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IS THE WORLD-SYSTEM APPROACH JUST A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE?

The connection between global and regional developments in pre -industrial France

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ABSTRACT:

France is the only state who always belonged to the core of the world-system and never attained hegemony, nor declined into the semi-periphery. This paper focuses on the reasons for this relatively stable position in the pre-industrial world-system. Crucial is France's size and fragmented regional structure. These constraints prevented France from building on its favourable position at the inception of the world-system. France's development within the world-system was further retarded by the shift in the centre of gravity and mode of transportation of the world-system. This interplay between general processes, at the level of the entire world-system, and the specific regional structure within France, demonstrates how the general processes of the world-system can be linked to the specific situation in a given country.

INTRODUCTION

When I started studying sociology in 1978 the world-system approach was not part of the regular program. It was a white spot on the mental map of sociology teachers. Students had to explore individually this still new and exiting backyard of sociology. A cursory glance through some recent introductory textbooks on sociology gives the impression that all this has changed. Most refer to the concept world-system and summarize the outline of

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this approach. For instance Giddens (1989, p. 733) includes it in his glossary of basic concepts.

"**WORLD SYSTEM**. A social system of global dimensions, linking all societies within a world social order. The world system may most easily be thought of as a 'single global society'. The world system has only come into being since the period of the expansion of the West from about the seventeenth century onwards. Today, however, the existence of an increasingly integrated world system is one of the most important features affecting the lives of most individuals."

It is clear that he gives great importance to the world-system. But Giddens (1989, p. 533) also criticizes Wallerstein for concentrating on economic causes, and thereby neglecting political, military and cultural factors. Smelser (1994, p. 31) in another and UNESCO sanctioned "authorative" survey of contemporary sociology claims: "At its most extreme, world-systems theory would write the internal histories of societies as ramifications of the international economic forces impinging on them." Smelser (1994, p. 131) also writes that Wallerstein "carries the idea of the world as an economic system to an extreme, in that the internal dynamics of nations are seen as overwhelmed by world forces." Many others - too many to refer to - criticize the world-system approach for a kind of global determinism. It criticized for over generalizing and for paying too little attention to the particular situation in specific countries.

MODE OF EXPLANATION

Before evaluating this criticism of the world-system approach, its general mode of explanation must be discussed. 'Nomen est omen' is also true for this approach. The world-system, especially as used by Wallerstein, is a very specific concept, indicating how

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explanations in world-system theory are made. A world-system is more than just ***a*** system on a world scale. Systems are generally defined as 'sets of elements standing in interaction' (Von Bertalanffy 1980, p. 38). It seems obvious that ***interaction*** between societies forms the basis of the world-system. This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The character of the interaction is the essential point for Wallerstein. The relations must have an ***essential influence*** on its constituent societies. This means that the relations must have a profound influence on the ***structure*** of these societies (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 3-11, 1979, pp. 4, 220). But what is this structure? Braudel's well-known division of ***time*** in 'l'evenememtielle', 'le conjoncturelle' and 'le structurelle' contains the answer. Braudel (1972, pp. 13-21) uses the concept of the short term to describe the rhythm of the individual. The short term refers to erratic and singular events as, for instance, reported in the mass media. The conjuncture, comprising more regular periodic changes, is the second unit of time he distinguishes. This medium term consists of social cycles, as for instance the Kondratieff cycle of about 50 years in economic growth. Braudel's third unit of time is the even more encompassing long-term trend. This trend

extends in time beyond the cycles, and may embrace many centuries. Cycles still occur within a structure. The long-term trend refers to the stability and development of that structure. Structure and long-term trend ('le structurelle') are closely intertwined. Structure is like the slowly shifting river bed in which the quickly changing flow of every-day life takes place. In summary: the world-system is a long-lasting system of interaction between societies which has an essential influence on the changes in the structure of these societies.

The changing relations within the world-system are the central mode of explanation of the world-system theory. This distinguishes world-system theory from other theories on social development (Menzel 1993). Traditionally, social theories explain changes in a state in terms of processes within that state. States are

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generally seen as going through the same kind of modernization processes. Especially dependency theory is very critical of explanations focusing on forces ***within*** a state. Not comparative properties but relational properties are called upon to explain differences in development between states. The main point of dependency theorists' criticism is that the situation in the poor states cannot be understood without referring to their exploitation by the rich states. Wallerstein's world-system theory can, to a certain extent, be viewed as an elaboration of the dependency theory (Bach 1980). But there are some fundamental differences. First of all, world-system theory gives much more attention to relations between rich states. The objective of dependency theory was not primarily to explain developments of the world as a whole but rather to expose the exploitation of poor states by rich ones. This difference in purpose highlights a more fundamental difference between world-system theory and dependency theory. Whereas dependency theory stresses the importance of relations between states, world-system theory starts with the totality of these relations - the world-system. This is a significant step beyond dependency theory, where social developments in a state are explained through relations with another state. In world-system theory, social development in ***both*** states is explained through their relations with the world-system. This world-system operates according to its own principles, which cannot be understood by restricting the study to social developments in individual states (Bergesen 1980). The whole is more than the assembled parts; the world-system has its own dynamic. Structural properties of the world-system are therefore very important.

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Table 1 General modes of explanation

Theory	Explanation	Properties	Causality
Modernization theory	intrastate	comparative properties of members	State A --> State A time x time x+1
Dependency theory	interstate	relational properties of members	State A --> State B
World-system theory	extrastate	structural properties of collectives	W O R L D-S Y S T E M | | | | | | core semi - periphery periphery

The general mode of explanation in the world-system approach is clearly top-down. The way in which the developments of the world-system influence different kinds of states is central to this approach. But this does not mean that those critics of the world-system approach are right who criticize it for over generalizing and for paying too little attention to the particular situation in specific countries. The example of France's pre-industrial development presented below shows how the general processes of the world-system can be linked to the specific situation in a given country. It does this by examining how the forces from the world-system distorted France's regional structure and blocked her development in the formative (pre-nineteenth century) period of the world-system.

THE BACKGROUND TO FRANCE'S STABLE CORE POSITION

The world-system perspective explains this distinctively stable core position of France through the interplay of external forces and internal structure. Because the world-system is a long-lasting system of interaction between societies, we have to start our examination in the formative period of the world-system.

Particularly important for France's context is its position concerning the Mediterranean and Northern European trade circuits. The explanation of France's stable, but subordinate core position in the world-system lies in the interplay between France's fragmented regional structure with the changing world-system around it. Especially the shift northwards of the world-system's centre of gravity disrupted France's regional structure.

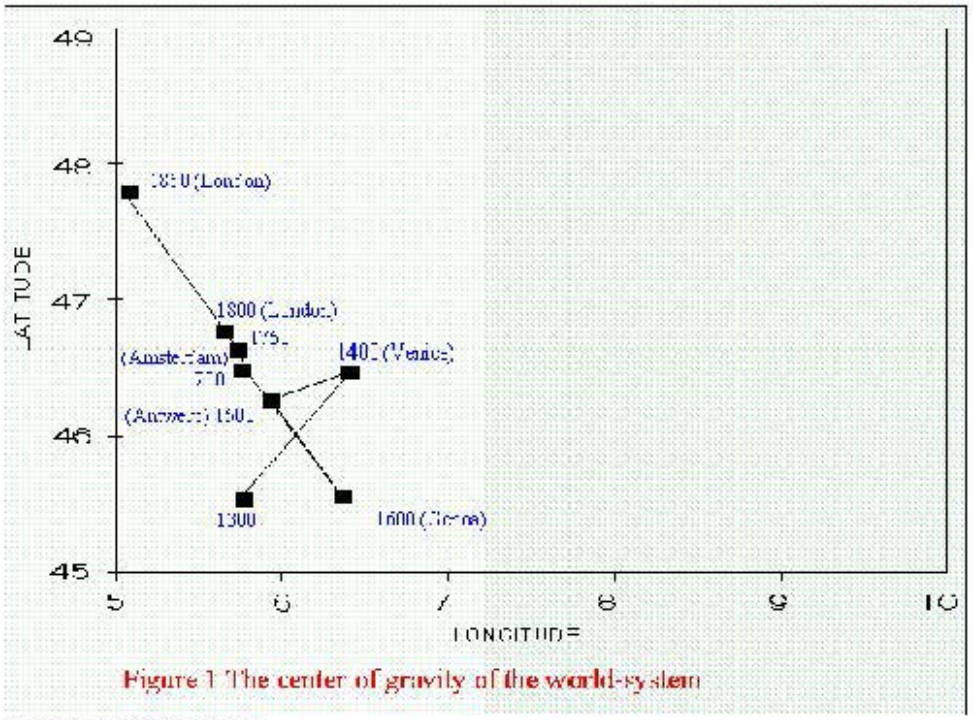

Figure 1 The center of gravity of the world-system

Source to Figure 1:

Urban development is a good indicator of regional development. Cities reflect, as the crossroads of both small- and large-scale interaction, the regions' internal and external capacity for development.

We operationalized the economic center of gravity by again using the data collected by Bairoch et al. (1988) on the location of a city (in degrees and minutes) and on the number of people living in that city. With this information it is possible to calculate the center of gravity. This was done by first transforming the grade data on location into decimal data. In order to get the coordinates of the point in which one can theoretically concentrate all the urban population of Europe, the population of each city was first of all multiplied with each spatial coordinate. These were subsequently summed and then divided by the sum of the population of all cities in Europe. This gives the coordinates of the center of gravity of urban population.

The urban center of gravity was calculated only for the part of Europe belonging to the world-system at the beginning of the eighteenth century as delimited by Wallerstein. This

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includes the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, Germany, Poland, the Baltic countries, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, France, and the Iberian and Italian peninsulas.

The Russian and Ottoman Empires were according to Wallerstein then outside the European world-system (Terlouw, 1985, pp. 42-47).

The cities were Braudel (1979) locates the core of the world-system are also shown in this figure.

Figure 1 shows that the urban centre of gravity has shifted in the long term towards the north. In the fourteenth century Europe's economic centre of gravity was pulled toward Venice, where the circuits of the eastern Mediterranean long-distance trade touched the European dorsal spine along the Rhine axis (Braudel 1979, p. 124). However, in the sixteenth century, the position of Venice waned, and the centre of gravity was pulled towards Portugal and Antwerp (Braudel 1979, pp. 132-153). Around 1600, the centre of gravity of the world-system in Europe briefly returned to the south, when Genoa held a central position in the European financial system. This rule 'was so discreet and sophisticated that historians for a long time failed to notice it.' (Braudel 1979, p. 157), but is clearly visible in Figure 1. Genoa's fragile position was later undermined by various incursions, including the penetration of the Dutch in the bullion flows between Spanish America and Europe (Braudel 1979, p. 170). This contributed to the demise of the Mediterranean trade circuits and the maturation of the modern world-system, with its core located in Northwestern Europe, where it stayed for the next several centuries - first in Holland and later in England.

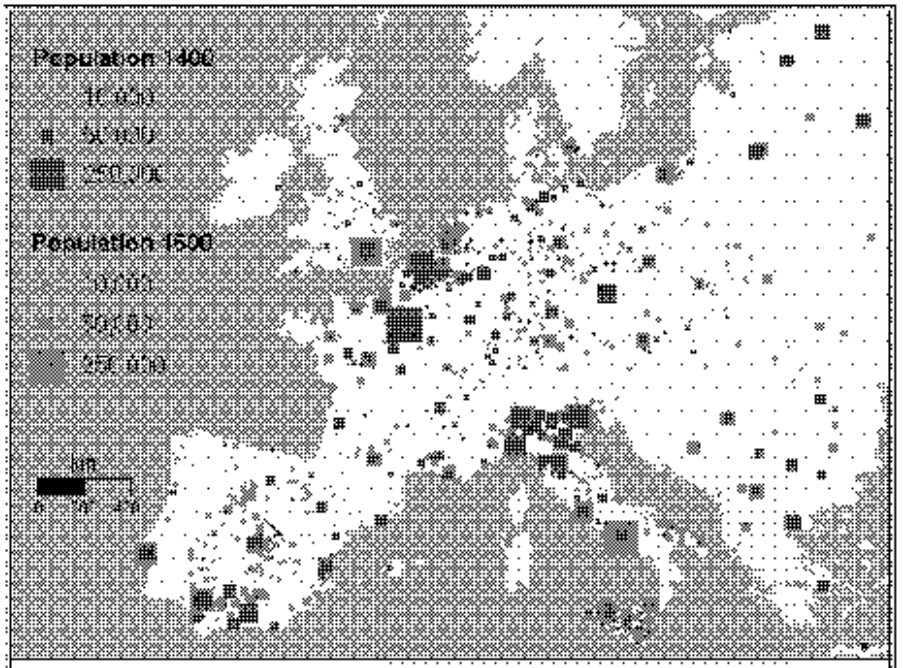

Figure 2 European urban population 1400 and 1600

Figure 2 shows Europe's urban poles of development in the late Middle Ages (1400) and after the genesis of the world-system (1600). This European world-system was spatially organized around two centres: One in Northern Italy, and one in the Low Countries. The

wealth of these two centres had different roots. The prosperity of the towns in the Low Countries had a more industrial origin, especially in the manufacture of textiles, while the towns

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in Northern Italy prospered because of trade. The emerging world-system increased their complementarity and the development of trade along Europe's 'dorsal spine': the overland and river transport route between the Low Countries and Northern Italy. In this 'dorsal spine' the dominant city of Bruges played an important role in connecting the Low Countries with Northern Europe. This Northern circuit was dominated by the Hanseatic League, which tried to regulate the voluminous but not so profitable trade in Northern Europe. In contrast, the Mediterranean trade conducted by the Northern Italian cities was much more profitable. Venice in particular connected Northern Italy to the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world. At that time, those were the most developed areas on this side of the globe (Braudel 1979, pp. 97-111).

France was strategically located between these two centres of this European world-system. It bordered both the industrial Northern zone and the trade circuits of the Mediterranean. France not only passively ***bordered*** both motors of the world- system, but also ***played*** an important active role in integrating this world-system. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Champagne and Brie fairs linked the northern and southern part of the world-system. The money transactions concluded at these fairs enabled the credit operations of the world-system to function. These fairs declined when the French state tried to control these lucrative activities. Besides growing interference by the French state, these fairs suffered from developments to their east. Both the openings of more easterly Alpine passes and the economic growth of Germany, whose mines also produced the silver needed by the Italians in their trade with the Levant, undermined the Champagne and Brie fairs. According to Braudel, in the twelfth and thirteenth century France was - for the first and only time - the centre of the world-system (Braudel 1979, pp. 111-116). Later, the centre of the world-system made a wide circle around France, from Venice by way of Portugal to Antwerp, Genoa, Amsterdam, London, and New York (See above and especially Figure 1).

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Besides its central position in the trade and financial flows in Europe, France also had a central role in European politics. France bordered on every important European political power. This stimulated the early formation of a strong and large state. It also meant that every interstate conflict had direct bearing on France. This central position in the

European political arena was sometimes a disadvantage compared to that of more sheltered states. France could hardly, and did not want to, remain neutral in European conflicts, this strained the state apparatus and bankrupted it (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 170-171, 1989, p. 149).

Although France was unsuccessful in its attempts to dominate the early world-system, it did succeed in creating a strong state controlling a large area. As states are formed against other states (Wallerstein 1981, Tilly 1990), the central location of France on the European continent, with powerful neighbours along all its borders, partly explains France's early state formation. But in a way, it was too successful. The size of the country hampered its economic development (Braudel 1979, p. 325, Wallerstein 1989, p. 148. See also: Gottmann 1951, Fox 1971, 1989, Fierro-Domenech 1986, de Planhol 1988). The French state was too big to form an integrated unity. Size caused coordination problems within the state apparatus because of the friction of distance. The French state had great difficulty controlling its large territory. These problems were not unique to this country, only more intense than elsewhere. Size in itself was not so hard to deal with; the problem was the specific regional differentiation within France: the economically strongest regions had a weak position in French politics. This lack of a regional correlation between economic and political forces hampered the effective nurturing of France's position in the world-system by the French state (Braudel 1979, pp. 339-343).

The most economically developed regions were located along France's Atlantic coast and its land borders. The political core area lay around Paris. Parisian political interests were often opposite to the economic interests of the rich regions. Therefore,

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these regions did not get enough support from the French state in their competition with core regions in the world-system abroad. The orientation of these border regions towards the outside world was also a cause for concern. Their external economic contacts threatened the political integration of France. Instead of benefiting from the French state, its economic core often suffered from it. The economically rich regions were taxed disproportionably. In return, they received little or no effective support in their competitive struggle on the world market. In France, the interests of state and capital diverged (Wallerstein 1989, pp. 146-154). The land-based state was unhelpful to the sea-based regions in the West. Also, the capitalists in the poor southern part of France were unhappy with the politics of the French state. They wanted free access to the world market and therefore opposed the mercantilistic politics of the state. State formation was expensive for both, but neither gained much from it (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 268-269). These smouldering conflicts of interest frequently flared up as open warfare. Regional uprisings were invariably suppressed by the French state, increasing the rift between France's economic and political core (Wallerstein 1974, p. 296).

France's economy was not a ***whole*** but the ***sum*** of separate regional units. France's wealthy regions on its margins were not oriented to the whole of France but to the outside world. They faced the world-system, turning their backs to France. These rich border areas were pulled towards the outside world, and not towards France's centre, each rich town on France's land or sea border influencing only its immediate countryside. These economic cores were attracted not to a French center, but to the outside world. Besides, these French economic core regions were also connected to different parts of the world-system. The southern regions were pulled towards the Mediterranean, the northwestern regions towards the North Sea. Because the pull of these external forces changed with the development of the world-system, the difficulties the French state encountered in holding all its

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regions together only increased over time (Braudel 1979, p. 315, 1990, pp. 672-673, Davis 1973, pp. 212-230). The shifting economic centre of gravity of the world-system tore France's fragile regional economic structure apart. The position of France in the world-system was even more precarious, because the shifting economic centre of gravity coincided with changes in the way goods were transported. France held a central position in the world-system at the time of the Champagne fairs, because it was located between the two most dynamic regions: Northern Italy and the Low Countries. France held a strategic position in the land and river routes between these two regions. Trade between Northern Italy and the Low Countries almost had to go through France. But by the beginning of the fourteenth century, France's position was undermined by the growing importance of the maritime route between Italy and the Netherlands. Maritime trade between Northern Italy and the Low Countries quite naturally left France out of the picture. Because of the shift from land to sea routes, France was starting to be excluded from the main capitalist circuit in Europe (Braudel 1979, p. 50). In the same period, several Alpine passes were constructed or improved. Towards the seventeenth century, the technology of sea transport improved even further (especially through the development of the 'fluyt'). Moreover, trade in the world-economy became bulkier. Grain and timber, for instance, increased in importance over textiles. The dominant trade in the world-system changed from land-based luxury goods towards sea-based bulk goods.

France's orientation towards the land-based luxury trade coincided with a concentration of France's industry on these traditional luxury products. In this field, France was generally able to compete successfully with the English and Dutch. However, this was a victory in the old economy, which was supplanted by a more powerful economy based on bulk commodities. This concentration of French industries on luxury products therefore only helped in the short run but was detrimental in the long run (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 291-292).

France was also strongly affected by the change from a land-based to a sea-based world-system because it coincided with the above-mentioned shift in the economic centre of gravity northwards. France's strong position on the land routes between North and South mattered less and less. The trade generated by the declining South became less important and relied ever more on ships. These trends in regional development are illustrated by Figure 3. The 'boom' of British towns between 1600 and 1800 is clearly visible as well as the continuing stagnation in most of southern Europe. The development of French towns was intermediate and differentiated between stagnating older cities on its borders and shores and developing small cities in the interior.

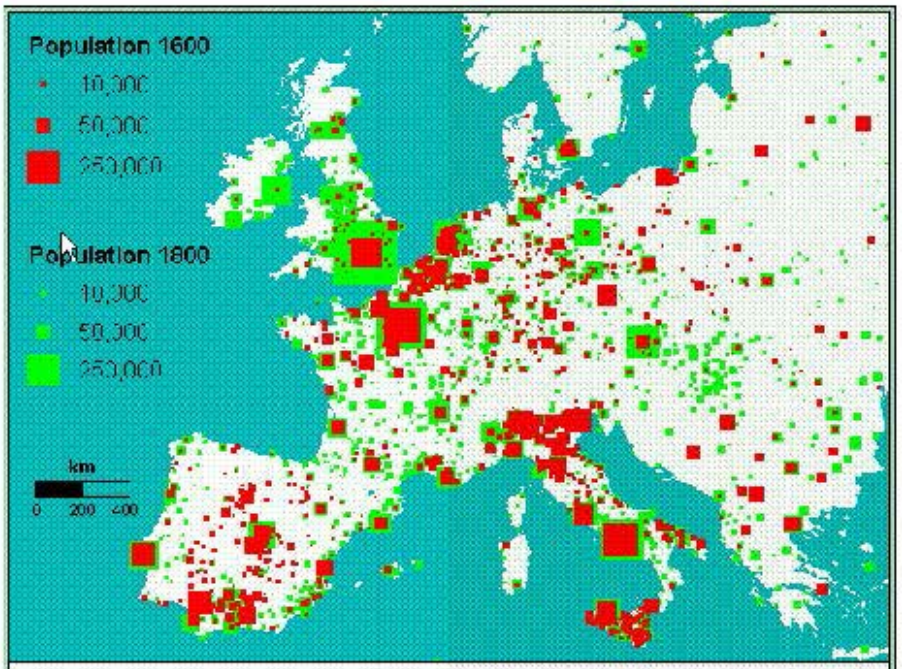

Figure 3 European urban population 1600 and 1800

The focus on the European continent became an important reason for France's subordinate core position when the world-system expanded towards the Americas. However, France really had no choice. France's ***location*** fixed her immediate ***political*** interests on the continent. France could not give priority to sea power, as its position in the ***world***-system demanded. To survive as a state, France had to give priority to its position in the power struggle on the ***European*** continent. To put it simply: France won the power struggle on the continent, but lost the struggle at sea, and thus lost the struggle for control of the world-system. Because France lost this more important struggle, it eventually lost its dominant position on the continent after the Napoleonic wars (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 265-266, 1980, pp. 249, 277).

When we compare France with England, the importance of this lack of relations overseas is even more apparent. The size of the French economy did not stimulate the development of links abroad. France had better resources within its borders than England. It had, for instance, large forests, a strategic resource used for ship masts in the war-ridden seventeenth century. England was not so well endowed; its forests were smaller and could not provide the large trees needed for the all-important ship masts. So England had to go to the trouble and expense to get them abroad

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from the Baltic and Canada. But then, of course, it took the best quality available. This contributed to the emerging dominance of the English navy. The wood shortage in England also stimulated the replacement of wood by coal for heating (Wallerstein 1980, pp. 99-101, 1989, p. 152). The lack of resources forced England to develop trading links. France had little immediate need to do the same. Instead, France directed its energy towards unification and internal colonization because of its size. England was forced to exert a greater effort abroad and accordingly developed settler colonies (Wallerstein 1980, pp. 103-104).

This initial English hardship turned out to have beneficial effects in the end. It stimulated English maritime trade, while the internal orientation of the French kept France focused on land transport. This was important because the dominant mode of transport was shifting from land to sea. Besides, it forced England to participate in the international trade network, which in turn stimulated the creation of anti-mercantilistic interest groups. In the search for markets, France first developed its own market and then turned towards the European continent, for which it was topographically and politically very well located. However, in this trade, France relied on obsolete and expensive land transport, while England could use the increasingly cheap sea transport on a world scale (Wallerstein 1980, pp. 85, 103-104, 267-268, 1989, p. 151).

CONCLUSION: the changing world-system and France's regional geography

This paper explored the reasons behind France's stable core position in the pre-industrial world-system. France's size and fragmented regional structure prevented France from building on its favorable position at the inception of the world-system. France's development within the world-system was further retarded

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by changes in the world-system. Shifts in its center of gravity and mode of transportation intensified the problems already present in France. France's secondary core position in the world-system was explained in terms of the interplay between general processes, at the level of the entire world-system, and the specific regional structure within France.

France's problem lay in forming part of both the northern and southern circuits of the world-system. The shifts in the balance between those two had a severe influence on the country's cohesion. Although the boundaries of economic zones never exactly overlap with political boundaries, the dissonance was particularly glaring for France, compared to the other core states in the sixteenth century. South of Paris via Lyon, France was oriented towards the Mediterranean and was part of an economic zone dominated by the Italians. In the North, along the French maritime front, and in the Rhine region, France was part of the Northern zone. This base structure was very stable over time. This made it very difficult to create a national economy, especially when the economic centre of gravity shifted between these two parts of the world-system. These recurrent shifts changed the relative importance of different regions within France. Several regions may be distinguished in this process. The centre, which was also politically dominant, was the old crossroads on the land routes between the southern and northern part of the earliest world-system. This part of France suffered, at least compared to other European regions, from the shift of the economic centre of gravity and the transition from land to sea transport. Further south towards the French shores of the Mediterranean, the regions were part of the Mediterranean subsystem and underwent the same declining processes leading towards a slide into the semiperiphery. From the inception of the world-system, northern France was part of the northern core. This region profited from the shift northwards, but suffered somewhat from the shift from land to sea transport. The regions on the west coast of France tried to derive benefit from this shift. Unfortunately, they

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received little help from the French state, which was still oriented towards the continent, where the old land-based trade network declined and divided by the mercantilistic policies of the developing states. The politically peripheral regions therefore lost ground to their competitors abroad (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 263-266, 295, Braudel 1979, pp. 336-337).

France suffered from its own early economic strength. Even until the nineteenth century, the main economic differences between France and England were not in wealth, but in trade. As an element of a ***set of states***, France's level of economic development was comparable to that of England. Yet as an element of the ***world- system***, France had much fewer structural ties with other states. Therefore, while many of their comparative properties were alike, their relational properties differed. Because of the different structural properties, these comparative properties started to diverge over time. England's

hegemonic position in the world-system made it wealthier than France. Meanwhile, France lagged behind because of its sluggishly integrating regional structure.

This paper demonstrated that 'global determinism' is not inherent to the world-system approach. Global and regional developments are intertwined. Although as Braudel formulates it, the identity of France is formed by 'the heavy pressure from Europe, which has modelled and moulded our destiny as the sculptor moulds the clay with his thumb.' (Braudel 1991, p. 673), this paper showed that the form of the resulting statue is also dependent on the preexisting regional structure.

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