

Title—Before European Hegemony, The World System AD 1250-1350
Author—Janet Abu-Lughod
Year—1989

Categories: World System Theory, World History, Economics

Place: The World

Time: 1250-1350

Argument Synopsis:

Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony* attempts to complicate the dominant understandings of world system theory, namely that there has only ever been one world system and it originated in sixteenth-century Western Europe. She revealed that the thirteenth century witnessed an efflorescence of cultural and artistic achievement, and she seeks to examine the world system of the thirteenth century which facilitated this prosperity. Unlike other world system theorists, she is not attempting to argue for the origins of 'true' or 'modern' capitalism. Rather she is more concerned with problematizing the discourse around the dating of the capitalist world economy. Abu-Lughod highlights the period of 1250 to 1350 because she posits that it constituted a critical turning point in world history and during this period, the Middle East was central in connecting the East and the West. Essentially, the book's central thesis is that there was no inherent historical necessity that shifted the system to favor the West rather than the East, nor was there any inherent historical necessity that would have prevented cultures in the Eastern region from becoming progenitors of a modern world system.

Abu-Lughod begins with an introduction that lays out the theoretical premise and explanatory plan of the work. For Abu-Lughod, her world system rests on the linkages between the three subsystems, which she identifies as China, the Arab World, and Western Europe. The rest of the book is divided into three parts. The first part is focused on the three core participants in the Western European subsystem: the fairs of Champagne, the towns of Flanders, and the seaports of Genoa and Venice. The second part is focused on the Mideast heartland with the core cities of Baghdad and Cairo. The third part is focused on Asia and specifically the Indian Ocean, which she divides into three spheres of influence: the Muslim traders in the Eastern circuit, the Hindus and Buddhists in the middle zone, and the Chinese space that included the South China Sea, as well as the strategically important Strait of Malacca. She argues that the Indian Ocean was the indirect connection between the Far East, India, and the Mediterranean. In all her sections, she focuses on selected monetized cities that were centers of production, finance and trade, rather than on countries because the modern nation-state did not yet exist in the thirteenth century. She is very critical of traditional world system theory, a la Wallerstein, which she views as deeply Eurocentric. Her primary purpose in this book is to present a descriptive survey and analysis of the world economic system in this period, while exploring the reasons for its decline. Abu-Lughod tends to attribute almost all of the change, not just economic, to the fallout from the Black Plague.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Challenges the notion that there was only one world system with its origins in sixteenth-century Europe
- Early world system relied on the linkages between the three subsystems, or cores: China (the most advanced), the Arab World (Egypt and the Near East), and Western Europe
- Black Plague played a significant role in causing the disintegration of this world system