Change is eternal. Nothing ever changes. Both clichés are “true.” Structures are those coral reefs of human relations which have a stable existence over relatively long periods of time. But structures too are born, develop, and die.

Unless we are to use the study of social change as a term synonymous to the totality of social science, its meaning should be restricted to the study of changes in those phenomena which are most durable—the definition of durability itself being of course subject to change over historical time and place.

One of the major assertions of world social science is that there are some great watersheds in the history of man. One such generally recognized watershed, though one however studied by only a minority of social scientists, is the so-called neolithic or agricultural revolution. The other great watershed is the creation of the modern world.

This latter event is at the center of most contemporary social science theory, and indeed, of the nineteenth century as well. To be sure, there is immense debate as to what are the defining characteristics of modern times (and hence what are its temporal boundaries). Furthermore, there is much disagreement about the motors of this process of change. But there seems to be widespread consensus that some great structural changes did occur in the world in the last several hundred years, changes that make the world of today qualitatively different from the world of yesterday. Even those who reject evolutionist assumptions of determinate progress nonetheless admit the difference in structures.

What are the appropriate units to study if one wishes to describe this “difference” and account for it? In a sense, many of the major theoretical debates of our time can be reduced to arguments about this. It is the great quest of contemporary social science. It is therefore appropriate to begin a work that purports to analyze the process of social change in the modern world with an intellectual itinerary of one’s conceptual search.

I started with an interest in the social underpinnings of political conflict in my own society. I thought that by comprehending the modalities of such conflict, I might contribute as a rational man to the shaping of that society. This led me into two great debates. One was the degree to which “all history is the history of the class struggle.” Phrased another way, are classes the only significant operating units in the social and political arenas? Or, as Weber argued, are they only one of a trinity of units—class, status-group, and party—which exist, the interactions among which explain the political process? Although I had my prejudices on the subject, I found, like others before me, that neither the definition of these terms nor the description of their relations was easy to elucidate. I felt increasingly that
this was far more a conceptual than an empirical problem, and that to resolve the debate, at least in my own mind, I would have to place the issues within a larger intellectual context.

The second great debate, which was linked to the first, was about the degree to which there could or did exist a consensus of values within a given society, and to the extent that such a consensus existed, the degree to which its presence or absence was in fact a major determinant of men’s actions. This debate is linked to the first because it is only if one rejects the primordial character of social struggle in civil society that the question can even be raised.

Values are of course an elusive thing to observe and I became very uneasy with a great deal of the theorizing about values, which seemed often to combine the absence of a rigorous empirical base with an affront to common sense. Still it was clear that men and groups did justify their actions by reference to ideologies. Furthermore, it seemed clear also that groups became more coherent and hence more politically efficacious to the extent that they were self-conscious, which meant that they developed a common language and a Weltanschauung.

I shifted my area of empirical concern from my own society to Africa in the hope either that I would discover various theories confirmed by what I found there or that a look at distant climes would sharpen my perception by directing my attention to issues I would otherwise have missed. I expected the former to happen. But it was the latter that came to pass.

I went to Africa first during the colonial era, and I witnessed the process of “decolonization,” and then of the independence of a cascade of sovereign states. White man that I was, I was bombarded by the onslaught of the colonial mentality of Europeans long resident in Africa. And sympathizer of nationalist movements that I was, I was privy to the angry analyses and optimistic passions of young militants of the African movements. It did not take long to realize that not only were these two groups at odds on political issues, but that they approached the situation with entirely different sets of conceptual frameworks.

In general, in a deep conflict, the eyes of the downtrodden are more acute about the reality of the present. For it is in their interest to perceive correctly in order to expose the hypocrisies of the rulers. They have less interest in ideological deflection. So it was in this case. The nationalists saw the reality in which they lived as a “colonial situation,” that is, one in which both their social action and that of the Europeans living side by side with them as administrators, missionaries, teachers, and merchants were determined by the constraints of a single legal and social entity. They saw further that the political machinery was based on a caste system in which rank and hence reward was accorded on the basis of race.
African nationalists were determined to change the political structures within which they lived. I have told this story elsewhere and it is not relevant to refer to it here. What is relevant here is that I thereby became aware of the degree to which society as an abstraction was heavily limited to politico-juridical systems as an empirical reality. It was a false perspective to take a unit like a "tribe" and seek to analyze its operations without reference to the fact that, in a colonial situation, the governing institutions of a "tribe," far from being "sovereign," were closely circumscribed by the laws (and customs) of a larger entity of which they were an indissociable part, the colony. Indeed this led me to the larger generalization that the study of social organization was by and large defective because of the widespread lack of consideration of the legal and political framework within which both organizations and their members operated.

I sought to discover the general attributes of a colonial situation and to describe what I thought of as its "natural history." It quickly became clear to me that I had to hold at least some factors of the world-system constant. So I restricted myself to an analysis of how the colonial system operated for those countries which were colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of European powers and which were "overseas possessions" of these powers. Given this constant, I felt I could make generally applicable statements about the impact on social life of the imposition of colonial authority, the motives and modalities of resistance to this authority, the mechanisms by which colonial powers entrenched and sought to legitimate their power, the contradictory nature of the forces that were able to operate within this framework, the reasons why men were led to form organizations that challenged colonial rule, and the structural elements that made for the expansion and eventual political triumph of anticolonial movements. The unit of analysis in all of this was the colonial territory as legally defined by the administering power.

I was interested equally in what happened to these "new states" after independence. As the study of colonial territories seemed to focus on the causes of the breakdown of existing political order, the study of the postindependence period seemed to focus on the opposite issue: How legitimate authority is established and a sense of membership in the national entity spread among the citizenry.

This latter study ran into problems, however. In the first place, to study the postindependence politics of Afro-Asian states seemed to be a process of running after the headlines. There could perforce be relatively little historical depth. Furthermore, there was the tricky question of Latin America. There were many ways in which the situations there seemed parallel, and more and more people began to think of the three continents as a "Third World." But Latin American countries had been politically independent for 150 years. Their cultures were far more closely linked
with the European tradition than anything in Africa or Asia. The whole enterprise seemed to be wavering on very shaky ground.

In search for an appropriate unit of analysis, I turned to "states in the period after formal independence but before they had achieved something that might be termed national integration." This definition could be taken to include most or all of Latin America for all or almost all of the time up to the present. But it obviously included other areas as well. It included for example the United States of America, at least in the period before say the Civil War. It surely included eastern Europe, at least up until the twentieth century and possibly up to the present. And it even included western and southern Europe, at least for earlier periods of time.

I was therefore forced by this logic to turn my attention to early modern Europe. This led me first into the question of what I would take as the starting point of this process, a process I provisionally formulated, for want of a better conceptual tool, as the process of modernization. Furthermore, I had not only to consider the issue of starting points but of terminal points, unless I wished to include twentieth-century Britain or Germany as instances of this same social process. Since that seemed prima facie dubious, terminal points had to be thought about.

At this point, I was clearly involved in a developmental schema and some implicit notion of stages of development. This in turn posed two problems: criteria for determining stages, and comparability of units across historical time.

How many stages had there been? How many could there be? Is industrialization a turning point or the consequence of some political turning point? What in this context would the empirical meaning of a term like "revolution" mean, as in the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution? Were these stages unilinear, or could a unit go "backward"? This seemed to be a vast conceptual morass into which I had stepped.

Furthermore, getting out of the conceptual morass was very difficult because of the absence of reasonable measuring instruments. How could one say that seventeenth-century France was in some sense equivalent to twentieth-century India? Laymen might consider such a statement absurd. Were they so wrong? It was all very well to fall back on textbook formulae of the virtues of scientific abstraction, but the practical difficulties of comparison seemed immense.

One way to handle the "absurd" idea of comparing two such disparate units was to accept the legitimacy of the objection and add another variable—the world context of any given era, or what Wolfram Eberhard has called "world time." This meant that while seventeenth-century France might have shared some structural characteristics with twentieth-century India, they were to be seen as very different on the dimensions of world context. This was conceptually clarifying, but made measurement even more complicated.
Finally, there seemed to be another difficulty. If given societies went through “stages,” that is, had a “natural history,” what of the world-system itself? Did it not have “stages,” or at least a “natural history”? If so, were we not studying evolutions within evolutions? And if that, was not the theory getting to be top-heavy in epicycles? Did it not call for some simplifying thrust?

It seemed to me it did. It was at this point that I abandoned the idea altogether of taking either the sovereign state or that vaguer concept, the national society, as the unit of analysis. I decided that neither one was a social system and that one could only speak of social change in social systems. The only social system in this scheme was the world-system.

This was of course enormously simplifying. I had one type of unit rather than units within units. I could explain changes in the sovereign states as consequent upon the evolution and interaction of the world-system. But it was also enormously complicating. I probably only had one instance of this unit in the modern era. Suppose indeed that I was right, that the correct unit of analysis was the world-system, and that sovereign states were to be seen as one kind of organizational structure among others within this single social system. Could I then do anything more than write its history?

I was not interested in writing its history, nor did I begin to have the empirical knowledge necessary for such a task. (And by its very nature, few individuals ever could.) But can there be laws about the unique? In a rigorous sense, there of course cannot be. A statement of causality or probability is made in terms of a series of like phenomena or like instances. Even if one were to include in such a series those that would probably or even possibly occur in the future, what could be proposed here was not to add a series of future possible instances to a network of present and past ones. It was to add a series of future possible instances to a single past-present one.

There had only been one “modern world.” Maybe one day there would be discovered to be comparable phenomena on other planets, or additional modern world-systems on this one. But here and now, the reality was clear—only one. It was here that I was inspired by the analogy with astronomy which purports to explain the laws governing the universe, although (as far as we know) only one universe has ever existed.

What do astronomers do? As I understand it, the logic of their arguments involves two separate operations. They use the laws derived from the study of smaller physical entities, the laws of physics, and argue that (with perhaps certain specified exceptions) these laws hold by analogy for the system as a whole. Second, they argue a posteriori. If the whole system is to have a given state at time \( y \), it most probably had a certain state at time \( x \).

Both methods are tricky, and it is for this reason that in the field of cosmology, which is the study of the functioning of the system as a whole,
there are wildly opposing hypotheses held by reputable astronomers. Just as there are in the explanations of the modern world-system, a state of affairs likely to remain so for some time. Actually, students of the operation of the world-system possibly have it easier than students of the operation of the universe in terms of the amount of empirical evidence at their disposal.

In any case, I was inspired by the epigram of T. J. G. Locher: "One should not confuse totality with completeness. The whole is more than the assembled parts, but it is surely also less."

I was looking to describe the world-system at a certain level of abstraction, that of the evolution of structures of the whole system. I was interested in describing particular events only insofar as they threw light upon the system as typical instances of some mechanism, or as they were the crucial turning points in some major institutional change.

This kind of project is manageable to the extent that a good deal of empirical material exists, and that this material is at least partially in the form of contrapuntal controversial work. Fortunately this seems to be the case by now for a large number of the themes of modern history.

One of the major thrusts of modern social science has been the effort to achieve quantification of research findings. Utilizing the heavily narrative accounts of most historical research seems not to lend itself to such quantification. What then is the reliability of such data, and to what extent can one safely draw conclusions from the material about the operation of a system as such? It is a major tragedy of twentieth-century social science that so large a proportion of social scientists, facing this dilemma, have thrown in the sponge. Historical data seemed to them vague and crude, hence unreliable. They felt that there was little to be done about it, and that hence it was best to avoid using it. And the best way not to use it was to formulate problems in such a way that its use was not indicated.

Thus the quantifiability of data determined the choice of research problems which then determined the conceptual apparatuses with which one defined and handled the empirical data. It should be clear on a moment's reflection that this is an inversion of the scientific process. Conceptualization should determine research tools, at least most of the time, not vice versa. The degree of quantification should reflect merely the maximum of precision that is possible for given problems and given methods at given points of time. More rather than less quantification is always desirable, to the extent that it speaks to the questions which derive from the conceptual exercise. At this stage of analysis of the world-system, the degree of quantification achieved and immediately realizable is limited. We do the best we can and go forward from there.

Lastly, there is the question of objectivity and commitment. I do not

---

believe there exists any social science that is not committed. That does not mean however that it is not possible to be objective. It is first of all a matter of defining clearly our terms. In the nineteenth century, in rebellion against the fairy-tale overtones of so much prior historical writing, we were given the ideal of telling history wie es eigentlich gewesen ist. But social reality is ephemeral. It exists in the present and disappears as it moves into the past. The past can only be told as it truly is, not was. For recounting the past is a social act of the present done by men of the present and affecting the social system of the present.

“Truth” changes because society changes. At any given time, nothing is successive; everything is contemporaneous, even that which is past. And in the present we are all irremediably the products of our background, our training, our personality and social role, and the structured pressures within which we operate. That is not to say there are no options. Quite the contrary. A social system and all its constituent institutions, including the sovereign states of the modern world, are the loci of a wide range of social groups—in contact, in collusion, and above all, in conflict with each other. Since we all belong to multiple groups, we often have to make decisions as to the priorities demanded by our loyalties. Scholars and scientists are not somehow exempt from this requirement. Nor is the requirement limited to their nonscholarly, directly political roles in the social system.

To be sure, to be a scholar or a scientist is to perform a particular role in the social system, one quite different from being an apologist for any particular group. I am not denigrating the role of advocate. It is essential and honorable, but not the same as that of scholar or scientist. The latter’s role is to discern, within the framework of his commitments, the present reality of the phenomena he studies, to derive from this study general principles, from which ultimately particular applications may be made. In this sense, there is no area of study that is not “relevant.” For the proper understanding of the social dynamics of the present requires a theoretical comprehension that can only be based on the study of the widest possible range of phenomena, including through all of historical time and space.

When I say the “present reality” of phenomena, I do not mean that in order to strengthen the political claims of a government, an archaeologist for example should assert that the artifacts he uncovers belong to one group when he in fact believes them to belong to another. I mean that the whole archaeological enterprise from its inception—the social investment in this branch of scientific activity, the research orientation, the conceptual tools, the modes of resuming and communicating the results—are functions of the social present. To think otherwise is self-deceptive at best. Objectivity is honesty within this framework.

Objectivity is a function of the whole social system. Insofar as the system is lopsided, concentrating certain kinds of research activity in the hands of particular groups, the results will be “biased” in favor of these groups.
Objectivity is the vector of a distribution of social investment in such activity such that it is performed by persons rooted in all the major groups of the world-system in a balanced fashion. Given this definition, we do not have an objective social science today. On the other hand, it is not an unfeasible objective within the foreseeable future.

We have already suggested that the study of world-systems is particularly tricky because of the impossibility of finding comparable instances. It is also particularly tricky because the social impact of statements about the world-system are clearly and immediately evident to all major actors in the political arena. Hence the social pressures on scholars and scientists, in the form of relatively tight social control on their activities, is particularly great in this field. This affords one further explanation to that of the methodological dilemmas for the reluctance of scholars to pursue activities in this domain.

But conversely this is the very reason why it is important to do so. Man’s ability to participate intelligently in the evolution of his own system is dependent on his ability to perceive the whole. The more difficult we acknowledge the task to be, the more urgent it is that we start sooner rather than later. It is of course not in the interest of all groups that this be done. Here our commitment enters. It depends on our image of the good society. To the extent that we want a more egalitarian world and a more libertarian one, we must comprehend the conditions under which these states of being are realizable. To do that requires first of all a clear exposition of the nature and evolution of the modern world-system heretofore, and the range of possible developments in the present and the future. That kind of knowledge would be power. And within the framework of my commitments, it would be a power that would be most useful to those groups which represent the interests of the larger and more oppressed parts of the world’s population.

It is therefore with these considerations in mind that I have embarked on this effort to analyze the determining elements of the modern world-system. It will take several volumes to accomplish this task, even in the preliminary format that this work must necessarily be.

I have divided the work, at least initially, into four principal parts, corresponding with what I think of as four major epochs, thus far, of the modern world-system. This first volume will deal with the origins and early conditions of the world-system, still only a European world-system. The approximate dates of this are 1450–1640. The second volume shall deal with the consolidation of this system, roughly between 1640 and 1815. The third shall deal with the conversion of the world-economy into a global enterprise, made possible by the technological transformation of modern industrialism. This expansion was so sudden and so great that the system in effect had to be recreated. The period here is roughly 1815–1917. The fourth volume will deal with the consolidation of this capitalist world-
economy from 1917 to the present, and the particular "revolutionary"
tensions this consolidation has provoked.

Much of contemporary social science has become the study of groups
and organizations, when it has not been social psychology in disguise. This
work, however, involves not the study of groups, but of social systems.
When one studies a social system, the classical lines of division within social
science are meaningless. Anthropology, economics, political science,
sociology—and history—are divisions of the discipline anchored in a certain
liberal conception of the state and its relation to functional and geographical
sectors of the social order. They make a certain limited sense if the focus
of one's study is organizations. They make none at all if the focus is the
social system. I am not calling for a multidisciplinary approach to the
study of social systems, but for a unidisciplinary approach. The substantive
content of this book will, I hope, make it clear what I mean by this phrase,
and how seriously I take it.