

**39th Annual Conference on the  
Political Economy of the World-System**  
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

**March 19-21, 2015**

Conference Theme

**Global Inequalities: Hegemonic Shifts and Regional Differentiations**

During its 500-year history, the modern world-system has seen several shifts in hegemony. Since the decline of the U.S. in the 1970s, however, no single core power has attained a hegemonic position, such that the 21st century world-system, while not dominated by one hegemon, has continued to move toward increasing polarization. As income inequalities have become more pronounced in core countries, especially the former hegemons, the US and the UK, but also Germany, global inequalities emerged as a "new" topic of social scientific scholarship. Framing the discussion of global inequalities as a new phenomenon however helped ignore the fact that a constant move toward polarization has been characteristic of the modern world-system throughout its history. At the same time, the rise of new states (most notably, the BRICS) and the relative economic growth of particular regions (especially East Asia) have prompted speculations about the next hegemon that largely disregard both the *longue durée* of hegemonic shifts and the constraints that regional differentiations place on the concentration of capital and geopolitical power in one location. The conference therefore intends to revisit the question of global inequalities in light of world-systems, global history and postcolonial perspectives on the evolutionary potential of semiperipheries, the *longue durée* of the coloniality of power within and beyond the ex-colonized peripheries, and global social mobility.

**1. Reconsidering Semiperipheries: Evolutionary, Epistemic, or Antisystemic Potential?**

The decline of US hegemonic power gave rise to regional bloc building, increasing inequalities on a regional scale. "Inner peripheries" of economic unions play an increasing role in the peripheralization of new regions (the European South, the Arab world)? In spite of the ongoing military supremacy of US and NATO, the dynamic of growth has been shifting to the Global South. Are the BRICS the new semiperipheries? Will they achieve core status? If so, is a new hegemonic shift to be expected from them? How will the old cores adapt to such a challenge?

**2. Latin America and Eastern Europe Facing the East Asian Challenge**

On the one hand, Latin America and Eastern Europe have served as the "first large-scale laboratories of underdevelopment" (H. Szlajfer) from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. On the other hand, Latin America and the Caribbean have long been the prime examples of "persistent inequality", frequently traced back to colonial rule, while Eastern Europe's inequality rates have risen considerably since the 1990s. With the collapse of state socialism, the Eastern European and the former Soviet states have gone from being part of a solid semiperiphery to experiencing a high

degree of fragmentation and differentiation. Piecemeal integration into the European Union for some states has been accompanied by their “Third Worldization” (A.G. Frank) of others. In contrast, East Asia counts as a model for “growth with equity”. How are such regional differentiations helpful in understanding overall system dynamics of inequality (re)production? Are these neat patterns blurred by the relative decline in inequality and poverty in parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe in the past few years?

### **3. Coloniality of power and the imperial difference**

Inequalities of race, ethnicity, gender, epistemic status, and economic position put in place during colonial rule have largely translated into enduring inequalities in postcolonial times. While the corresponding term, “coloniality of power” (A. Quijano) has been coined in relation to colonized regions, especially Latin America, its workings are harder to pinpoint in the absence of former colonial rule in other parts of the world. Can we therefore speak of the “racialization” of Eastern Europe along the lines of a system-wide coloniality of power? Is “imperial difference” (W. Mignolo) in those regions never colonized by the Western core the counterpart of “colonial differences” put in place by European colonialism? How do these different positions in the power hierarchies of the world-system translate into opportunities and disadvantages today?

### **4. Migration and global social mobility**

In mass-media discourse and popular perception, rising inequality in core regions is often linked to the increasing inflow of low-skilled immigrants from non-core regions and routinely prompts anti-immigrant sentiment and policies in response. Recent scholarship on migration and global inequalities (Therborn, Korzeniewicz/Moran) has instead shown how late nineteenth-century mass migration across national borders led to significant convergence of wage rates between core and semiperipheral countries – mainly Europe and its settler colonies in North America, Australia and New Zealand – but also tended to intensify competition for land and jobs within receiving countries in the Americas. Ever since, the maintenance of relatively low inequality in the core has been contingent upon controlling the inflow of immigrants from peripheral regions through strict immigration policies, border-control regimes, and forced repatriations, thereby helping (re-)produce high inequality between countries. Does migration to wealthy regions represent an effective means of global social mobility and redistribution? If so, what are the main constraints on transnational migration as a form of social mobility? How does the reversal of the century-old trend of migration from the core to the periphery relate to new patterns of inequality in the world-system?

#### **Conference organization:**

Manuela Boatcă, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Andrea Komlosy, University of Vienna, Austria

Hans-Heinrich Nolte, Hannover University, Germany

Paper proposals (around 500 words) should be sent by **November 15, 2014** to [pews2015@yahoo.de](mailto:pews2015@yahoo.de)