years ago Bartolomeu Dias was thought remarkable to have reached by sail the Indian Ocean, but even he never dreamed of such exotic possibilities as are now before us. Yet at the same time, we are being told by many per-sons, including many social scientists, that we have reached the end of modernity, that the modern world is in terminal crisis, and that we may soon find ourselves in a world that resembles the fourteenth century more than the twentieth. The more pessimistic among us foresee the possibility that the infrastructure of the world-economy, in which we have invested five centuries of work and capital, may go the way of the Roman aqueducts.

Suppose we now lengthen our horizons even more, to a period of some 10,000 years. This takes us back to a moment in time when neither Portugal nor any other contemporary politico-cultural en-tity existed, to a moment in time which; is almost beyond our ability to reconstruct it historically, to a-moment in time be-fore agriculture was a significant human activity. There are those who look back on the multiple hunting and gathering bands that flourished then as structures in which humans work many fewer hours per day and per year to maintain themselves than they do today, whose social relations were infinitely more egalitar-ian, and which operated in an environment that was far less pol-luted and dangerous.

For some analysts, the so-called progress of the past 10,000 years may therefore rather be said to consti-tute one long regression. And, for some furthermore, the expecta-tion and hope is that this long cycle is near an end, and that we may be returning to the "healthier" conditions of yesteryear.

How may we appraise such contrasting views? And how may we deal with the issues under

debate, scientifically and philosophi-cally? This seems to me the key question facing social scientists in general, and indeed all the bearers and creators of knowledge. It is not a question however that will be resolved by one more empirical study, even a very ambitious one. Nonetheless, one may say that it is very difficult to formulate intelligently empiri-cal studies on any concrete issue, without creating for ourselves the solid underpinning of an intellectual framework that enables us to place our analyses intelligently within this larger framework. For too long, for two centuries now, we have declined to do this on the grounds that this larger framework was a lure of "philosophical speculation," not to be taken seriously by "ratio-nal scientists." This was an error that we can no longer afford to indulge.

The social sciences, as we know them today, are a child of the Enlightenment. Indeed, in some ways, they are the finest pro-duct of the Enlightenment: they represent the belief that human societies are intelligible structures whose operation we can un-derstand. From this premise, it has been thought to follow that humans can affect their own world crucially by using their capa-cities to achieve rationally the good society. Of course, social science has accepted, virtually without questioning it, the fur-ther Enlightenment premise that the world is evolving inevitably toward the good society, that is to say that progress is our nat-ural heritage.

If one believes in the certainty of progress, and in its ra-tionality, then the study of social change cannot be thought of as merely one particular domain of social science. Rather, all of social science is necessarily the study of social change. There is no other subject. And in that case, it is clearly true that "change is eternal," albeit in a specified direction. In-deed, the whole theme is quite teleological: from barbarism to civilisation, from animal behaviour to god-like behaviour, from ignorance to knowledge. If then we are called upon to discuss the practices and pro-cesses of social change, we fit ourselves into a very clear and simple mould. It becomes virtually a technocratic exercise. We are required to analyse the immediate changes that we perceive; and then to judge whether they are more or less rational or, if you prefer, functional. Essentially, we are explaining how it is that they are as they are. And we then can, if we wish, prescribe what can be done to adjust the arrangements, such that we advance collectively more rapidly toward the good society. We are thereby thought to be useful, or policy-oriented, or practical. We can of course vary the parameters of time and space we use in such exercises, applying our knowledge to the case of very small groups over very short periods of time; or to much larger groups (say sovereign states) over medium-length periods of time, as for example, when we ask what we can do to "develop" the national eco-nomy."

Social scientists of all kinds have been engaged in these sorts of analyses for at least a century, overtly or covertly. When I add covertly, I mean that many social scientists would not define their activities as being so immediately tied to the exer-cise of public rationality. They might define it rather as the pursuit of more perfect knowledge in the abstract. But even when they do this, they know that the knowledge that they produce is being used by others to help achieve the more perfect society. And they are aware that the economic underpinnings of their sci-entific research are conditioned on their ability to show social benefit from the work, at least in some longer run.

The same Enlightenment assumptions, however, can lead us in a different, even opposite direction. The presumed rationality of the social world, just like the presumed rationality of the physical world, implies that law-like propositions may be formula-ted that describe it fully, and that such propositions hold true across time and space. That is to say, it implies the possibility of universals, which can be stated exactly and elegantly, and con-cludes that the object of our scientific activity is precisely to formulate and test the validity of such universals. This is of course nothing but the adaptation of Newtonian science to the study of social realities. And it is therefore no accident that, already in the early nineteenth century, some authors used the label of "social physics" to describe such activity. This search for law-like propositions is, in fact, totally compatible with the policy-oriented practical research that is centred on the achievement of the teleological objective of the good society. No one need feel uncomfortable pursuing the two objectives at the same time. Still, there is one small hitch in this double pursuit, one which has to do with social change. If the patterns of human interaction follow universal laws that hold true across time and space, then it cannot be true that "change is eternal." Quite the opposite, in fact: it follows that "no-thing ever changes," or at least nothing fundamental ever chan-ges. At which point, not only is it not true that all of social science is the study of social change, but precisely the inverse. The study of social change becomes defined as simply the study of the deviations from equilibria. In this case, even if one starts out, like Herbert Spencer, by offering the study of social change 50% of the space — the study of social dynamics as a pen-dant to the study of social statistics — one will rapidly arrive at a practice wherein social change as a topic is the vermiform ap-pendix of social science, an antiquated leftover from an early penchant for social reform. We can see that this did in fact hap-pen by looking at many of our elementary textbooks for students,which reserve for their very last chapter the topic of "social change," a belated acknowledgement that there exist some minor problems with the static description of the social structure.

Today, the Enlightenment view of the world is under much at-tack, and from many sides. Few persons would admit to accepting it without qualifications. They would seem "naive". Nonetheless, the

view remains deeply rooted in the practice and the theorising of social science. And it will take more than bombastic denuncia-tions by post-modernists to uproot it. Social scientists will not be ready to accept a basic reorientation of their view of social change without being first convinced that they will not thereby lose the *raison d' être* of social science. What I should like therefore to present to you is a rationale for a social science that has an alternative logic to one based on a belief in prog-ress. I believe we no longer need to be prisoners of a *Methodenstreet* between idiographic and nomothetic forms of knowledge. I believe that the presumed fundamental split between the "two cul-tures" — science versus philosophy/literature — is a lure and a deception, and must be overcome. I believe that neither statement about social change — change is eternal; nothing ever changes — can be accepted as valid as stated. I believe, in short, that we need to find another and better language with which to describe social reality.

Let me start by discussing the most traditional concept of sociology, that of society. We are said to live within, to be part of societies. There are supposed to be many societies, but (as the term is used) each of us is supposedly a member of only one of them, and at most a visitor in any other. But what are the boundaries of such societies? This is a question that has been in many ways strenuously and deliberately ignored by social sci-entists. Not however by politicians. For the origin of our curr-ent concept of "society" lies not too very far in the past. It came into use in the 50-year period following the French Revolu-tion, when it became common practice in the European world to as-sert (or at least assume) that social life in the modern world was divided into three different spheres — the state, the market, and the civil society. The boundaries of the state were defined juridically. And implicitly, never explicitly, the boundaries of the other two spheres were assumed to share those of the state, if no other reason than that the state asserted that this was true. France, or Great Britain, or Portugal was each assumed to have a national state, a national market or national economy, and a national society. These were a priori assertions, for which evidence was rarely offered.

Although these three constructs existed in the same bounda-ries, it was nonetheless insisted that they were distinct from each other — distinct both in the sense of being autonomous, each supposedly following its own set of rules; and in the sense that each was operating ~n ways that might put it at odds with the other entity. Thus, for example, the state might possibly not be representative of the "society." This is what the French meant when they distinguished *le pays légal* from *le pays réel.* Indeed, the social sciences were constructed originally around this distinction. To each of these hypothetical entities corresponded a "discipline." Economists studied the market; political scientists the state; and sociologists the civil society.

This partitioning of social reality was, to be sure, an im-mediate derivation from Enlightenment philosophy. It incarnated the belief that human social structures had "evolved"" and that the defining feature of higher social structures, that is modern social structures, is their "differentiation" into autonomous spheres. This is quite recognisable the dogma of liberal ideolo-gy, the dominant ideology of the past two centuries, which has served as the geoculture of the modern world-system. The proof, incidentally, that post-modernism is less a break with modernism and more plausibly merely the latest version of modernism is the fact that the post-modernists have not at all escaped from this schematic model. When they inveigh about the oppression of objec-tive structures and preach the virtues of "culture" embodying subjective agency, they are essentially invoking the primacy of the sphere of civil society over those of the state and the mar-ket. But in the process, they are accepting the thesis that the differentiation into three autonomous spheres is real and a pri-mordial analytic element.

I do not believe myself that these three arenas of action are in fact autonomous, and that they follow separate principles. Quite the opposite! I believe that they are so thoroughly inter-twined with each other that action in any of the arenas is always pursued as an option in which the overall effect is the determin-ing consideration, and that it obscures rather than clarifies analysis of the real world to attempt to separate the description of the sequential chains of action. In this sense, I do not be-lieve that the modern world is any different from previous per-iods of world history. That is to say, I do not believe that "differentiation" is a distinguishing feature of modernity. Nor do I believe that we live within multiple, distinctive "socie-ties" within the modern world, that each state contains one and only one "society," and that each of us is a member essentially of only one such "society."

Let me explain why. It seems to me that the appropriate un-its of analysis for social reality are what I call "historical systems." What I mean by an historical system is implied by the name itself. It is a system insofar as it is built around an on-going division of labor that permits it to sustain and reproduce itself. The boundaries of the system are an empirical question, to be resolved by determining the boundaries of the effective di-vision of labor. To be sure, every social system necessarily has various kinds of institutions that in effect govern or constrain social action such that the basic principles of the system are realised, to the degree possible, and persons and groups in the social system are socialised into behaviour that is consonant with the system, once again to the degree possible. We may designate various of these institutions as being economic, political, and socio-cultural, if we wish, but such designations are in fact in-accurate, since all the institutions act in ways that are simul-taneously political, economic, and socio-cultural, and could not be effective if they did not.

But, at the same time, every system is necessarily histori-cal. That is to say, the system came into existence at some moment in time as a result of process we can analyse; it evolved over time by processes we can analyse; and it came (or will come) to an end because (like all systems) there comes a moment when it has or will have exhausted the ways in which it can contain its contradictions, and it thereby goes out of an existence as a system.

You will notice immediately what this implies about social change. To the degree that we are talking of a system, we are saying that "nothing ever changes". If the structures do not remain essentially the same, in what senses are we talking about a system? But, to the extent that we insist that the system is "historical", we are saying that "change is eternal". The concept of history involves a diachronic process. It is what Heraclitus meant when he said that we cannot step into the same water twice. It is what some natural scientists mean today when they talk of the "arrow of time". Hence, it follows that both statements about change are true, *within framework of a given historical system.*

There are various kinds of historical systems. The capitalist world-economy in which we are presently living is one of them. The Roman Empire was another. The Maya structures in Central America comprised another. And there have been countless tiny historical systems. How to decide when- any one of these came into existence and when it then ceased to exist is a difficult and contentious empirical question; but theoretically there is no problem at all. By definition, the label of historical system is assigned to entities that have a division of labor with integrated production structures, a set of organising principles and institutions, and a definable life span. Our task as social sci-entists is to analyse such historical systems, that is, to demon-strate the nature of their division of labor, to uncover their organising principles, to describe the functioning of their in-stitutions, and to account for the system's historical trajecto-ry, including both its genesis and its demise. Of course, each of us does not have to do the whole thing. Like any other scien-tific activity, this is a task that can be divided up and shared. But unless we are clear about the framework of our analysis (the historical system), our work will not be very insightful or fruit-ful. What I have just said applies to any particular historical system. And each of us may devote energy to the analysis of one or another particular historical system. In the past, most per-sons who called themselves sociologists restricted their concern to an analysis of the modern world-system, but there is no sound intellectual reason for this.

There is however a further task for social science. If there have been multiple historical systems in the history of the world, we may wonder what their relation to each other is. Are they ontologically linked to each other, and if so in what way? This is the question of what Krzysztof Pomian calls chronosophy. The Enlightenment view of the world had a particular answer to that question. It saw the relation of what I am calling histori-cal systems, the ones to the others, as sequential and cumula-tive: over time, the successive systems became more complex and more rational, culminating in "modernity." Is this the only way to describe their relationship? I do not think so. In fact, I think this is distinctly the wrong way to describe their relationship. The basic question of social change repeats itself at this level. We have to ask whether change or repetition is the norm not only about the internal life of each historical system but also about the composite history of human life on this pla-net. And here too I am going to argue that neither statement — change is eternal, nothing ever changes — is satisfactory.

Before, however, we discuss the composite history of human life on this planet, let us return to the issue of social change within any given historical system. And let us do this by looking at the historical system of which we are a part, and which I de-fine as a capitalist world-economy. There are three quite sepa-rate intellectual questions that ought not to be confounded one with the other. The first is the question of genesis. How is it that this historical system came into existence, at the time and place that it did and in the way that it did? The second is the question of systemic structure. What are the rules by which this particular historical system, or perhaps more generally, this type of historical system, functions? What are the institutions through which these rules are implemented? Who are the social actors in conflict with each other? What are the secular trends of the system? The third is the question of demise. What are the contradictions of the historical system, and at what point do they become intractable, leading to a bifurcation in the system, entailing the demise of the system, and the emergence of one (or more) replacement system(s)? Not only are the three questions separate, but the methodology (the modes of possible enquiry) that may be used to respond to these queries are not at all the same.

I wish to emphasise the importance I attach to not confoun-ding the three questions. Most analyses of social change centre around only the second set of issues, the functioning of the his-torical system. The analysts quite often assume a functionalism teleology; that is to say, they presume that its genesis is ade-quately explained, once they can demonstrate that the kind of system they are describing works well, and they can argue that the system is "superior" in its mode of functioning to prior sys-tems. In this sense, the genesis assumes a quasi-inevitable char-acter, situated in the logic of history, and tied to setting in motion the particular kind of system. As for demise, this is ex-plained in the case of defunct systems not by the inherent con-tradictions in the system (for every system has contradictions) but by the asserted inferiority of its mode of functioning which inevitably gave way to presumably superior modes of functioning. And, it should be noted, this question is seldom posed at all for the

current historical system, so obvious to us seems its super-iority. You can observe this kind of reasoning in the endless number of books which seek to explain the emergence of the modern Western world as the end point of a logical evolutionary process, books whose argumentation normally involves a searching in the depths of history for the seeds which have led to the present — the glorious present.

There is an alternative way of discussing this same history. Let us illustrate this by discussing the modern world-system. We may take the period of its genesis as being somewhere circa 1450 AD, and its locus Western Europe. At that moment of time in that region, there occurred the more or less simultaneous great movements we call the Renaissance, the Gutenberg revolution, the *Descobrimentos,* and the Protestant Reformation. Now this momentin time came in the wake of a sombre period in this same region, in which there was the Black Death, the abandonment of villages (the Wüstungen), and the so-called crisis of feudalism (or the crisis of seigniorial revenues). How might we go about explaining the end of the feudal system and its replacement by another sys-tem, more or less in the same geographic zone?[1]

First, we need to explain why the previously existing system could no longer make the adjustments necessary to continue opera-ting according to its rules. I believe that in this case, it is explained by a simultaneous collapse in the three key institu-tions that sustained the feudal system: the seigniors, the states, and the Church. The drastic demographic collapse meant that there were fewer persons to till the land, that revenues fell, that rents fell, that commerce contracted, and that con-sequently serfdom as an institution declined or disappeared. In general, peasants were able to exact far better economic terms from large landowners. As a result, the power and the revenues of the seigniors declined significantly. The states in turn col-lapsed both because of the drop in their own revenues and because the seigniors turned on each other in order to salvage their per-sonal situations in difficult times (which, by decimating the no-bility, further weakened them vis-à-vis the peasantry). And the Church was attacked from within, both because of its weakened economic situation and because the collapse of the seigniors led to a generalised decline in authority.

When an historical system falls apart in this way, what nor-mally happens is that it becomes subject to a renewal of the rul-ing strata, most frequently by conquest from without. Had this been the fate of western Europe in the fifteenth century, we would have taken no greater notice of this transformation than we have taken of the historical replacement of the Ming dynasty in China by the Manchus (which essentially was precisely what I have described, a renewal of the ruling strata by conquest from without). This did not however happen in Western Europe. Instead, as we know, the feudal system was in fact replaced by something radically different, the capitalist system.

The first thing we must note is, far from being inevitable, this was a surprising and unanticipable development. And the second thing to note is that it was not necessarily a happy solu-tion. In any case, how did this occur, or why? I would suggest that it occurred primarily because the normal external renewal of ruling strata was accidentally and unusually not possible. The most plausible conquering stratum, the Mongols, had themselves just collapsed for reasons quite external to what was happening in Western Europe, and there happened to be no other conquering force immediately available. The Ottomans came along a little too late, and by the time they tried to conquer Europe, the new Euro-pean system was already strong enough (but just) to keep them from advancing beyond the Balkans.

But why then was feudalism replaced by capitalism? Here we have to remember that capitalist entrepreneurial strata had long existed in Western Europe as in many others parts of the globe; indeed, such groups had existed for centuries, if not millennia. There had however been in all previous historical systems very strong forces that limited their ability to have free rein and to make their motivations the defining characteristics of the system. This was very clearly true of Christian Europe, where the powerful institutions of the Catholic Church maintained a con-stant battle against "usury." In Christian Europe, as elsewhere in the world, capitalism was an illegitimate concept, and its practitioners were tolerated in only relatively small corners of the social universe. Capitalist forces did-not suddenly become stronger or more legitimate in the eyes of-most people. In any case, it had never been primarily the degree of strength of capi-talist forces that had been the decisive factor but the strength of the social opposition to capitalism. Suddenly, the institu-tions that sustained this social opposition had become quite weak. And the inability to re-establish them or create similar structures by renewing the ruling strata via external conquest gave a momentary (and probably unprecedented) opening to such capitalist forces, which swiftly entered the breach and consoli-dated themselves. We must think of this occurrence as extraordi-nary, unexpected, and surely undetermined (a concept to which we shall return).

Nonetheless, it happened. In terms of social change, this was a once only event, which we certainly cannot put under the head-ing of "nothing ever changes." The change in this instance was fundamental. Instead of calling this fundamental change "the rise of the West," as is usually and self-servingly done, I would des-ignate it myself as "the moral collapse of the West." Since how-ever capitalism, once given its head, is indeed a very dynamic system, it rapidly took hold and

eventually swept the entire pla-net into its orbit. This is how I perceive the genesis of the modern world-system in which we are living. It is wondrously aleatory.

We thereupon come to the second question about an historical system: what are the rules by which it works? What is the nature of its institutions? What are its central conflicts? I shall not take your time to deal with this here in detail about the modern world-system.[2] I shall merely briefly summarise the essential elements. What defines a system, this system, as capitalist? It seems to me that the *differentia specifica is* not the accumula-tion of capital but the priority given to the *endless* accumula-tion of capital. That is to say, it is a system whose institu-tions are geared to rewarding over the middle run all those who give primacy to the accumulation of capital and punish in the middle run all those who attempt to implement other priorities. The set of institutions that were established to make this poss-ible include the elaboration of commodity chains linking together geographically disparate production activities operating to optimise profit ratios in the system as a whole, the network of mod-ern state structures linked together in an interstate system, the creation of income-pooling households as the basic units of so-cial reproduction, and eventually an integrated geoculture legit-imating the structures and seeking to contain the discontents of the exploited classes.

Can we speak of social change within this system? Yes, and no. As with any system, the social processes fluctuate constant-ly, in ways we can explicate. As a result, the system has cyclical rhythms, which can be observed and measured. Since such rhythms by definition always involve two phases, we can, if we want, sug-gest that there is a change each time the curve rounds the bend. But in fact, we are here dealing with processes that are essen-tially repetitive in broad outline and which thereby define the contours of the system. On the other hand, nothing ever repeats itself exactly. And even more important, the mechanisms of "re-turning to equilibrium" involve constant changes in systemic pa-rameters which can themselves be charted and which thereupon de-scribe secular trends of the system over time. An example in the case of the modern world-system is the process of proletariarisation, which has followed a slow secular upward trend for five centuries. Such trends provide constant quantitative increments that are measurable, but (old question) we still need to ask at what point such quantitative increments add up to a qualitative change. The answer must surely be, not as long as the system con-tinues to function by the same basic rules. But of course, sooner or later, this ceases to be true, and at that point we can say that such secular trends have prepared the third phase, that of demise.

What we have described as secular trends are essentially vectors moving the system away from its basic equilibrium. All trends, if quantified as percentages, move towards an asymptote. When they approach it, it is no longer possible to increase the percentage significantly, and therefore the process no longer is able to fulfil the function of restoring thereby the equilibria. As the system moves further and further from equilibrium, the fluctuations become ever wilder, and eventually a bifurcation oc-curs. You will notice that I am here applying the model of Prigo-gine and others who see in these non-linear processes the expla-nation of non-cumulative, non-determined radical transformations. The concept that the processes of the universe are explicable and ultimately orderly without being determined is the most interes-ting contribution to knowledge of the natural sciences in the last decades, and represents a radical revision of the dominant scientific views that had previously prevailed in the modern world. It is also, may I say, the most hopeful reaffirmation of the possibility of creativity in the universe, including of course human creativity.

I believe that we are involved right now in a transforma-tional period of the kind I have been describing in our modern world-system.[3] One can argue that there are a series of develop-ments which have undermined the basic structures of the capita-list world-economy and therefore have created a crisis situation. The first is the deruralisation of the world. To be sure, this has been regularly hailed as a triumph of modernity. We no longer need so many people to provide basic subsistence. We can move beyond what Marx scorned as the "idiocy of rural life," a value judgement that is widely shared beyond the confines of Marxists. But seen from the vantage point of the endless accumulation of capital, this development means the end of a previously seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of persons, a portion of whom could per-iodically be brought into market-oriented production at extremely low levels of remuneration (to restore global profit levels by balancing the greater incomes of their predecessors whose syndi-cal action had resulted in raising their historic level of wa-ges). This shifting pool of workers at the bottom who are paid marginal sums has been a major element in worldwide profit levels for five centuries. But no particular group of workers remained in such a category for too long, and the pool had to be regularly renewed. The deruralisation of the world makes-this virtually im-possible. This is a good example of a trend reaching an asymp-tote.

The second such trend is the escalating social costs of per-mitting enterprises to externalise their costs. Externalising costs (that is, making the collective world society pay in effect for a significant part of the firm's costs of production) have been a second major element in maintaining high profit levels and therefore ensuring the endless accumulation of capital. As long as the cumulative costs seemed

low enough, no attention was paid. But suddenly they are too high, and the result is the worldwide concern with ecology. The fact is that too many trees have been cut down. The costs of repairing the ecological damage are enor-mous. Who will pay them? Even if the repair costs are spread among all persons (however unfair this might be), the problem would recur immediately unless governments insisted that firms internalise all costs. But if they did this, profit margins would catapult downward.

The third trend is the consequence of the democratisation of the world-system, itself a result of the geoculture which le-gitimated this pressure as an essential element of political stabilisation. It has now come to the point that these popular de-mands have become very expensive. Meeting what are the current social expectations of a large portion of humanity for adequate educational and health expenditures is beginning to take a major bite out of the total of world surplus-value. Such expenditures are in fact a form of social wage, returning to the producing classes a significant share of the surplus-value. This had been largely mediated via the state structures, as social welfare pro-grams. We are witnessing today a major political battle about the size of the bill. Either the bill is cut (but is this compatible with political stability?) or once again the profit margins will be cut, and in no small amounts.

Finally, there is the collapse of the Old Left, of what I call the traditional antisystemic movements. This is in fact not a plus for the capitalist system, but its greatest danger. De facto, the traditional movements served as a guarantee for the existing system, in that they assured the world's dangerous classes that the future was theirs, that a more egalitarian world was on the horizon (if not for them, then for their children), and thereby these movements legitimated both optimism and pa-tience. In the last twenty years, popular faith in these move-ments (in all their varieties) has disintegrated, which means that their ability to canalise angers has disappeared with them. Since all these movements had in fact preached the virtues of strengthening the state structures (in order to transform the system), faith in such reformist states has also declined radi-cally. This is the last thing that defenders of the present sys-tem really want, despite their anti-state rhetoric. Accumulators of capital in fact count on the state both to guarantee economic monopolies and to repress "anarchistic" tendencies of the dange-rous classes. We are seeing today a decline in the strength of state structures everywhere in the world, which means rising in-security and the rise of ad hoc defensive structures. Analytic-ally, this is the road back to feudalism.

In such a scenario, what can we say about social change? We can say that we are once again seeing the demise of an historical system, parallel to the demise of Europe's feudal system 500-600 years ago. What will therefore happen? The answer is we cannot know for sure. We are in a systemic bifurcation, which means that very small actions by groups here and there may shift the vectors and the institutional forms in radically different directions. Structurally, can we say that we are in the midst of fundamental change? We cannot even say that. We can assert that it is unlike-ly that the present historical system will last too much longer (perhaps 50 years at most). But what will replace it? It could be another structure that is basically similar, or it could be a structure that is radically different. It could be a single structure over all of the same geographic area. Or it could be multiple structures in different zones of the globe. As analysts, we will not be sure until it is over. As participants in the real world, we can of course do whatever we think wise to achieve the good society.

What I have offered you here is a model with which you can approach the analysis of a particular historical system in terms of social change, illustrating the issues by an analysis of the modern world-system. When an historical system is in genesis or demise (the demise of one is always the genesis of one or more others), we may designate it as social change if the category of historical system that existed is replaced by a different cate-gory of historical system. This is what occurred in Western Eur-ope when feudalism was replaced by capitalism. But it is not so-cial change if it is replaced by the same kind of historical sys-tem. This is what happened when the Ming Chinese world-empire was replaced by the Manchu world-empire. They were different in many ways, but not in their essential form. We are going through such a process of systemic transformation right now in the modern worldwide world-system, and we do not know yet whether this involves a fundamental social change or not.

This alternative model of analysing the concept of social change allows us to see that, when we are analysing an ongoing functioning historical system, the language of social change can be very deceptive. The details keep evolving, but the qualities that define the system remain the same. If we are concerned with fundamental social change, we have to try to discern and distin-guish the secular trends from the cyclical rhythms, and estimate how long the secular trends can continue to cumulate quantitatively without endangering the underlying equilibria.

Furthermore, when we turn out attention from the analysis of particular historical systems to the collective history of hu-manity on the earth, there is no reason whatsoever *to assume* a linear trend. Thus far, in the known history of humanity, any such calculations give quite ambiguous results, and justify a great scepticism about any theory of progress. Perhaps, with much greater depth of vision, social scientists in the year 20,000 AD may be able to argue that global secular trends have always

existed, despite all the cyclical rhythms that the constant shifting from one set of historical systems to other sets seemed to belie. Perhaps. In the meantime, it seems far safer to me to take the intellectual and moral stance that progress may be poss-ible, but it is by no means inevitable. My own reading of the past 500 years leads me to doubt that our own modern world-system is an instance of substantial moral progress, and that it is more probably an instance of moral regression. That does not render me innately pessimistic about the future, just sober.

We are faced today, as we have been faced at other points of demise of historical systems, with historic choices, in which our individual and collective inputs will make a real difference in terms of the outcome. Today's moment of choice is, however, in one way different than previous such moments. It is the first one in which the entire globe is implicated, since the historical system in which we live is the first one that encompasses the en-tire globe. Historic choices are moral choices, but they can be illuminated by the rational analyses of social scientists, which thus becomes the definition of our intellectual and moral respon-sibility. I am moderately optimistic that we shall rise to the challenge.

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[1] The argument that follows is an abbreviated summary of the explanation I offer in some detail in "The West, Capitalism, and the Modern World-System", ***Review***, XV, Fall 1996, 561-619

[2] I have **done this in the three volumes of *The Modern* *World -System*** as well as in many other writings**.**

[3] I here summarise arguments to be found in *After Libera-lism* (New York: New Press, 1995) and in T.K. Hopkins & I. Waller-stein, coord., *From Good Times to Bad? Trajectory of the World System, 1945-2025 (*forthcoming Zed Press, 1996).