Rethinking Centre and Periphery in Historical Analysis: Land-based Modernization as an Alternative Model from the Peripheries

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As briefly mentioned in the introduction to this book, the pair set ‘core’/‘periphery’ was first applied extensively to the operations of the world economy in the 1960s by scholars and activists who challenged dominant views of development as synonymous with economic growth. The main thrust of developmentalist literature, the contestants claimed, was to analyse the characteristics of those sovereign states that were industrialized and prosperous, in order to establish a model that could be copied by less fortunate sovereign states.

The critics pointed out that the fortunate and the less fortunate sovereign states were not separate, independent entities that happened to be at different stages of parallel processes of development. They were, instead, part of a single ongoing system – a ‘world-system’ – where ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ were simply descriptive terms applied to the poles of a unified process of development. Beginning with liberal development theorists and reformers, such as Raul Prebisch, and continuing with Marxists like Paul Baran, André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, the new terms ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ entered the vocabulary of development literature. Better than ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’, they expressed the relational, mutually dependent nature of the pair in a zero-sum game: the more one zone became core-like, the more another became peripheral. The power aspect of this relationship was expressed by André Gunder Frank’s ‘development of underdevelopment’.
As ‘core’/‘periphery’ is a relational concept, one should be careful not to associate this shorthand with any permanent list of traits. ‘Core’/‘periphery’ refers always to an unequal relation, but the inequality may be expressed in changing forms. In fact, the commodities involved in the exchange have changed dramatically over time, especially between industrial and agricultural products: what were core products would become peripheral, and vice versa. Most of the time, the ‘coreness’/‘peripherality’ had to do with the wage and profit levels of each product as well as with degrees of technical sophistication.

The full implications of the ‘core’/‘periphery’ relationship can only be observed in an integrated world economy, integration that started with the onset of the modern world-system and reached its apex in the late nineteenth century. Only then, in parallel with the new imperialism, was the dogmatic view of development as a unique progressive process consolidated. Until then, across the world, different paths of development were envisaged, and none of them yet perceived as inherently core or peripheral.

The case considered here is that of nineteenth-century Europe and its internal peripheries in the period preceding the consolidation of the political economy dogma. In that time and place, a peripheral alternative model of modernization was elaborated and implemented by a transnational cohort of rural modernizers. That nineteenth-century Europe had within it vast internal peripheries is a well-known fact, though maybe less well known is the extent to which they were rural and underdeveloped. Developmental theory views them as having been in the process, however slow and contradictory, of catching up and transitioning to successive stages of the prescribed road. Instead, I will show here how the elites of those peripheries, conscious of the risks of dependency, undertook in that period a number of modernizing projects that were land-based and different from what they referred to as ‘Manchester civilization’, a paradigm of modernization based on urban concentration, class polarization and mass factory production. Even less known is the use these elites made of political economy, the hegemonic reference culture at that time.

Without providing a systematic comparison, this chapter is based on an extensive study of modernizing elites in four countries situated at the outskirts of nineteenth-century Europe: Ireland to the west, Norway to the north, Poland to the east and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to the south, in the period that runs roughly from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the 1860s. These areas, integrated into the European world
economy in ways in which, for example, Russia or Turkey were not, were representative of the peripheral condition for the following reasons:

- they were topographically peripheral in that they constituted the outermost regions of Europe.
- they were structurally peripheral: as producers of foodstuffs and raw materials, their economic activities commanded only a very small share of the total surplus produced within a commodity chain.
- they were politically peripheral in that they were dominated by other free states, as colonies or semi-colonies: Ireland had been, since the 1800 Act of Union, a fully integrated colony of Great Britain; Poland was, in 1795, definitively partitioned among Austria, Prussia and Russia; Norway had passed, in 1814, from an oppressive colonial dominion by Denmark, to a less oppressive but still colonial dominion by Sweden. The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, although an independent state, had a relatively low degree of autonomy, being treated by both Great Britain and Austria as a dependent territory.
- their indigenous state machinery, where it existed, was weak. State managers did not play the role of coordinators of a complex industrial-commercial-agricultural mechanism, but were rather simply one set of landlords among others, with little claim to legitimate authority over the whole.
- their class system was dominated by the binary ‘lords’/‘peasants’, as the urban bourgeoisie was small in number and often composed of foreigners.

With the bourgeoisie culturally insecure, and peasants poor and mostly illiterate, land-owning elites – though deprived of political power – retained an uncontested cultural hegemony. If change were to occur, landed elites were its only possible agents.

These elites proposed a model of modernization which was based on land, agriculture and, in general, on what was perceived by these followers of Smith, Vico and Herder as a vocation of the given territory, its natural and historical suitability to a given path of development. The choice of an agricultural path was not as backward-looking as it might appear from a later perspective. As no path of development was taken as inherently peripheral, in the sense of precluding the ascent of a given region to core position, a land-based one made sense in Prussia as well as in Calabria. In his 1987 ‘Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments’, Giovanni Arrighi identifies three pathways to wage labour
in late nineteenth-century Calabria, the poorest region in the newly unified Italy: commercial citrus production in the area of Gioia Tauro, the grain-livestock *latifundia* in the Crotone, and the subsistence-oriented peasant household economy in the Cosentino. He names them, respectively, the ‘Swiss road’, the ‘Prussian or Junker road’ and the ‘American or farmer road’, to stress analogies with other historical instances in which such pathways led countries to ascend to core position.

All these roads were, indeed, possible in the eighteenth-century version of the ‘core’/‘periphery’ relation. Adam Smith’s invisible hand of the market allowed for multiple pathways to the prosperity of nations: agricultural or industrial production, as long as it followed the vocation of the territory, could assert itself on equal terms in the benevolent international market.

By the early nineteenth century, the onset of the period under consideration here, the terms of the ‘core’/‘periphery’ relationship had begun to harden, away from Smith’s equalizing market vision. Industrial goods were increasingly identified as inherently core products, while primary products were becoming by definition peripheral, to be exchanged on unequal terms in a market dominated by the core areas. Ever more often in the public discourse, peripheral areas were marked as unable to reap more than very marginal benefits from their participation in the world division of labour. The main proof furnished of this inability was the fact that at no point since 1815 had these peripheries been the locus of the most advanced sectors of world production in terms of technology, productive capacity, and focal points of accumulation of capital. This representation was both factually accurate and functioned to subalternize the agricultural vocation of a territory.

This was happening at a time when Europe, as depicted by Jerome Blum, was overwhelmingly rural, noble, traditional and poor. Industrialized areas, on the well-known map drawn by Sidney Pollard, appear as small patches among the rural ones, even within the core states.

This was also a time particularly favourable for agriculture and for landowning elites. The steady growth of population and its food requirements, the long period of rising agricultural prices, import-substitution production strategies implemented by Napoleon, the reigning Romanticism, all this made agriculture attractive, while forcing the pace of agricultural change in market- and profit-oriented directions. Major efforts were put into improving the productivity of staple foodstuffs (grain and other high-starch-content foods) and livestock, and promoting high-yield crops such as buckwheat, potatoes and maize. The slump
that followed the Napoleonic Wars did not break the enthusiasm for agriculture; agricultural production entered a growth cycle again in the 1830s and more than doubled in the next four decades, with intensive use of the soil, interest in chemical fertilizers, permanent crop rotation and mechanization.

These clear signs of modernization, to which I will return later, coincided with an accelerated effort from the core countries’ governments and capitalist interests to expand the amount of unequal exchange in which Europe’s traditional societies were involved, aiming resolutely at their further peripheralization. This effort took multiple classical forms: external investments, comparatively lower wages for salaried work, use of peripheries as labour reserve areas, fiscal extraction via indebtedness, and technological and ideological dependence. The point, for the core areas, was to restructure production processes (or to intensify those already begun in previous decades) to keep the peripheries to the role of low-cost producers.

All the above was part of a pattern of peripheral modernization. To ensure optimal circulation of the factors of production (land, labour and capital), modernized structures of bureaucracy were needed, accompanied by weak political superstructures, strong enough to oversee the creation of a relevant economic infrastructure and a personnel training system and to guarantee conditions of order against potential labour unrest, but not to have their own foreign or commercial policies. The model container for all this was the liberal constitutional state. This was what so passionately attracted to liberalism so many in the peripheral areas who were eager to partake in human progress. Many of them, however, also wanted to have a say in defining their role in the capitalist world economy.

They formed a new elite of liberal modernizers, composed mainly of the new bureaucratic and cultural intelligentsia and of landowners oriented to large-scale or specialized export production. On the conservative side, they encountered strong resistance from the cadres of the old order who feared, reasonably, that they might be swept away in the reconstruction of the political system, and who actually did succeed in slowing down the pace of peripheralization. On the bourgeois side, with far greater ease, the modernizers established a dialogue and joint actions with quite a few capitalists, bankers and entrepreneurs. They also envisaged a far more active role for the state, to serve them against the interests of the core. To sum up, liberal agrarian modernizers were trying to fit their countries into their ‘peripheral’, i.e. agricultural producers’, roles in the capitalist world economy, pursuing, however, their own alternative model of modernization rather than imitating the core one.
With regard to the principal concepts discussed in this volume, their strategy undermined the existing spatial hierarchies imposed on them.

As mentioned above, Restoration Europe was not a bad place and time for a cautious modernizing action by landed elites. The Congress of Vienna restored some of the old prerogatives of the nobility and the landed estates, and guaranteed landowners the security of their possessions. Many reform projects were promoted together by the governments, the landed elites and the intellectuals, including radical transformations in farming, legal reforms, and a transition from communalism to individualism – that is, to a clearly defined private property and freedom of action for individuals. The cooperation between liberal elites and governments had its strict political limits, but some kind of an organic action was possible within them. Old ailing universities, such as Naples, were revived, new ones were opened in Christiania-Oslo, Vilna and Warsaw, and a Catholic one was planned in Dublin. State administration was reformed, railroad constructions initiated, and the development of industry and banking was encouraged. Poland and Norway, within their respective unions with Russia and Sweden, were granted liberal constitutions. Poland even had her own army, until 1830. Ireland obtained the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829 and a national primary education system was set up under state auspices. The economy flourished, with local textiles, lumber and weapons factories in Poland, and steam-powered mechanized spinning in Ireland.

The monarchs were ready for collaboration with local landed elites as they were the only indigenous partners possible. The elites were ready too, despite political disagreements, because they needed some occupation, given that their traditional jobs – in the civil service and military – were now closed to them. As the leading Polish modernizer, Count Andrzej Zamoyski, put it: ‘la noblesse doit aujourd’hui se mettre à la tête d’améliorations intéressantes pour le pays, privée qu’elle est d’autre emploi’. The new generation of peripheral modernizing landowners in Poland, Ireland and the Two Sicilies renounced, for the time being, the insurrectional efforts of their fathers – protagonists of the 1790s uprisings, of wars and of long periods of exile – and opted for prudence, gradualism and moderation.

Thus, modernization at a pace different from the core became the liberal-conservative elites’ political, economic and educational project. At its centre stood the land, in a coherent vision of how land-based modernization could bring about moral redemption and eventually become a way of achieving national and political sovereignty. In a way, it was an attempt to slow down or invert the impact of what the economist Karl Polanyi called the ‘great transformation’, i.e. the extension of the market economy at a pace
that no ‘traditional’ society could bear without being torn apart.\(^{10}\) Versions of such liberal-conservative land-centred visions were widely diffused in the Europe of the time by economists, novelists, poets, philosophers and preachers, but, as projects accompanied by sets of practices often supported by government agencies, they were peculiar to the peripheries.

The process of modernization was to be slow and gradual, with land at its centre, and landed elites in charge. It was to start with the reorganization of agriculture and radiate from there to a pertinent development of local manufacture, and then to the gradual extension of trade. Such transformations would trigger, in their turn, a virtual process of economic, social and moral advancement of Europe’s backward areas.\(^{11}\)

It was to be a ‘harmonious’ modernization. The word ‘harmony’ appeared frequently in reformers’ writings, in a variety of applications: preserving existing social and family hierarchies; engaging local traditions and knowhow; achieving social (class) harmony; and maintaining harmony between economy and nature, between change and continuity, between art and industry. In Adam Smith’s oft-quoted words, this modernization project was to follow the ‘natural course of things’.

‘Harmonious’ modernization was the proclaimed alternative to the ‘Manchester civilization’ with its permanent class antagonism and monetization of all relations. Again referring to Smith, peripheral modernizers considered the English model as historically ‘inverted’, as well as socially disruptive and economically unsound, and opposed it in their economic doctrine and geo-historical philosophy as well as in their actions, class protagonism and economic and social measures implemented. Of course, such critiques of the ‘Manchester civilization’ were widespread even in England itself, by Charles Dickens, Friedrich Engels, Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle, for example, but in the peripheries they were often used in opposition to the interests of the core.

In this sort of dialogue, both sides invoked the same reference culture of political economy, each to its own advantage.\(^{12}\) In appearance, political economy references used by peripheral modernizers were the same as those employed by the followers of the Manchester school. Some people were schooled in economics, but the whole milieu read political economy, which was extremely popular at that time. Thus, in reclaiming the agrarian model, they relied upon the authority of Adam Smith, but the ‘true Smith’ of the ‘natural order’ and ‘natural course’ of things.

In the ‘natural order’, land and agriculture had priority. In Smith’s words, land was ‘the greatest, the most important, and the most durable part of the wealth of every … country’ (Smith, IV, 9), and the most productive too, as nature assisted labour and capital that were applied to the
land. Agriculture was ‘the original destination of man’ and was also ‘by far the most advantageous to […] society’ (Smith, II, 5):

Had human institutions … never disturbed the natural course of things, the progressive wealth and increase of the towns would … be consequential, and in proportion to the improvement and cultivation of the territory’ (Smith, III, 1).

Progress would proceed in a gradual and orderly fashion from local semi-autarkic realities to larger markets: first well-ordered agriculture, followed by the development of local manufacture, followed by the growth of domestic trade, and lastly transport and foreign trade. But in the England of his time, lamented Smith, ‘this natural order of things [is being] … inverted … into [an] unnatural and retrograde order’, dominated by world trade (Smith III, 1).

If in the core areas, in the nineteenth century, Smith’s work was increasingly seen as merely an economic doctrine that laid the basis for Jean Baptiste Say’s and David Ricardo’s iron laws of economy and the ultra-liberal Manchester School, it preserved its centrality in the peripheries. Local modernizers emphasized gradualism and the social responsibility of ‘the natural course’: industry, manufacturing and trade would follow the modernization of agriculture, which would supply enough foodstuffs to satisfy demand. Progress was to be gradual and slow.

If the main tenets of Smith’s teaching, as the peripheral modernizers saw them, were to be preserved, the concerns of the nineteenth century required, however, a modern re-elaboration of Smith. A ‘harmonic school’ of political economy was emerging in the peripheries, in connection with other schools in Europe. In Norway, Anton Martin Schweigaard and Torkel Halvorsen Aschehoug elaborated in the 1840s a theory of harmoni liberalismen, which gave a sound theoretical grounding to the agrarian modernization alternative. Like the ‘harmonic school’, derived from Frédéric Bastiat, harmoni liberalismen was critical of the ‘English theory’ because it was concerned only with economics without regard to ‘natural and social laws’ as norms for moral behaviour and productive choice. The harmonic school and harmoni liberalismen aimed, instead, at achieving harmony between population and production. It was from these economists that peripheral modernizers adopted the concept of ‘harmony’.

These peripheral modernizers found, however, their own prophet, a nineteenth-century rendition of Adam Smith, in the Italianized Genevan Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, the so-called
‘second Sismondi’. Initially an acclaimed laissez-faire interpreter of Smith, Sismondi published in 1819 the *Nouveaux principes d’économie politique, ou la richesse dans ses rapports avec la population*, a stringent critique of the ruthless, laissez-faire two-class capitalism and a call for agriculture-based progress, an economics for the common good and a hierarchical system of social and economic harmony. This book was virtually ignored in the core of Europe, but found an enthusiastic following in the peripheries. ‘Harmonious modernizers’ followed Sismondi’s teaching also in the areas of social policy, constitutions, and connections among literature, history and economics.

Of course, both Sismondi and the peripheral modernizers were in many ways the followers of the physiocrats. But on one important point they differed from physiocratic universalism: they advocated ‘localization’, and were committed to *vocazioni territoriali*. Each territory, they claimed, had its own local vocation (and its own soul) constituted by morphology, history, anthropology and the *Zeitgeist*, and this was different in the plains, the mountains and the hills. The eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, to whom the Neapolitan modernizers often referred, spoke of progress as specific to a place, its ‘physical’ and human history, its traditions and its cultural context. For Vico, none of the established systems of knowledge or civil and political arrangements could be considered a supreme form of development, because each culture and system of knowledge has its own intrinsic historicity and is oriented towards its own ideal model. Thus Vico provides us with a powerful argument to sustain one of the main arguments of this book: that any concept of spatial hierarchy represents a specific and subjective point of view.

The modernizers strove to understand the ‘vocations’ of a given territory to find out what economic, technological or social choices were appropriate for it. Agriculture, of course, was by its nature region-specific, but so was the small- and medium-scale industry that they promoted, based on raw materials locally available.

The harmonious land-based development project did not prevail, and after the agricultural depression hit Europe in the 1870s, the project succumbed to the protectionist turn and simply withered away. In post-World War I Europe, it survived only under the form of utopian ‘back-to-the-land’ colonies, so marginal as to make even historians forget that such a project had been the economic and political choice of landed elites in the midst of the industrious continent and in the central part of the industrious century. With the rise of post-industrial ecological awareness since the late twentieth century, however, and with the fundamental...
switch in the commodities that characterize the core and the periphery, nineteenth-century attempts to find an alternative pathway to modernization are now meeting with renewed scholarly interest. The case of Europe’s landed elites taking it upon themselves to slow down the pace of the extension of the market economy to protect society from being torn asunder might be an important part of this as yet untold story.

Notes

4. A similar argument might apply to other peripheral areas of Europe, such as Bulgaria, which was in some ways comparable to Norway; or Romania and Anatolia, comparable to Poland; and Andalusia, comparable to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.
12. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of reference cultures see the following chapter by Joris van Eijnatten.