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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND WORLD-SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

*Edited by Jackie Smith, Michael Goodhart,
Patrick Manning and John Markoff*

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INTRODUCTION

Unthinking the world-system

Michael Goodhart, Patrick Manning, John Markoff and Jackie Smith

Today's political realities present us with particularly urgent social and ecological crises, along with promising opportunities for people to converge around alternative projects that promise to resolve intractable global problems. The contributors to this volume represent some of the leading voices in social movement scholarship and global social change, as well as several emerging scholars and practitioners engaged in work to uncover the lessons of past movements that can inform and guide today's struggles for a more just and ecologically sustainable world. Contributors encourage each other and our readers to "unthink" some basic assumptions and conceptual frameworks that inhibit our full understanding of both the social movements challenging globalized capitalism and the promise of the alternatives these movements are offering to the current organization of the world-system.

A predominant theme in the conversations among our authors has been the need to question some of the key concepts, methods, and assumptions that inform the study of social movements and of the world-system. Participants adopted the language of *unthinking* the world-system to highlight the depth of the questioning we had in mind, to draw a contrast with familiar calls for *rethinking* that often leave fundamental epistemological issues untouched. Put differently, the challenge consists not merely in reassessing what we know but also in interrogating the *ways of knowing* upon which our "knowledge" rests. So, for instance, we need not only to make visible and to theorize the various manifestations of imperialism and oppression within the world-system, but to recover and think with and through indigenous and other subaltern knowledges as a way of unthinking what we "know" about social movements and about the world-system itself.

As scholars of and participants in social movement politics, we discussed extensively the importance of approaching our work with humility. By humility we have in mind an ethical sensibility to power relations, which operate in and

through our movements and our disciplines and which are often (unconsciously) replicated in the knowledge that we construct about the world. Yet we also have in mind a related epistemological humility that cultivates openness and attention to the wide variety of struggle and resistance in which people are engaged and to what it can teach us about possibilities for human emancipation. Humility of this kind represents a practice of unthinking; it is something to be enacted continuously in our research, our theorizing, our teaching, and our engagement. Once one begins trying to unthink in this way, huge, destabilizing questions immediately present themselves.

These questions structure the book before you. This volume seeks to challenge conventional ways of thinking about social movements and social change and to identify areas of practice and theory that can guide thinking and action at a time of urgent and pervasive questions about the stability and future of the present world-system and about viable alternatives to it and the pathways toward their realization. The chapters draw from world-systems analysis, social movement studies, and subaltern knowledges and theorizing to examine contemporary as well as historical social movements, as well as to address questions about what prospects and obstacles exist for those who wish to advance a more just, equitable, and ecologically healthy and sustainable world.

We begin with a realization that large-scale social change is likely to require a fundamental transformation of the modern world-system. In other words, in order to address the pressing and dire social and ecological crises confronting us, humans will need to reorient ourselves and the world-system away from the dominant capitalist mode of accumulation and exploitation and towards values that will ensure the long-term survival of people and the planet. We also recognize, however, the difficulty of conceiving of a new world-system when the existing system and its logic color our concepts, methods, and assumptions and condition our daily practices.

One such question has to do with the transformation in which we are interested — again, both as scholars and as participants in social movement politics. Is it the political revolution so ingrained in the imaginary of left/progressive movements since the French Revolution (or even before)? Or is that notion so shot through with modernist and Eurocentric assumptions about the state, the world-system, and the nature of domination as to be inadequate for theorizing and making a truly emancipatory politics today? Perhaps another kind of transformation is possible. In what might it consist, and how should we assess its emancipatory potential? Must emancipatory movements be antisystemic? What other modalities of resistance — in the everyday, in the spiritual — are possible? Can such modalities effectuate large-scale change? What is the appropriate geographic scale of action? Can we think of emancipation separately on local, national, regional, and global scales, or does emancipation necessarily take place at all levels simultaneously? Some project participants wanted to take seriously the operation of non-system logics on smaller scales as a pathway to emancipation, whereas others

felt that emancipation worthy of the name entails comprehensive transformation of the world-system.

Other key questions concern the role of traditional ideologies and social movement actors in making meaningful change. Do conventional left/progressive ideas and social formations remain the privileged vehicles of system transformation and the appropriate objects of emancipatory aspirations? Can they adequately acknowledge and incorporate the nomadic sensibilities of many contemporary actors in the global justice movement or the theories and practices of struggle and resistance of subaltern and indigenous communities and movements? What are the possibilities for collaboration and solidarity across traditional and alternative social movement formations, keeping in mind that both remain internally diverse and conflictual?

An important set of related concerns has to do with the difficulty that traditional social movements and social movement scholarship have had in integrating their others. Why do clear geographies of power remain such a prominent feature of the social movement landscape? Why has it proven so hard even for progressive movements explicitly committed to ideals of equality and inclusion to recognize and root out domination in their own ideas and structures? One possibility suggested by the contributors to this volume is that any adequate unthinking of the system must include unthinking core modernist and Eurocentric assumptions about the uniformity of antisystemic struggle and resistance, about the linearity of political time, and about the singularity of emancipatory visions and ambitions. Such an unthinking requires recognizing and grappling with the seeming incommensurability of different knowledges about and orientations toward the transformation of the world-system. As scholars of and participants in social movements, can we expand our epistemological horizons to embrace radically different notions about the nature, scale, and terms of emancipatory change? In so doing, can we unthink the world-system in ways that allow for its creative reconfiguration?

The attempt is clearly necessary. Capitalism in its neoliberal instantiation remains dynamic and firmly entrenched. Its own modernist logic drives us inexorably toward social inequality and ecological disaster, complacent in the surety that science and profit invisibly coordinate to promote human freedom and to provide technological solutions to what it can only conceive as technical problems.

The reflections in this volume take seriously the possibility that this same logic inhibits our ability to think outside the familiar narrative that left/progressive movements, spurred by their awareness of systemic crisis, will organize successfully to seize political power and transform the world-system. We recognize that developing new paradigms for theorizing social movements and system transformation requires that we look to the experiences of oppressed and subaltern groups to guide our critiques and our reimaginings of the global. We wrestle with the recognition of what Sylvia Walby, in her address to our convening of this volume's authors and other scholars, called "non-nested hegemonomies" and the

challenges they pose to linear, uniform, and singular thinking about emancipation. We engage, in short, in a collective exercise of *unthinking* in hopes of opening up new and hybrid possibilities for the theory and practice of emancipatory social transformation. At the same time, we must be mindful that unthinking is not an end in itself; in a world rife with injustice, in which the obstacles to social transformation are formidable, it can be easy to content ourselves with such radical-sounding exercises. *If* the point of understanding the world is (still) to change it, unthinking should clear the way for emancipatory change.

Part I of the book begins by interrogating conventional categories that help shape mainstream academic and public discourses about the world and the politics of social change. The chapters here help us to historicize the modern state and to reflect on the ways the capitalist world-system has shaped fundamental assumptions and identities. In Part II, contributors examine emancipatory struggles of the past and in the current moment to identify possible lessons from history that can inform today's movements. The authors demonstrate how states and their policies affect movement strategies and practices but also reveal limits to states' abilities to fully contain the conflicts expressed by social movements. Part III demonstrates the inevitable challenges faced by movements seeking greater equity and voice in a system that is fundamentally oriented towards inequality and exclusion. The cases show how, over time, movements have learned from their internal conflicts, even as those conflicts persist. Finally, the chapters in Part IV explore the emergence of movements and strategic analyses that suggest other pathways toward system transformation. Engaging with these subaltern emancipatory projects and discourses provides insight into possible alternatives to the modern world-system, while raising profound questions about how we conceive of emancipatory social transformation, suggesting new avenues of research that might prove fruitful in this regard.

This volume began its formation at the 38th annual conference of the Political Economy of the World-System Section of the American Sociological Association, held April 10–12, 2014 at the University of Pittsburgh. The book derives its title from the conference theme, *Social Movements and World-System Transformation: Prospects and Challenges*. We want to thank Jules Lobel for working with us to organize the conference, and we are grateful to the following entities at the University of Pittsburgh that helped make this meeting possible: the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences; Department of History; Department of Political Science; Department of Sociology; School of Law; World History Center; Humanities Center; University Center for International Studies; Hewlett International Grants Program; Center for Latin American Studies; European Union Center of Excellence; the European Studies Center (EUCE/ESC); and the Global Studies Center. Thank you as well to the Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka (<http://vankamurals.org/society/>), which helped give conference participants a richer experience of the city of Pittsburgh and of its residents' long-enduring struggles for justice.

ANTISYSTEMIC MOVEMENTS, YESTERDAY AND TODAY¹

Immanuel Wallerstein

There have always been historical systems in which some relatively small group exploited the others. The exploited always fought back as best they could. The modern world-system, which came into existence in the long sixteenth century in the form of a capitalist world-economy, has been extremely effective in extracting surplus-value from the large majority of the populations within it. It did this by adding to the standard systemic features of hierarchy and exploitation the new characteristic of polarization. ...

The French Revolution further changed the structure of the modern world-system by unleashing two new concepts, whose impact was to transform the modern world-system. These concepts were the “normality of change” as opposed to its exceptional and limited reality, and the “sovereignty of the people” as opposed to that of the ruler or the aristocracy. ... It was in response to this danger to the dominant forces that the three modern ideologies – conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism – emerged.

Each of the ideologies represented a program of political action. Conservatism was the first and most immediate response, notably in the writings of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre. The core of the conservative ideology was to deny the prudence, even the possibility, of substantial change. Conservatives reasserted the priority of the judgments of traditional elites, locally situated, and supported by religious institutions.

Liberalism arose as an alternative mode of containing the danger. Liberals argued that reactionary conservatism, which inevitably involved suppressive force, was self-defeating in the medium run, pushing the oppressed to rebel openly. Instead, liberals said, elites should embrace the inevitability of some change and defer nominally to the sovereignty of the people, but insist that social transformation was a complicated and dangerous process that could only be done well and