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## Perspectives on the Origins of Merchant Capitalism in Europe

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# *Perspectives on the Origins of Merchant Capitalism in Europe\**

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*Eric Mielants*

Essentially, there are four major theoretical perspectives on the Origins of capitalism and the medieval era in western Europe. This article critically examines the main arguments elaborated in these perspectives and attempts to rethink the long term history of socioeconomic and political processes. The four major theoretical perspectives dealt with in this article are, respectively, orthodox Marxism (which considers the nineteenth century as the era of capitalism), a form of neo-Marxism which I call “Brennerism” (in which class struggle and agrarian production tend to be the primordial focus), “modernization theory” (which often contrasts the medieval era with the modern era), and lastly, world-systems analysis, which tends to date capitalism back to the “long” sixteenth century (So, 1990: 187–90).<sup>1</sup> Each of these perspectives copes with its own specific problems in dealing with the emergence of merchant capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Others in the world-systems school go back to c. 1400 AD (Arrighi, 1994), the thirteenth century (Abu-Lughod, 1989), or even 3000 BC (Frank, 1990; 1992; Frank & Gills, 1991; 1992a; 1993a).

## ORTHODOX MARXISM

When orthodox Marxism is used as a theoretical perspective to analyze the emergence of capitalism, one faces several problems: a deterministic stagist evolution is imposed upon historical processes (after a bourgeois revolution, the era of capitalism dawns, only to end in the *Aufhebung*), the use of a socioeconomic infrastructure which determines a suprastructure, the use of Eurocentric terminologies (e.g., frozen histories; Asiatic Mode of Production), the framing of exploitation as a rigid dichotomous class struggle between proletarians and capitalists within a nation-state as a unit of analysis (Takahashi, 1976: 74),<sup>2</sup> and last but not least the relegation of the market to a secondary position outside the sphere of production, while assigning analytical priority to the means of production (Tomich, 1993: 223).

The orthodox Marxist tradition of constructing an economic view of modernity, reproduced by academics such as Christopher Hill, dates capitalism (and modern society) in the late eighteenth century with the Industrial Revolution at its forefront (Baradat, 1998: 137–61). It is only then that Marxists see a real transition taking place. As a consequence, most of them disregard the “long” sixteenth century, let alone the Middle Ages. Although Marx himself acknowledged that “we come across the first sporadic traces of capitalist production as early as the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries in certain towns of the Mediterranean” (1977: 876) he did not elaborate on this.<sup>3</sup> At most, Marxists trace the early roots of capitalism to the 1640’s in England (Cantor, 1973: 294). However, in the 1970’s a neo-Marxian variant, the Brennerian approach, comes into the picture.

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<sup>2</sup> “Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word; oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another” (Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* cited in Edwards et al., 1972: 67) as if there were only two fundamental classes in history. Another assumption is that small family production on the countryside was identical to auto-subsistence (Bois, 1985: 190) so it could not lead to the development of capitalism. For the historical evidence that it could in Catalonia cf. Torras (1980: 258).

<sup>3</sup> Marx himself was not preoccupied with feudalism or the Middle Ages and all his statements about them were nothing more than “contextual observations dependent on his analysis of the capitalist production” during the industrial era (e.g., Guérreau, 1980: 57; Bois, 1985: 189; Feddema & Tichelman, 1978: 17; Dahl, 1998: 61).

## BRENNERIAN APPROACH

The Brennerian approach (unlike traditional orthodox Marxism) is strongly preoccupied with the Middle Ages. However, this approach also has specific problems since it tends to:

- focus predominantly on class struggle and modes of production and minimize the circulation of trade (Brenner, 1977);
- overemphasize production, specifically agrarian, at the expense of urban centered production,
- consider the nobility as nothing more than a “surplus extracting by extra-economic compulsion” oriented class in order to indulge in so-called “non-productive consumption” (Brenner, 1985b: 232).<sup>4</sup>

Brenner remains encapsulated in a Marxist tradition that focuses predominantly on the mode of production and class warfare between peasants (the exploited) and the nobility (the exploiters) within a given territorial unit (the nation-state being the unit of analysis).<sup>5</sup> Essentially, he explains the economic success of the English nobility, in comparison with the French nobility, as the difference between a class in itself (France) and a class for itself (England) (Byres, 1996: 67) which he labels “extraordinary intra-class cohesiveness” (Brenner, 1985b: 258).<sup>6</sup> He also follows the Marxist path which juxtaposes the “absolutism in France” versus “the development of

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<sup>4</sup> Does this statement imply that no investments (through spending) took place within certain urban industries? “Desired goods included luxuries as well as basic commodities . . . kings and princes, noblemen, town patricians and clergymen were also the consumers par excellence of goods . . . their consumption preferences played a basic part in shaping many of the commercial policies of the middle ages” (Miller, 1976: 353); cf. also Abraham-Thisse (1993a: 27–70). Does this imply that no investments occurred in the countryside either? (Lewis, 1984: X, 513). Furthermore, the nobility could also be very active in trade, becoming a direct competitor to peasants and merchants selling goods on the market (e.g., Pal Pách, 1994: III).

<sup>5</sup> Brenner’s thesis is essentially “a base consisting of unfree peasants, the direct producers, and an aristocratic superstructure supported by rents which were extracted from the former. This critical process of extraction was possible because the lords owned the land” (Harvey, 1991: 16–17). Cf. also Lis & Soly (1993: 196) who follow the same “Brennerian” framework.

<sup>6</sup> On the problematic issue to what extent one can already perceive class formations in the Middle Ages, cf. the opposition between Brenner (1985a; 1985b) and Fossier (1991: 415–36) on one hand and Murray (1978: 14–17) and Raftis (1996: 128) on the other. Constable (1996: 301–23) seems to take a careful intermediary position.

classical capitalist relations on the land in England” (Brenner, 1985b: 275; 284–99). Brenner then constructs his narrative in such a way it becomes either: a) a prelude to orthodox Marxist stagist historical evolution,<sup>7</sup> ending with the “rise of a capitalist aristocracy presiding over an agricultural revolution” (Brenner, 1985b: 299) which in turn brought about “an upward spiral that extended into the industrial revolution” (Brenner, 1985b: 327) or b) a particular variant of modernization theory (cf. *infra*), explaining why one territorial unit (England), unlike another one (France), managed to achieve an economic “take-off.”<sup>8</sup>

In both cases, capitalism becomes a characteristic of one nation at a given moment in time.<sup>9</sup> Another problem is to what extent peasants (in Brenner’s view the productive base of a society) were actually of servile status.<sup>10</sup> Also, in making class struggle and the mode of production so central, Brenner minimizes the market’s importance (1977; 1985a; 1985b). Certainly, one can claim that some peasants only sold products on the market to cover their monetary requirements, which were partially generated by coercive demands of their lords and/or state officials. In this way, some agricultural producers were “driven to the market” in order to obtain, via the sale of part of their production, the cash with which to meet their obligations, generated by “extra-economic compulsion” (Aymard, 1993: 292–93; Gutnova, 1990: 111).<sup>11</sup> Yet, this does not mean one should minimize

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<sup>7</sup> In a typical Marxist framework, Brenner juxtaposes the general crisis “on most of the continent” versus the “critical breakthrough to self-sustaining growth in England” (Brenner, 1985b: 275).

<sup>8</sup> “It was the growth of agricultural productivity, rooted in the transformation of agrarian class or property relations, which allowed the English economy to embark upon a path of development already closed to its Continental neighbors” (Brenner, 1985b: 323). In this sense, English development distinguished itself from the continent that suffers from sclerosis (Brenner, 1985b: 275, 299); therefore, Brenner perceives capitalism, development and a breakthrough in economic growth occurring in England, and crisis, stagnation, absolute monarchy occurring in France. It is also a very unilinear way of thinking about historical evolution (Holton, 1985: 89).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Torras who criticizes “the unilinear and strictly endogenous causality of his [Brenner’s] approach” (1980: 262).

<sup>10</sup> According to Kosminsky, even in late thirteenth century feudal England, 40% of the land occupied by peasants was free land, and approximately the same percentage of peasant households was free as well (Kosminsky in Harvey, 1991: 18). Cf. also Heers (1992: 163–64).

<sup>11</sup> Or, as Rodney Hilton puts it: “The important thing about the development of money rent was that as soon as the peasant was told to produce his rent in money, he had to produce goods on the market in order to get the money” (1974: 218).

the importance of demographic change or the powerful dynamic impulses generated by the existence (and increasing significance) of the market itself: between the eleventh and late thirteenth century, England's employment in market-dependent occupations grew more rapidly than the number of self-sufficient farmers. Within the rural economy, specialization occurred as well.<sup>12</sup>

After investigating data available in the Domesday book, the economic historian Snooks estimates that 40% of the economy in eleventh-century England was involved in market activities (the market being the sector where "all the major economic decisions in England were made") and 60% in subsistence.<sup>13</sup> These results challenge the conventional wisdom which insists upon only a very limited role for market forces at this time (Snooks, 1995: 39). Hence, assertions such as Brenner's that individual feudal lords frivolously consumed surpluses either produced from estates managed according to time-honored custom or extracted from their tenants by various noneconomic means, have to be seriously questioned (Snooks, 1995: 47). Of course, one cannot deny that a small minority (the nobility) in a given territorial unit imposed many substantial different financial extractions upon the majority (peasants) without reinvestments occurring in the countryside (e.g., Maddicott, 1975; Thoen, 1988a:

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<sup>12</sup> The intensification, specialization, and commercialization of the countryside also occurs in Flanders (e.g., Thoen, 1993) as well as in the Netherlands (Blockmans, 1993: 49-50). At the same period,

commercialization changed the character of taxation. Geld, the principal tax of the eleventh century, had been levied on land. By 1300 the main tax on the laity was assessed on the value of personal movable property, and this ensured that townspeople should be brought within its scope. Not only that, but townspeople usually paid tax at a higher rate than country people. In addition, customs duties fell directly on imports and exports. Edward I had enhanced their value in 1275 when he initiated the levying of a tax on wool exports. This levy on trade instantly became a principal support of royal finances, more regular than any other source of income. It was the foundation upon which the king established his credit when he wished to borrow money from Italian merchants (Britnell, 1995: 14).

According to Cazal, during the reign of Edward I, the royal revenue from dues of foreign merchants (paid in return for a license to trade with England), became about equal to the entire domanial revenue (1966: 104). On the presence of a whole variety of "alien merchants" in late thirteenth and early fourteenth century England, cf. Lloyd (1982; 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Snooks estimates that 32.3 % of the English market sector in 1086 was rural and 7.8% was urban, hereby arriving at a total of 40.1% (1995: 40).

636–37). Nor does it mean that “surplus extracting by non-economic compulsion” (Brenner, 1985b: 232) did *not* take place. But I think it is fundamentally important to acknowledge that strong cities, dominating their rural hinterland, exploited the countryside just as well as feudal lords did (Harvey, 1991: 19; Nicholas, 1971: 93; Epstein, 1992: 124–33; Hilton, 1974: 212).<sup>14</sup> And, fundamentally, why would feudal structures inhibit the emergence of markets? According to Bruce Campbell, peasant producers generally

intensify production, specialize, and participate in the market exchange when they have to, and feudalism—through the extraction of their surpluses in various forms of feudal rent—obliged them to do precisely this (1995b: 133).

Peasants did produce abundant goods in regional market circuits (Derville, 1996: 123–36) as well as in truly international markets (Thoen, 1988a: 277–79). Not denying or minimizing the significance of agency or peasant resistance in the face of coerced extractions (e.g., Hanawalt, 1986: 23–47), to consider the concept of “power relations between lords and peasants as the *primum movens* of the Middle Ages would be absurd” (Guérreau, 1980: 108).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I agree with Epstein’s critique of Brenner:

Because economic development occurs as a result of exchange and competition in markets, it is primarily market structures that determine the character and rate of economic development in a society. By contrast, since property rela-

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<sup>14</sup> It is quite surprising that in the entire debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Brenner (among other Marxists) has failed to include the importance of trade and cities in his “narrative of socioeconomic change” (Howell & Boone, 1996: 323; Epstein, Steven A., 1991: 258; Epstein, Stephan R., 1991: 4) as he reduced the latter to mere passive entities (Boone, 1996b: 162).

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Wood is nevertheless convinced this is the case, since merchants and manufacturers were in her opinion not driving the process that propelled the early development of capitalism (1999: 94). As a “Brennerian Marxist” she essentially considers most of the seventeenth century world as nothing more but commercial networks where “the dominant principle of trade was buying cheap and selling dear” and moreover, trade itself “still tended to be in luxury goods” (1999: 72). Just as Brenner, she juxtaposes France vs. England. The latter is, according to her, the most unique site of historical development in the entire world: “there was one major exception . . . England, by the sixteenth century, was developing in wholly new directions” (1999: 74). Because of its unique agricultural conditions (1999: 80), “England’s internal market and its ‘capitalism in one country’ ” (1999: 130), this exceptional island was, according to Wood, capable of becoming all on its own the first capitalist nation-state.

tions are only one (albeit crucial) determinant of market structures, one may not deduce the course of economic development from a (reified) structure of property relations alone. . . . One cannot infer a peasant smallholder's economic strategies from his ability to subsist on his own land (and his duty to pay rent to a feudal or other landlord); rather, his economic strategies will depend on how his access to markets is structured (Epstein, 1992: 22).

## MODERNIZATION APPROACH

A modernization approach<sup>16</sup> is also problematic, whether it is based on the emergence of modern (spiritual or religious) values that form the basis of the emergence of capitalist accumulation (e.g., Weber, 1996; Tawney, 1926; Werner, 1988; Landes, 1998) or technological innovations that would lead Europe on an unavoidable teleological path to dominance over the rest of the world in subsequent centuries (e.g., Labal, 1962: 32–39; Gimpel, 1976; Ashtor, 1992a: vol. IV; White, 1962; Jones, 1981: 45–69; Landes, 1998; Lal, 1998). In constructing a developmental/modernization model to explain the steady rise of putting-out systems (in symbiosis with the emergence of capitalism), one must be very careful in reifying concepts, since unhistorical pitfalls loom everywhere.<sup>17</sup> A typical misconception inherent to modernization theory is the fact that, in contemporary literature, many scholars dismiss medieval corporations and guilds as being synonyms for socioeconomic stagnation, decline, and archaism (Munro, 1994a: IX, 44; Boone, 1994: 3–5; Lis & Soly, 1997b: 228). Guilds and corporations are the victims of this unhistorical interpretation mainly because their presence is often framed in a period of transition, whereas capitalism, identified as the *real* progress within modernization theory, takes over the pre-Renais-

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<sup>16</sup> A modernization approach is sometimes associated with a commercialization approach (Persson, 1988: 64), but its obsession with situating modernity in the post-medieval era and the prejudices vis-a-vis everything linked with the Dark Ages (cf. *infra*) makes it more proper to call it a “modernization approach.”

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the expansion of a *Verlag*-system in western Europe (the main commodity chain flowing from the Low Countries through Germany towards northern Italy) was not universal in time and space, nor was its appearance uniform (Holbach, 1993: 207–50).

sance decadent medieval structures while installing modernity (Boone, 1994: 4). The classic example of this traditional point of view in the modernization/development school is, I would argue, the most famous propagator of modern economics, Adam Smith himself:

One objective of the craft guilds was to exclude competition. A craft guild was an association in a given town of the masters of a trade who combined to control prices, wages, and the standards and conditions of sales of their products, and to monopolize their manufacture (1976: 69; 139).

Thus, the guilds became constantly depicted as medieval conservative remnants that were obstructing the route to progress (i.e., towards capitalism) with regulations and prohibitions (according to modernization theory, detrimental to the increasing wealth of nations within a free market).<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the guilds were also, from the late fifteenth century onwards, losing forces against ongoing centralization processes. Besides, the nineteenth-/twentieth-century liberal industrial nation-state was always significantly more interested and motivated in illustrating its own vibrant dynamism than giving justice to its own predecessors, the medieval craftsmen and guilds (Braunstein, 1994: 23). Surely, capitalism itself could not have originated in the midst of this archaic premodern world?

For modernization theory it seems nothing important or novel happened in the “long” sixteenth century: as in Marxism, the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century has to be looked upon as the real watershed in history, opening the gates of modernity (Cantor, 1973: 298–301). As a result, the economic historian’s principle interest in preindustrial economies lay in understanding the constraints that prevented their becoming modern. Obviously, this quite stagnationist interpretation of medieval economic history undoubtedly had an impact on the course of historical debates and the assumptions many scholars shared about the state of the premodern world in general. Only premodern factors such as the availability of land and population growth became the key to understanding a premodern world,<sup>19</sup> making commercializa-

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Lis & Soly (1994: 366–69) but also Persson’s (1988: 50–54) well-founded critique on Mickwitz’s (1936) view of guilds and competition.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Postan (1966; 1973) and Postan & Hatcher (1985); on the supposedly non-

tion, specialization, and technical change peripheral topics for the history of a premodern society (Britnell & Campbell, 1995: 8). Unfortunately, many still associate the Middle Ages with an age of ignorance, backwardness, and general underdevelopment (Pernoud, 1992: 16; Geremek, 1994: 15) and, in doing so, uphold a “traditional picture of medieval society as feudal, hierarchical, deeply conservative and religious and the economy as a self-sufficient subsistence economy” (Fryde, 1998: 207).<sup>20</sup>

Regarding technological progress, dynamism, and inventiveness, premodern medieval labor formations cannot, as modernization theory does, simply be dismissed as being premodern as if a major gap would divide them from our modern world. How can one imagine that guilds, located at the heart of a medieval urban society, and its political institutions, would have been nothing more but incarnations of conservative, stagnant, and unproductive economic action without proper dynamism and innovation (Boone, 1994: 16)? Furthermore, preindustrial (i.e., pre-nineteenth century) markets were much more complex and varied than is usually envisaged (Epstein, 1993: 470). Yet, one should not only rethink the concept of the Industrial Revolution, praised (and conceptualized) by modernization-development theory (Wallerstein, 1984: 179–80), but the very term agricultural revolution as well (Verhulst, 1989a: 71–95; Verhulst, 1990a: 17–28).<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, modernization theory dismisses not only the guild’s infrastructure, but sometimes even the entire premodern medieval era, “consigning it to a pre-industrial limbo of gloom and inertia” (Dyer, 1991: 7), as if it were rigid and suffering from permanent sclerosis, a time period only waiting to be swept away by the triumph of *laissez-faire* economics.<sup>22</sup>

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existence of technological progress in this perspective which frames “pre-industrial agrarian economies in a sort of Ricardo-Malthus trap,” cf. Persson (1988: 3–4, 24–32).

<sup>20</sup> For a dismissal of pessimistic assessments regarding late medieval agricultural productivity and proficiency common to both Malthusianists and neo-Marxists cf. Verhulst (1997: 91–92). For an excellent revision of the ideal typical “lymphatic peasants” à la Postan and the “lackadaisical lords which sapped the agricultural sector of dynamism” à la Brenner, cf. Campbell (1995a: 76–108).

<sup>21</sup> Some even situate the agricultural revolution in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries (e.g., Dowd, 1961: 143–60 for Italy).

<sup>22</sup> For many scholars, medieval features are “treated either as obsolete remnants from the past or as radically transformed vehicles of early modernity with almost unrecognizable origins” (Howell & Boone, 1996: 305).

However, everything remaining different, Marxism has the same obsession with modernity in emphasizing the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in its stagist perspective as modernization theory. Hence, its dismissive attitude vis-a-vis the premodern “long” sixteenth century or medieval era is quite similar. Yet many Marxist and modernization theorists tend to forget that “the industrial revolution was not the source of modern economic growth” (North & Thomas, 1973: 157) but rather the outcome of different processes which have to be traced back in the period prior to the Industrial Revolution.<sup>23</sup>

## WORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

World-systems analysis (WSA) attempts to explain the emergence of a capitalist world-economy in Europe parallel with the incorporation of regions through domination and colonization which in turn results in an international division of labor and an interstate system. At the same time, it debunks the notions of modernity and Industrial Revolution. As a consequence, unlike modernization theory and orthodox Marxism, WSA cannot disregard medieval Europe in its entirety since it has to “reopen the question of how and when the capitalist world-economy was created in the first place; why the

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<sup>23</sup> Findlay states rightfully: “the view that only England, with its Industrial Revolution on domestic soil and with home-grown technology was truly able to initiate the modern industrial world is fundamentally mistaken since it adopts a ‘national’ instead of a ‘systemic’ perspective. One must not look at the consequences for individual nations or states, but for Europe or the West as a whole” (1992: 160–61). Although most scholars continue to focus on the Industrial Revolution as the key historical moment (e.g., Grassby, 1999: 63) which brings about real growth in terms of a rise in per capita income, there is ample historical evidence that this was occurring much earlier than the eighteenth century (e.g., Wee, 1988: 343–44; Jones, 1988: 38). Some scholars (e.g., O’Brien, 1990; 1992) even tend to dismiss the profits derived from international trade prior to the Industrial Revolution. It is, in my opinion, of major importance that the western European core was able to industrialize precisely because it could specialize in the production of goods with a higher value added, whereas the periphery could not because its industrialization process was thwarted, and colonial production was geared towards supplying raw materials for the core, as its markets were forced open to the refined products from the core. While the importance of an internal market should not be underestimated in order to create sustained growth, the external market and inter-regional trade, the former as a source of raw materials and the latter for the demand for services or finished products with a higher value added, are crucial for any economic growth (Wee, 1988: 321, 337).

transition took place in feudal Europe and not elsewhere; why it took place when it did and not earlier or later; why earlier attempts of transition failed" (Wallerstein, 1979: 135). While WSA has not dealt effectively with the transition problem, it has brought the medieval era back into the picture. Another positive element about WSA is that it illustrates how the Brenner Debate between class history versus the so-called "objective economic forces, particularly those deriving from demographic fluctuations and the growth of trade and markets" (Torras, 1980: 253) can be overcome by emphasizing that

the exploitation of labor is not only determined by the wage bundle and the extraction of labor from labor power in the production process, but in substantial measure by the prices at which goods are exchanged between the economies that make up the world-system, or between the modes of production in a given economy (Bowles, 1988: 434).

In this sense, WSA attempts to integrate the Marxist focus on production and the Smithian focus on the circulation of goods on the market in its relational model to explain the emergence of capitalism.<sup>24</sup> Yet, as Thomas Hall observes, many scientists agree that "World-System Theory cannot be applied wholesale to precapitalist settings, before approximately 1500 AD" (Hall, 1996: 444–49). This leads us to the question: is there no capitalist system before the "long" sixteenth century? The answer to this question depends whether one tends to agree with a spatial predisposition, namely that there has been a period of transition from feudalism to capitalism wherein the existence of multiple systems converge into a single

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<sup>24</sup> Brenner's claim that WSA is circulationist should be rejected.

While it must be admitted that much of what goes on among Wallerstein's zones of the capitalist world-economy involves exchange, much also involves production. When, for example, core capitalists peripheralize a region in order to extract surplus value from it, they are doing so through the direct establishment of productive activities that they ultimately control. How can such an economic relationship between core and periphery be regarded as based only on exchange? (Sanderson, 1995: 178).

It is important to note that it is the combination of profits based on the exploitation of wage labor and unequal exchange that constitute a capitalist system. Profits derived from surplus value are after all not necessarily "of greater historical significance" (Heilbroner, 1985: 66) than those derived from unequal exchange.

world-system (a world-economy centered around Europe or western Asia) and a temporal predisposition, namely that this transition from feudalism to capitalism occurred somewhere between 1450 and 1650. Let us focus first on the temporal predisposition. For Wallerstein, capitalism evolved in Europe out of the crisis of feudalism in the “long” sixteenth century and with the world-system, one single new mode of production comes into existence. His work on the “long” sixteenth century—the “period of the world-economy in creation”—(1974: 356) notwithstanding, his summary explanation about the transition (1974: 37) remains unsatisfying. I agree with the methodological criticism of Terlouw:

During this long traditional phase, feudalism was slowly transformed into, and superseded by, capitalism. This can only mean that during at least two centuries feudalism and capitalism coexisted in one world-system. So what Wallerstein explicitly denies (the coexistence of two modes of production in one world-system) he implicitly assumes for the period between 1450 and 1650. If one accepts that during a very long period, several modes of production coexisted in one single system, it is a small, and completely logical, step to admit that at any moment in the history of the world-system several modes of production could exist simultaneously (1992: 57–58).

Like Marx himself, Wallerstein is more interested in the functioning of the capitalist world-economy today. But this interest has some unfortunate theoretical implications:

By focusing his attention on the emergence of the present world-system, Wallerstein inadequately theorizes about the temporal borders between world-systems. His fixation on the unity of the present world makes him blind to the intertwining of different social systems in the past (Terlouw, 1992: 57).

Wallerstein was of course very aware of this problem.<sup>25</sup> But calling the transition at a given moment in time completed (in the sense that capitalism has superseded other modes of production or

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<sup>25</sup> “To analyze the period from 1450 to 1750 as one long ‘transition’ from feudalism to capitalism risks reifying the concept of transition, for we thus steadily reduce the periods of ‘pure’ capitalism and sooner or later arrive at zero, being left with nothing but transition” (Wallerstein, 1980: 31).

that its logic appears to be predominant) is hard to do, since “it is always easy to find presumed instances of ‘non-capitalist’ behavior in a capitalist world—all over Europe in 1650 and 1750 and 1950. The mixture [of noncapitalist and capitalist behavior] is the essence of the capitalist system as a mode of production” (Wallerstein, 1980: 32). So who can really tell for sure when one system profoundly takes over (incorporates) the other one(s) at a specific moment in time? Unfortunately, the confusion does not end here. Wallerstein’s reluctance to apply concepts such as core and periphery before the “long” sixteenth century, is a result of how he interprets the importance and impact of long-distance trade. However, the dichotomy which he creates (and many in WSA follow) between preciosities (luxuries) versus essentials or utilities (mass or bulk trade) can seriously be questioned, especially prior to 1500 (Schneider, 1991: 48). What goods can one exactly define as luxury or bulk trade: does one focus on the quantity of the goods exchanged or emphasize the nature of goods? And if certain luxury items over time become mass commodities, being widely bought and sold due to a rising demand in the market (for instance, such as wine,<sup>26</sup> sugar,<sup>27</sup> and salt<sup>28</sup>), when

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<sup>26</sup> “In some years around 1300, England exported up to 15 million pounds of raw wool, and a year’s export of about 25 millions gallons of wine from the Garonne valley was recorded. The wine trade found markets in Tunis and the Black Sea. Exotic commodities were more and more moved in bulk” (Mundy, 1991: 91). Cf. also Craeybeckx (1958), Sivéry (1969), and the impressive essays of Rénouard (1968: 225–359) and Maguin (1982) who demonstrate the significance of both regional production and long-distance trade. To illustrate the example of massive production of wine for the market in the medieval era: “La moyenne annuelle, pendant le premier tiers du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle, se chiffre à 747,000 hectolitres—850,000 environ en 1308–1309. Pour fixer les idées, en 1950, l’exportation totale de vin par la France est de 900,000 hectolitres. Et cela ne concerne que les seules sorties par la Gironde: Bordeaux et Libourne” (Pernoud, Gimpel & Delatouche, 1986: 195); cf. also Bochaca (1997: 20). Thus, one should not underestimate the impact of the wine production on the “monétarisation de l’économie rurale et l’accumulation de profits” (Mousnier 1997: 327). But not only French wine was exported to England: German wine (Boer, 1996: 138), Spanish wine (Childs, 1978: 126–36; Ruiz 1992: IX, 182) and Cretan wine (Scammell, 1981: 105) was sold there as well. For the importance of the “regular, large-scale, well-developed trade between distinct but relatively integrated economies” of which the wine trade was illustrative, cf. also Menard (1997: 236–48) and his bibliography. Pauly demonstrates clearly that wine in the early fourteenth century cannot be dismissed as a luxury commodity: the consumption of wine was so widespread—even prisoners got wine—that one should consider it “un aliment de base de première importance” (1998: 297–98). Despite the fact that the wine trade probably dominated the commerce from southern French cities to England during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, many other items were of course sold as well, such as pastel (from Bayonne and Toulouse), while English products such as fish and skins, and, later in the fourteenth century increasingly cloths, were brought back to be sold at the French marketplace (Wolff, 1954: 118–19).

does this critical transition from a luxury good to a bulk good occur?<sup>29</sup> In other words, when do luxuries become necessities (Wallerstein, 1993b: 294)? Furthermore, to what extent is it analytically useful prior to 1500 that such a dichotomy is drawn between the two? Schneider (1991: 52) and Adams (1974) are convinced that long distance trade in luxuries prior to 1500 was a “formidable socioeconomic force ... in spite of its being confined largely to commodities of very high value ... and in spite of its directly involving only a small part of the population” (Adams, 1974: 247). And can the growing wealth of Europe not be measured by its increased demand for luxuries? (Cheyney, 1962: 10). Is it impossible to retain the importance and impact of luxury trade without reducing it conceptually to the same analytical level as bulk trade? Is it not conceivable that luxury trade (and certainly the serious profits involved) could have provided essential financial leverage for the same merchant entrepreneurs/families who also engaged (and invested) in bulk trade, specifically prior to 1500? And could one not argue that this leverage was quite necessary, if not essential, to further stimulate the increasing trade in mass commodities, stimulating the actual expansion of capitalism in this era of transition from feudalism to capitalism?<sup>30</sup> A medieval super company such as managed by the Peruzzis or the Bardis around 1300 in Italy invested and made notable profits in both textile trade (the cloth market) and large-

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<sup>27</sup> For the sugar industry in late medieval Sicily, cf. (Epstein, 1992: 210–22); for the structure of the Levantine sugar industry in the late Middle Ages, “a true capitalistic enterprise, with big trusts which systematically pushed the small enterprises aside,” cf. Ashtor (1992b: ch. III, esp. 237).

<sup>28</sup> The salt trade asserted itself as “one of the unifying elements of the western economy” (Mollat, 1993: 65) as it became the target of special taxes all over Europe. Cf. also the illuminating essays in Bautier (1992: chaps. V and VI); Mollat (1968; 1977: VI & VIII) and, more important, the major studies by Hocquet (1979a; 1979b; 1985). For the significance of the salt trade in northwestern Europe, cf. Bridbury (1973: 22–39).

<sup>29</sup> Of course one might pose the same question about other commodities that were traded in bulk in the fourteenth century, such as beer produced in northern Germany (Hamburg, Bremen) and exported towards the Low Countries (cf. Unger, 1989: 121–35; Aerts & Unge, 1990: 92–101; Uytven, 1988: 548) as beer gradually replaced wine as a major consumption item (Unger, 1998) or the major trade in lumber (e.g., North & Thomas, 1973: 50).

<sup>30</sup> Especially if one realizes that at the time commercial expansion and industrial specialization both required unprecedented investment of capital (Schumann, 1986: 107). For the importance of both bulk trade and luxury trade in the medieval economy, cf. Bozorgnia’s powerful arguments (1998: esp. chs. 4 and 5).

scale grain trading (Hunt, 1994: 244; Britnell, 1993: 123; Wolff, 1959).<sup>31</sup> Besides, both bulk and luxury traders took advantage of

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<sup>31</sup> “Since the latter part of the Middle Ages, the range of articles in long-distance commercial circulation was already a very diverse one, and encompassed consumer goods which were relatively commonplace, [while] it did not absorb very high transaction costs” (Torras, 1993: 202). Cf. also Saporì (1970) and Cherubini (1993) who reject the Sombartian perspective that Wallerstein seems to follow: “While recognizing the fact that we are not dealing here [the market in Medieval Italy] with quantities comparable with the figures brandished for the days leading up to the Industrial Revolution, the circulation [of commodities] did not only involve products of specifically high value, but also the most run-of-the-mill goods . . . we must reject the image of Italian commerce during this era as being centered around products such as spices and other highly-priced items” (Cherubini, 1993: 282–83). Nor should one forget that the “medieval usage of the term spice could be highly elastic” (Modelski & Thompson, 1996: 178) which means it could encompass many different materials (Scammell, 1981: 101–02). Furthermore, “the mass traffic of heavy products, such as salt and grain, and of cumbersome products, such as wood, also corresponded to a certain division of tasks between the sea and land routes” (Mollat, 1993: 65). For some estimates on the magnitude of profits from Italian maritime trade with England in 1270–1530, cf. Fryde (1983: xiv–xvi). Essentially, one can say that “de plus en plus, il faut se convaincre que l’essentiel des trafics méditerranéens était fait du sel, du blé, du vin, de l’huile, sans parler des cuirs, du bois, du fer, de l’alun, nécessaires à la vie de tous les jours, et que c’est sur ces produits pondéreux, sur celui des grains en particulier, que l’attention doit se porter, bien plus encore que sur les épices ou les soieries” (Bautier, 1992: VI, 224). According to Unger (1980: 191), Miskimin (1975: 125), Scammell (1981:48), and Lewis & Runyan (1985: 134–35) bulk trade even *dominated* commerce in northern Europe. Thus, it is a serious exaggeration to claim that industrial production in the Middle Ages was “scattered, small-scale, and mostly geared to a luxury market” (Wallerstein 1974: 123) and that “there was no middle-distance division of labor . . . local zones did not generally depend on or count on ‘regional’ (that is, middle-distance) supply sources” (Wallerstein, 1993a: 5) as if medieval trade was nothing more than “local trade and exchange in which goods moved within restricted regions [while] long-distance trade was characterized exclusively by valuables produced for the elites” (Wolf, 1982: 32). Although local production and consumption of grains and textiles remained important (Munro, 1998: 275), regional markets as well as international ones were at the heart of the medieval economy: both the city-states’ dependence on the grain trade (for the consumption of the urban proletariat) and the textile market illustrate this. For instance, ca. 1400 French grain was transported via Ghent to Antwerp, where ultimately Dutch merchants had to pay toll to be able to transport it to Haarlem (Aerts, Dupon & Wee, 1985: 237; Brand, 1996: 36). At the same time, the import of grain from the Baltic to the Low Countries (according to Slicher van Bath [1963: 156] as early as 1250 and to England according to Fourquin [1979: 317] as early as the fourteenth century), or from the Black Sea region to cities such as Genoa (Karpov, 1993; Unger, 1980: 183) or Montpellier (Reyerson, 1998: 269) constituted an *essential* feature of the urban system (Uytven, 1985). Estimating that the “average inhabitant of a northern European town in the Middle Ages consumed 300 kg of grain annually” (Samsonowicz, 1998: 306), one can imagine the logistical problems for a city with a population of 50,000 or more. Thus, as increasing amounts of raw materials (furs, timber, cattle) and last but not least grain were transported from the East to the cities of the Low Countries (Tits-Dieuaide, 1975: 150–66; Lewis, 1978: IX, 33–35), and occasionally to Italy as well (Favier, 1996: 172–73), in return the “bulk of the cities’ growing exports were directed to Eastern Europe” (Uytven, 1983: 181). One can think of the division of labor between the urban

their networks of circulation systems which ensured the rapid spread of messages all across Europe from the fourteenth century on (Blockmans, 1997: 41).

Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997) and Modelski and Thompson (1996), for instance, agree on the existence and importance of long-distance trade patterns and cycles prior to 1500. A dichotomy between luxury trade and bulk trade is not as important to them as it is to Wallerstein. Completely dismissing a distinction between bulk and luxury goods from the present to 5000 years ago would imply that no transition from feudalism to capitalism occurred: indeed, Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills (1991; 1992; 1993a; 1993b) completely dismiss the notion of transition in the Middle Ages, or even in the “long” sixteenth century for that matter. For them, no sharp break or transition occurs around 1500 (Frank & Gills, 1993b: 297). In seeking to make their analysis “as holistic as possible” Frank

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intercity state system of western Europe and the countryside of eastern Europe and the Black Sea area (Balard, 1983: 45, 51) as an embryonic form of peripheralization which would culminate in the transformation of “East Central Europe into a virtual colonial appendage of the European heartland, supplying raw materials in exchange for finished goods” (Rowan, 1994: 197–98); cf. also Turnock (1988: 209); Asdracha & Mantran (1986: 348); Scammell (1981: 87); Tits-Dieuaide (1975: 160). For example, the Polish textile industry could not flourish in the long run because of the continuous inflow of textiles from the western European city-states against which they could not compete (Wyrozumski, 1981: 301; Kloczowski, 1996: 471–73; Małowist, 1957: 578). This had of course political ramifications: the Polish urban bourgeoisie could not grow as strong as in the West, which enabled the much more powerful nobility to implement a socioeconomic policy which turned the country into a periphery vis-a-vis the West (Samsonowicz, 1981; Bogucka, 1985: 101; Samsonowicz & Maczak, 1985) as, from the end of the fourteenth century on, the Baltic area became more and more important as the source of food supply and other raw materials for major urban centers in the Low Countries (Verhulst, 1963: 74–75). The continuous expansion of this European division of labor throughout the fourteenth–seventeenth centuries is in my opinion an adequate explanation to understand the relation between the “unidirectional development towards increased agricultural production” (Tarvel, 1990: 71) in eastern Europe on one hand and the increasing numbers of nonagricultural workers in western European cities on the other hand (cf. also Wunder, 1983: 270–71; Pal Pách, 1994: ix–xi; Wee, 1988: 338). One should not homogenize eastern and western Europe, but the late Middle Ages nevertheless have to be regarded as the “crucial turning point [which] lead to divergent agrarian development in east and west” (Rösener, 1994: 106). The internal division of labor in Europe (Samsonowicz, 1996: 50–52) was part of the systematic construction of a colonial periphery (cf. footnote 57) which is in turn crucial to explain the emergence of capitalism. This makes the claim of internal transformations within a single nation-state (a capitalism in one country phenomenon) quite presumptuous (“the English economy in the early modern period, driven by the logic of its basic productive sector, agriculture, was already operating to principles and ‘laws of motion’ different from those prevailing in any other society since the dawn of history” [Wood, 1999: 96]).

and Gills envisage the contours of a world system that existed 5000 years ago (1993b: 45). Ironically, a narrative of frozen history is constructed: since time immemorial, trade linked peoples and tribes together, while some made profits and others were exploited. They are convinced that “the labor of the ancient lapis lazuli miners of Afghanistan and the textile workers in urban Sumeria was all surely interlinked in a world economic system division of labor even in the fourth or third millennium BC” (1993b: 299). And so, mankind has always lived (and always will live?) in a world capitalist system.<sup>32</sup> Their position is somewhat extreme and remains a minority point of view in the WSA school. In contrast to Frank and Gills, Wallerstein does use the concept of transition, but in constructing WSA to analyze historical processes, he has problems pinning it down. However, the transition to capitalism he invokes c. 1500, becomes even more problematic if one looks at other (non WSA) literature.

Many have accepted the late Middle Ages as a period of transition between 1300 and 1520 (e.g., Ferguson, 1962), or a period of acceleration between 1270 and 1520 (Fossier, 1991: 337–441). Some have coined the period between 1100–1350/1500 the “Commercial Revolution” (Lopez, 1954: 615; Adelson, 1962: 68–87; Jones, 1997: 152–332; Lopez, 1976: 56–84) that in turn initiated the era of capitalism<sup>33</sup> (and in the long run, made the rise of the West possible), disregarding whether various forms of technological innovations (e.g., White, 1962; Mokyr, 1990; Balard, 1991: 113–23; Carus-Wilson, 1941) or a form of agrarian development and surplus extraction, in itself an outcome of specific class relations (Brenner, 1985: 11–12), were at the heart of the matter.<sup>34</sup> Snooks traces the decline of feudalism between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries (1996: 191, 304). The French agricultural historian Alain Derville agrees, stating that the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the countryside took place around 1150 AD (1995: 243–50). Several studies focusing

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<sup>32</sup> Hence Wallerstein’s well-founded critique: “Only if we keep the caesura [from protocapitalism to the emergence of a capitalist world-system] in mind will we remember that this historical system, like all historical systems, not only had a beginning (or genesis), but that it will have an end” (1993b: 295–96).

<sup>33</sup> Aymard traces the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism in Italy back to the thirteenth century (1982: 133).

<sup>34</sup> Some have attributed events outside Europe (i.e., technological stagnation resulting from the fiscal policy of despotic governments) as crucial to the rise of the West, but we cannot elaborate upon this here (e.g., Ashtor, 1992b: III, 266, 273–80).

on urban production and trade<sup>35</sup> and agrarian production for trade,<sup>36</sup> bulk/mass and luxuries alike, clearly indicate a historical continuity on all levels between the late Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, which explains the political, economic, and technological evolutions interwoven with the transition from feudalism to capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

Even a change in *mentalités*,<sup>38</sup> the rational drive to achieve an activity which one calls a ceaseless accumulation of capital, can be traced back to its roots in the Middle Ages (Le Mené, 1977: 160–90). Jacques Le Goff considers the theological controversy on usury in the thirteenth century as “the labor pains of capitalism” (1988: 9–10). And he continues: “The instigators of capitalism were usurers: merchants of the future, sellers of time. The hope of escaping Hell, thanks to Purgatory, permitted the usurer to propel the economy and society of the thirteenth century ahead towards capitalism” (1988: 93).<sup>39</sup> Also, the mechanical clocks that were appearing on

<sup>35</sup> Cf. excellent essays on urban economies and putting-out production in the fourteenth century in Boone & Prevenier (1993); for a short description of the putting-out system implemented by medieval (merchant) capitalists, cf. Reynolds (1961: 236–43); Stromer (1991); Holbach (1985; 1994); and Friedrichs (1975). For case studies concerning constantly changing markets of textile industries in Ghent and Douai, cf. Howell & Boone (1996); for urban industries in the Low Countries and Italy, cf. Wee (1988); for a general economic history of the Low Countries, cf. Houtte (1977).

<sup>36</sup> For example, the studies collected in Wee & Cauwenberghé (1978) and Thoen (1992; 1993).

<sup>37</sup> In emphasizing historical continuity throughout this article I do not intend to simplify the complex history of certain conjunctures related to certain products being bought and sold at the market place, in which, of course, discontinuities occur (as for instance Munro [1997] points out for the new draperies). What I want to stress here is the *overall* continuity of economic growth in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries and the nature of capitalist exploitation inherent to it.

<sup>38</sup> “Du Marx dans la pratique, six cents ans avant Le Capital! . . . La réussite ou l'échec d'une vie se mesurent à l'importance du capital accumulé” (Martin, 1996: 357–70). Cipolla notes that by the fifteenth century “western glass too was widely exported to the Near East and a telling symptom of the European ‘capitalist’ spirit, unhampered by religious considerations, was the fact that the Venetians manufactured mosque lamps for the Near Eastern market and decorated them with both western floral designs and pious Koranic inscriptions” (1994: 210). As far as medieval Bruges is concerned, Murray states that “the term medieval capitalism should not be rejected out of hand, for despite its tint of anachronism, capitalism does indeed describe the workings of the Bruges economy in the fourteenth century” (1990: 25).

<sup>39</sup> “C'est avec le développement de l'économie monétaire, dès le XIIe siècle, que l'usure va devenir un sujet de la plus grande importance pour l'Eglise. C'est au XIIIe siècle que le problème s'est avéré fondamental, alors que le capitalisme est en train de faire ses premiers pas, en usant précisément de pratiques condamnées par l'Eglise jusque-

churches and town halls in western Europe from the beginning of the fourteenth century onwards (Barnett, 1998: 80), were “a historical revolution in the measuring of time, with far-reaching intellectual, commercial and industrial consequences” (Gimpel, 1976: 165; Pernoud, 1992: 140). Indeed, “the rational outlook of the merchants and bankers was fundamental to the installation of mechanical clocks in the West. With their capitalistic mentality they had observed the value of time” (Gimpel, 1976: 170).<sup>40</sup> Besides, what is the

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là” (Greilsammer, 1994: 810). But, quite important, “the urban authorities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries defended the practice of usury. Synods that denounced canonical infractions such as usury hardly installed any fear in the ‘monde des affaires’ ” (Wyffels, 1991: 870–71) since “money-lending was freely practiced in the Middle Ages among the poor as well as the rich. Usury was still forbidden by canon law, but there were all kinds of subtle devices for cloaking usurious transactions” (Du Boulay, 1970: 59; cf. also Little, 1978: 180–83), and one of them was certainly carrying on banking activities “under the cloak of exchange” (Roover, 1969: 29). Essentially, “the church’s condemnation of usury did nothing to shackle the development of capitalism” (Le Goff, 1979: 25) since

medieval lawyers and their clients became spectacularly adept at circumventing the laws by disguising interest payments. The church itself was a borrower (and occasionally a lender) and it, too, made use of the ingenious methods of casuistry that had been developed for paying interest without appearing to pay interest. In short, credit financing had become too pervasive and integral a part of economic life—and an economically productive fact of life—that no amount of theological argument was going to make go away. Although theologians and scholars continued to argue the moral fine points of the usury problem, by the mid fourteenth century there was a marked decrease in the Church’s actual prosecutions of usury, and it even began to change its laws to allow moderate interest rates (Barnett, 1998: 60).

According to Little, “what was once deviant behavior, which by definition is marginal, was [by the mid thirteenth century] becoming standard practice and thus simultaneously, from an official point of view, increasingly difficult to define as deviant, particularly as more and more of those in positions of authority had mercantile background. This is self-evident in the case of the urban patriciate, but it was also true of the ecclesiastical hierarchy” (1978: 212). Cf. also Heers (1992: 253–56) and Mundy (1997: 196–202).

<sup>40</sup> Or, to quote Barnett, “God’s time began to grant space to the new secularized idea of time required by a money economy” (1998: 61). For the far-reaching implications of changes in the apprehension of time in the period between 1300 and 1650, cf. E. P. Thompson’s classic chapter, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism” (1993: 352–403) and the cited literature there. Time itself became also a compartmentalized and rationalized commodity (Le Goff, 1991: 46–79; Martin, 1996: 168–74). Cf. also Epstein (1988a); Crosby (1997: 75–93); and Cipolla (1967). On the chronology and geography of diffusion of clocks in medieval Europe and their implications (“Merchant’s Time” and “Work Time and Hourly Wage”) cf. the study by Dohrn-van Rossum (1996). Landes explicitly links the large scale production of the textile industry to the diffusion of work bells in the medieval urban communities (1983: 72–76). According to Whitrow it is important to note that, unlike China and Mesoamerica, “in Western Europe the

essential difference regarding *l'esprit d'entreprise* of a merchant like Jacques Coeur in the middle of the fifteenth century (Mollat, 1988), and that of merchants like Jean Boinebroke (Espinass, 1933; Bernard, 1976: 311; Koenigsberger, 1987: 223–24) and the Genoese capitalist Symon de Gualterio (Face, 1969: 75–94) in the late thirteenth century, or even that of a merchant like Guillaume Cade in the mid-twelfth century (Derville, 1994: 52–54), all linked to the emergence of capitalism?<sup>41</sup> This provokes the question: what is so new about the sixteenth century as far as features of capitalism are concerned?

The capitalistic nature of major commerce and international finance becomes clearly apparent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The volume of medieval trade and the amount of business conducted was negligible by comparison with present-day trade, but this means very little. It was substantial considering the size of the population, and the relative importance of other sectors of the economy. In tonnage, some figures actually surpassed those of Seville's trade with America in the first half of the sixteenth century (Bernard, 1976: 309–10).

It also should be clear that the concept "age of transition" implies that at least two coexisting modes of production were operating, and as time goes by, one becomes more dominant over the other: if we want to analyze the rise of one mode of production and the demise of another, we have to acknowledge them working together. If not, should one not have to argue that feudalism simply disappeared within Europe during the "long" sixteenth century? Instead, why not argue that the feudal system was very much alive well into the nineteenth century, as well as some of its social structures? Wallerstein, however, insists that the creation of the modern

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mechanical clock first appeared and with it a new type of civilization based on the measurement of time" (1988: 96).

<sup>41</sup> On the question: "Was the medieval economy capitalistic?" the economic historian Heaton responds: "14th-century merchants were conducting complicated businesses with intelligence, foresight, and a detailed knowledge of their financial position. There was no lack of capitalistic spirit, organization, or technique in the management of great estates during the 13th century" (1948: 185–87). Although I do not want to stress the emergence of a Weberian "capitalist spirit," and do not agree with the claim that "what made European expansion different and in some sense 'special' was . . . derived from a series of religious and cultural factors which were largely peculiar to European society" (Phillips, 1998: 243), the impact of a new commercial mentality in the educational field did occur (Delort, 1982: 247–48; Dahl, 1998: 67–68; Wolff, 1989: 58–59).

capitalist world-economy took place not earlier than 1450 and not later than the sixteenth century. Of course, he is very much aware of major changes in Europe prior to 1450, stating that “the crisis of feudalism in Europe in the period of 1300–1450 [was] a crisis whose resolution was the historic emergence of a capitalist world-economy located in that particular geographic arena” (1984: 23).

Yet he does not really elaborate on this issue because Wallerstein—even when he has to acknowledge the existence of some features of capitalism in the late Middle Ages—perceives no fundamentally important historical continuity in Europe between the period 1300 and c. 1500, which could help explain the transition from feudalism to capitalism:

There were no doubt other times throughout history when such a transformation [into a capitalist world-economy] seemed to be beginning, such as in the Mediterranean basin between 1150 and 1300. And there were parallel occurrences at other moments in other regions of the world. But for various reasons all the prior transformations were abortive (1979: 142).

This is a very important statement, meaning that other regions, unlike Europe, did not witness the emergence of capitalism. It also implies that what happened between 1150 and 1300 did not appear to have an impact on the emergence of capitalism in 1450, in Europe, since he dismisses it as “abortive.”<sup>42</sup> But is there really such an extreme break with the past?<sup>43</sup> Is it not plausible that, precisely because several features of capitalism were already strongly apparent prior to 1500 in Europe—more precisely between 1100 and 1350<sup>44</sup>—

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<sup>42</sup> An “earlier attempt of transition [that] failed” (Wallerstein, 1979: 135).

<sup>43</sup> In a more recent article, Wallerstein claims there is a fundamental difference between “protocapitalist” systems with capitalist features (investments of capital, extensive commodity production, wage labor and *Weltanschauungen* consonant with capitalism) on one hand and the “genesis of a radically new system” after 1400 out of the “crisis of feudalism” on the other hand (1999: 34). I argue that one should be careful not to miss the construction of the embryonic European capitalist system in the period 1200–1400 precisely to understand developments in the world-economy in a much more intensified pattern, and on a larger scale in the period 1400–1600. Unfortunately, in Wallerstein’s model, the sixteenth century capitalist world-economy is “virtually a creation ex nihilo” (Sanderson, 1995: 159).

<sup>44</sup> For the argument of continuity from medieval mercantile capitalism originating in northern Italy and the Low Countries up to the emergence of industrial capitalism in western Europe, cf. Sée (1928: 7–56).

and because of their overall continuing growing importance, the feudal system sunk into a crisis? Not that the feudal system was suddenly and completely replaced by a totally new system of accumulation. It fell into an agonizing, slow period of decay, and became superseded by the dominant logic of capitalism. In this sense, historical continuity is revealing, as the economic historian John Day points out:

By the mid-14th century, merchant capitalism has already perfected the instruments of economic power and business organization that were to serve it for the next four hundred years: foreign exchange, deposit banking, risk insurance, public finance, international trading companies, commercial book-keeping (1987: 199).<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, there was already a valid money market in the fourteenth century, where the banking and trading companies had branches which dealt in paper currency (and, like every market, was governed by the laws of supply and demand and was subject to various seasonal and cyclical fluctuations) (Bernard, 1976: 327). According to Braudel, in his conceptualization of the *économie-monde*, forms of capitalism—commercial, industrial, banking<sup>46</sup>—already existed in thirteenth century Florence and has since widened its grip over the economy.<sup>47</sup> Unlike Wallerstein, Braudel is not reluctant to

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<sup>45</sup> The same is said by Bouvier and Germain-Martin (1964: 21–22) and Lane (1977); for the importance of credit instruments in fourteenth century overseas trade, cf. Munro (1994a: X, 67–79). Using transfers of credit by exchange instruments “inter-city exchange bankers” could avoid moving bullion over long distances (Blomquist, 1994: 345–46). For the use of bank money in medieval Venice, cf. Mueller (1981: 77–104). For rather short distances, money changers were obviously very important (Chevalier, 1973: 153–60). For a discussion on the usage of bookkeeping by urban governments in western Europe, cf. Samsonowicz (1964: 207–21).

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Le Goff’s conclusion of medieval banking: “Par la masse d’argent qu’il manie, par l’étendue de ses horizons géographiques et économiques, par ses méthodes commerciales et financières, le marchand-banquier médiéval est un capitaliste. Il l’est aussi par son esprit, son genre de vie, par sa place dans la société” (1962: 41). Cf. also Roover (1948; 1971) and Blomquist (1979: 53–75). In the late thirteenth century, Genoa introduced maritime insurance contracts, which were adopted quite rapidly elsewhere as well (Heers, 1959: 8–14; Wolff, 1986: 136–39). For the links between insurance practices and the availability of credit, cf. Leone (1983).

<sup>47</sup> The functioning of the Florentine economy in the fourteenth century is brilliantly exposed by Brucker:

The merchant-entrepreneur would buy the raw materials (wool and dyeing substances, woad and alum) and market the finished product once the wool had passed through the various stages of cloth production. [First] the imported

apply the term capitalism in the Middle Ages,<sup>48</sup> nor is he reluctant to apply WSA concepts to that period.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, why not use WSA terminology such as periphery, semiperiphery, core, incorporation, etc., earlier than the sixteenth century, concerning the emergence of capitalism (Wachter, 1996: 51–57)?

For Wallerstein, the “axial division of labor involving integrated production processes” is a condition sine qua non when one wants to identify a system capitalistic in nature (1993a: 294). Actually, from the late eleventh century on, energetic merchant-entrepreneurs in Flanders<sup>50</sup> started to produce standardized textile goods which were intended for large scale export.<sup>51</sup> This export industry drew its

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wool would arrive at the wash house, it would then proceed to the factory to be carded and combed; out to the country to be spun; back into the city for weaving and dyeing; once again into the country to be fulled and then back to town finally to be stretched, packed, checked, sealed and retailed or exported. . . . During this process he would have recourse to workers directly answerable to him. He would always remain in charge and would always retain ownership of the wool, as it progressively became transformed into cloth. Spinners and weavers remained financially dependent on the lanaiolo: the looms were borrowed or sold on a pro rata basis of payment by installments of work, or else they were pledged to the lanaiolo in return for work (1998: 105).

On the power of the *setaiolo*, the merchant-entrepreneur in the Italian silk industry, cf. Piergiovanni (1993).

<sup>48</sup> Nor does Henri Pirenne (1937: 19).

<sup>49</sup> “The European world-economy has changed shape several times since the thirteenth century, displacing the core, rearranging the peripheries” (Braudel, 1992b: 70).

<sup>50</sup> For the importance of cloth from Champagne and Flanders to the Genoese market in the twelfth century, cf. Krueger (1987), Reynolds (1929; 1930), and Laurent (1935: 1–20); for the significance of Scottish and Spanish wool production for export, cf. Ewan (1990: 68–91), Childs (1978: 72–106), and Cipolla (1994:192); for the impact of market fluctuations on transformations in the textile industry, cf. Munro (1991); for the evidence that northern cheap cloths exported towards the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century exceeded those of luxury woolens, not only in volume but also in aggregate value, cf. Chorley (1987). The importance of the trade in cloth is confirmed by Malanima: “In the 13th century large scale trade became increasingly linked to the trade in textiles: of all the goods that traveled across the Mediterranean these were the most valuable. In comparison the spice trade had become a secondary affair, with not only a more limited scale but also a much lesser value since a sack of Flemish cloths was equivalent in value to between three and five sacks of spices” (1987: 351). According to Ashtor, “the [long distance] trade of bulky commodities, like cotton and alkali ashes, yielded much more than that of spices” (1985: 376).

<sup>51</sup> The thirteenth-century merchant-entrepreneur was, of course, not only active in the Low Countries, but also in England and Italy: “Disposant de capitaux, il maîtrise les importations de matières premières, l’exportation du produit fini, assume les risques engendrés par la dispersion des marchés, contrôle toutes les étapes de la production et en détermine le rythme” (Sosson, 1991: 280).

strength from a far-reaching division of labor, both employing semi-skilled and even unskilled workers in large numbers (Wee, 1988: 320).<sup>52</sup> Braudel states that the boom of the thirteenth century arose out of the newly created division of labor as it proliferated (1992b: 315). This increasing division of labor, especially apparent in the textile industry but also in the mining industry,<sup>53</sup> was quite signifi-

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<sup>52</sup> Thus in the Flemish textile industry, from the twelfth century on, each of the tasks described was performed by a specialist: breakers, beaters, washers, oilers, carders, combers, spinners, weavers, fullers, tenderers, teaselers, shearmen, dyers, pressers, pickers, greasers, and so on (Munro, 1988: 1–27). Even further specialization within a single manufacturing process took place: “the dyers, for example, subdivided themselves into groups which concentrated on a particular color” (Wee, 1975: 204). “These were all employees of the draper and subject to the regulation of the industrial ‘police’ who guaranteed the quality of the product and were the agents of the drapers. The raw materials were owned, and the work directed, by businessmen. The day laborers were actually little more than the kind of proletarian factory workers of the 19th century” (Gutmann, 1988: 28–29).

Thus Flanders and northern Italy had developed a genuinely capitalist mode of production in which the workers had effectively become wage earners, a proletariat, owing nothing but their labor, even though there was as yet no factories and the workers worked in their homes, . . . the employment of these workers was subject to the fluctuations of the international market which they did not understand and over which they had no control. It is not surprising therefore, that both areas were beginning to experience industrial strife: strikes and urban revolts (Koenigsberger, 1987: 225).

Nicholas (1992: 136) also mentions nascent capitalism in medieval Flanders but does not explain it. In 1356–58—after the great plague (!)—between 59% and 67% of the population in Ghent (64,000) was still involved in the cloth industry (“membres des métiers de la laine”) (Prevenier, 1975: 276–79; Lis & Soly, 1979: 10). In Tournai, Maubeuge, Valenciennes (Bruwier 1992: 261) and Ypres (Uytven, 1981: 289) the situation was more or less similar. In fourteenth-century Florence, minimum 40% of the working population was employed in the textile industry (Uytven, 1981: 292; Franceschi, 1993: 103). Jacoby (1994: 551) claims that in fifteenth-century Catalonia “between 40 and 60% of the population was engaged in the manufacturing of woolens.” For fifteenth-century Leiden and Oudenaarde one estimates 34% and 50% of the population respectively (Prevenier, 1998: 82). For early fourteenth-century Bruges (more a commercial than an industrial city) the professionally active population employed in the textile industry fluctuated between 31% (Dumolyn, 1999: 53) and 37% (Blockmans, 1997b: 263).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Braudel (1992b: 321–25); Pounds (1994: 329); Molenda (1989); Braunstein (1987). In early fourteenth-century Tuscany the impact of private capital from urban merchants who invested in the countryside in order to extract minerals, can be deduced from key clauses of mining laws which indicate “the separation of land ownership from the rights to the subsoil (which allows the deposits to be exploited by a person other than the owner of the property) and the possibility that exploitation can be undertaken by several persons in a partnership, who adopt a capitalistic structure comprised of partners, salaried workers, and ‘magistri’ or directors of the enterprise” (Piccinni, 1994: 225). While many mines were initially exploited by the nobility, the medieval bourgeoisie took over the role of exploiting the mines by the early fourteenth century (Hesse, 1986:

cant regarding social stratification and polarization. The leather and metal industries (lead, tin, copper, bronze, silver, gold, and iron) and finished products made from them, were also important: "Metal-working guilds had divided as early as the thirteenth century into several dozen independent professions and trades" (Braudel, 1992b: 315). Metal-working gradually ceased to be a part-time occupation of the farming community, and became the full-time pursuit of professional iron-workers. "Dans le secteur du métal l'Europe médiévale a disposé d'une production de masse, qui, par la structure de l'entreprise, les modalités du travail, l'offre sur les marchés, ne peut être considérée sous l'angle de l'artisanat" (Braunstein, 1994: 23). Merchant capitalists who dealt in bar iron, first invested in ironworks, and then leased and operated them (Pounds, 1994: 327).<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the steadily expanding population in Europe during the economic upturn of the mid-thirteenth century resulted in massive land reclamation.<sup>55</sup> As the new expanding urban centers placed greater demands on the agrarian economy (Mackenney, 1987: 78–79), reclamation of land from the sea, especially around great river

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437–38). By c. 1400 leading mining towns such as Kutna Hora in Bohemia employed 4000 to 4500 miners (Pollard, 1997: 179).

<sup>54</sup> Especially in the valley of the Meuse, at Huy and above all at Dinant—in the Low Countries—metal-working contributed significantly to international trade (Jansen, 1989: 360–61). By 1430, the expansion of the metal industry in the area of Namur, Liège, and the Haut-Palatinat (due to the construction of ever larger "hauts fourneaux"), led to a takeover of the industry by merchant capitalists (Gillard, 1971; Stromer, 1991: 46–47). But paper-, glass-, mirror-, and crystal making and, last but not least, shipbuilding (Wolff, 1989: 49–53; Favier, 1996: 188) were also quite important industries. For Modelski and Thompson (1996: 237), the Venetian Arsenal "where standardized galleys were constructed along an assembly line, can probably claim to be one of Europe's first modern industrial factories." For medieval international trade and the "rise of an English merchant class," cf. Miller & Hatcher (1978: 79–83); Miller & Hatcher (1995: 181–254).

<sup>55</sup> One can of course, not deny the impact of a considerable population growth in the thirteenth century. One result is that not everyone could be fed from his own land, which in turn led to more "self-employment, dependence upon trade and a greater availability of wage labor" (Britnell 1993: 104). The latter is, of course, very important. According to Goldthwaite, the labor contract in medieval Florence was

thoroughly monetized. The employer calculated wages entirely in precise monetary terms, he rarely paid in kind . . . paid no more for longevity on the job, and provided no social and health benefits for unemployment, accidents or old age . . . that even the humblest of men thought about their wages and daily purchases in the abstract language of moneys of account rather than in terms of medium of exchange is a mark of the extent to which their attitudes were conditioned by the practice of offsetting [or giro transfer on private accounts] within the framework of a written accounting record (1991: 649).

estuaries, became very important: once the sea had been excluded from the area, the land proved excellent, fertile, flat, and stone-free soil (Ponting, 1993: 125). This reclamation of land was very impressive in Flanders and Holland (specifically in the areas of peat moors),<sup>56</sup> albeit the greatest progress was being made in northern Italy (Pounds, 1994: 170). Investments were made in reclaiming the wet and fertile valley of the Po and in creating polders in the Low Countries (Alberts & Jansen, 1964: 74–79; Tebrake, 1985). For merchants in fourteenth century Milan or Venice, or burghers in Bruges or Ypres, conceiving land as a commodity which one could acquire, improve, and turn to profit, became quite natural (Pounds, 1994: 109–10; Ponting, 1993: 154). Land reclamation (e.g., Verhulst, 1990b: 54–55) became in its turn thus an important aspect of capital formation (Smith, 1991: 100). Speaking of the exploitation of land, what about the incorporation of new arenas, by WSA defined as the “historical process by which noncapitalist zones are absorbed into the capitalist world-system [where] inhabitants of territories that have been outside are brought into the system through colonization, conquest, or economic and political domination” (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1986 quoted in Dunaway, 1996: 455)? Cannot the creation of the Crusading states in the Levant in the twelfth century—a region that was strongly interlinked with intercontinental trade—or the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula (ending in 1492) be interpreted as an identical form of expansion, subjugation, domination, and exploitation<sup>57</sup> as Spain’s conquest of the New World, albeit on a

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<sup>56</sup> The production of peat was not only very important in the Low Countries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as well (Leenders, 1989: 251–71).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Bernard (1976: 292–93) in general; cf. Le Mené (1977: 207), Thiriet (1977: XIII & XV), and Jacoby (1999) for the case of medieval Crete; Poisson (1995 & 1997), Abulafia (1993: I, 28–29), Day (1983: 198–200), and Tangheroni (1995) for the case of medieval Sardinia which exported primarily grain and salt; Cancellieri (1989) for the case of Corsica; Hocquet (1990) for certain parts of Dalmatia; Ashtor (1978b: VI, 5–53), Jacoby (1979: VII, 225–64), and Issawi (1970: 254–57) for the case of the Levant in the Middle Ages; cf. Thomson (1998: 49–50) for parts of Greece, the Aegean, and the Black Sea; the case of medieval Sicily, however, is more doubtful (cf. Epstein, 1989) and the North African states in the western Mediterranean were just too strong for the Italian city-states (Jehel, 1993: 66; Dufourcq, 1990: III). But the colonialism which was practiced by city-states such as Venice in the eastern Mediterranean (Wolff, 1986: 214–15), or Genoa in the Black Sea area (Balard, 1978; 1992; Scammell, 1981: 162), was not just political but financial as well (Day, 1985). Many similarities exist between these forms of colonialism in the eastern Mediterranean and later forms in the Atlantic (cf. Balard &

smaller scale?<sup>58</sup> If all these parallels exist, then what is actually so

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Ducellier, 1995; 1998; Balard 1989; 1990; Verlinden, 1970). For instance, the “colonization of the Byzantine Empire” by the Italian city states (Thomson, 1998: 63–96), cannot be separated from the acquisition of raw materials such as alum “which was indispensable for textile production in western Europe” (Verhulst, 1998: 110; Dahl, 1998: 40) and cotton, vital to both the textile and candle industries (Mazzaoui, 1981: 43–44, 102–03). According to Jacoby, the government in the Venetian metropolis “focused on the immigration of specific professional groups, with a clear emphasis on textile craftsmen, in order to promote industrial development” (1994: 558), while in its colonies no industries were allowed that competed with those of Venice (Scammell, 1981: 122). Essentially, the sustenance of major merchant capitalist city-states in Europe and the preservation of their “recurring growth” cannot be separated from the continuous (re)construction of a colonized periphery which served as a source of foodstuffs and raw materials (Jacoby, 1979: I, 45), and a market for the city-states’ industries. Moreover, a close investigation of sugar production on Cyprus and Crete in the fourteenth century, and on the Madeira islands, the Canary Islands, and the Azores in the fifteenth century, reveals this strategy of capital accumulation was copied and transplanted on a much wider scale in the New World after 1500 (Heers, 1981: 12; Solow, 1987; Galloway, 1977; Wartburg, 1995), as was the slave trade—in itself a growing source of profit during the Middle Ages (Verlinden, 1977)—which went hand in hand with it (Thiriet, 1977: XIII, 63–64). Thus, insisting on a fundamental difference between these forms of medieval and modern colonialism as Bartlett (1993: 306–13) does, is not warranted (Lewis, 1978: IX, 37). Last but not least, one should not forget to take into account the practices of colonialism implemented by the city-states vis-a-vis their respective hinterland, equally important for the supply of food and raw materials to the city (Blomquist, 1969: 69; cf. footnote 77).

<sup>58</sup> To what extent is it an understatement to claim that “à la fin du Moyen Âge déjà, s’était établi un rapport pays développés—pays sous-développés entre l’Occident chrétien et les pays orientaux et maghrébins: l’emprise économique a précédé la domination politique” (Ashtor, 1992a: IV, 385)? Bozorgnia states that “soap and especially western textiles were so extensively exported to the Middle East that by the second half of the fourteenth century the textile and soap industries of Syria and Egypt were no longer a match for the manufacturers of Europe” (1998: 85). Cipolla agrees:

the make-up of international trade between East and West seems to point to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as the period when Europe gained the upper hand. . . . In the twelfth century the West still exported to the East mostly raw materials . . . and imported manufactured goods [but] by the fourteenth century the situation had completely changed (1994: 210).

By then, the

expansion of the western textile industries achieved a growing technological edge over their eastern competitors. It was increasingly profitable to invest in the East in the purchase of industrial raw materials intended for western manufacturers, than in finished products. This shift contributed to the gradual decline of the textile industries in Byzantium and the Levant, including Egypt (Jacoby, 1994: 558; cf. Malanima, 1987: 337–51; Smith, 1991: 54).

Bautier concludes: “L’Orient fournissait les épices, mais aussi nombres de matières premières: coton, lin, alun, laine; il recevait en échange des produits manufacturés à la fois coûteux et introduits en grandes quantités: coton filé et toiles, draps de laine, produits de l’industrie métallurgique” (1992: IV, 301). This resulted in “l’enrichissement

modern, that one can see originating only around 1500 AD?<sup>59</sup> This criticism is not only directed at the Wallersteinian version of world-systems analysis, but also to a certain extent at Arrighi (1994) who (himself an Italian being in favor of emphasizing the importance of medieval Italy) takes the story further back to circa 1400 AD.<sup>60</sup> Venice may indeed have been the first “true prototype of the capitalist state,” as Arrighi (1994) points out, but did he not want to date capitalism in Italy prior to 1400 because it did not properly fit the explanatory model of his book? And why look only at the Italian city-states to explain the origins of capitalism?

In conclusion, the concept of commercial capitalism is completely applicable in the late Middle Ages throughout the entire intercity-state system of western Europe (Chaunu, 1969: 311) and historical continuity is undeniable (De Vries & Woude, 1997: 159–65; Hunt & Murray, 1999). As a consequence, I suggest to rethink the temporal predisposition put forward by WSA. But let us now return to the problems invoked by the *spatial* predisposition of WSA: the emergence of capitalism within Europe.

For Wallerstein the transition from feudalism to capitalism takes place on the European continent (1984: 23). This brings us back to whether one should attribute the transition to internal or external transformations. Wallerstein (1974; 1980) focused on the transition within Europe, coinciding with the impact of Europeans upon

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de l'Occident aux dépens de l'Orient, commencé en Syrie, poursuivi à Constantinople et dans tous les comptoirs échelonnés sur les côtes de la mer Noire et de l'Asie Mineure” (Bautier, 1992: 304).

<sup>59</sup> In other words:

Des formes d'investissement que l'on peut qualifier déjà de capitalistes étaient assez largement connues et pratiquées, en milieu rural comme en milieu urbain, sur terre comme sur mer. . . . Il importe de reconnaître que le capitalisme “protestant” et “nordique” des Temps modernes est largement issu des formes de capitalisme bien plus qu'embryonnaires apparues pendant les derniers siècles du Moyen Âge (Contamine et al., 1993: 403–09).

However, I do not deny the qualitative shift which takes place in the sixteenth century when a *global* division of labor takes place and the interstate system replaces the intercity-state system: indeed, city-states were too small for the further ceaseless accumulation of capital on an ever wider scale: Genoa or Venice could colonize and exploit their rural hinterland or their colonies (e.g., Crete which supplied Venice with grain, timber, sugar, wax, wine, and dye [Scammell, 1981: 106]) in a core-periphery relationship, but obviously not the Americas.

<sup>60</sup> So does Rénouard when he looks into “l'essor du capitalisme financier et industriel du XVe siècle” (1949: 197–250).

others, i.e., the “colonies” and their subsequent economic contributions to European nations’ economies in general (1983: 580–83). But other WSA literature attempts to analyze the impact of external factors on Europe prior to the “long” sixteenth century. According to Abu-Lughod, the existing linkages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries constituted a system since “all these units were not only trading with one another and handling the transit trade of others, but had begun to reorganize parts of their internal economies to meet the exigencies of a world market” (1989: 355), making the effects of this interdependence so great that declines in one region contributed to declines elsewhere (1989: 359). By comparing a cluster of interlinked regions with one another and analyzing the common commercial network of production and exchange (1989: 13) and stating that “it would be wrong to view the ‘Rise of the West’ as ... an event whose outcome was attributable exclusively to the internal characteristics of European society” (1989: 361), we can no longer attempt to explain the emergence of capitalism by focusing exclusively on certain transformations within Europe, or rather, within northwestern Europe (Sweezy, 1976; Takahashi, 1976: 74), or internal contradictions within England and France themselves (Dobb, 1976: 59 and Brenner, 1985a; 1985b). Indeed, one of the most valuable contributions of WSA is a coherent holistic perspective, which undermines the nation-state as unit of analysis to explain the emergence of capitalism.<sup>61</sup> But this leaves open the question why capitalist features took place in Europe, that colonized America, and not in, for example, West Africa (Sanderson, 1996: 512).<sup>62</sup> Yet certain specific phenomena within medieval Europe may have stimulated the emergence of capitalism there, and not elsewhere.<sup>63</sup> Al-

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<sup>61</sup> In this perspective, it makes no sense to claim that one single nation-state was “the cradle and nursery of capitalism” (Macfarlane, 1988: 185).

<sup>62</sup> The Eurocentric critique poses the question: “Why speak of transition to capitalism only for Europe? Indeed, why not abandon the notion of transition altogether in favor of a constant evolution of a system in existence for a long while?” (Amin, 1993: 251). Blaut (1993) contends that between 1000 and 1500 the whole world was moving in the direction of capitalism.

<sup>63</sup> Holton notes that “capitalism of a modern kind developed rather in the relatively decentralized West, where political structures were far from monolithic, allowing internal differentiation” (1986: 134). Merrington refers to the “independent growth of urban capital” in the Western city in contrast to the Eastern one: “In China ‘city air’ made nobody free” (1976: 178). Cf. also Bairoch (1989: 227–31). For Hicks “the fact that European civilization has passed through a city-state phase is the principal key to the

though some in WSA have advocated civilizational underpinnings, I want to stress the importance of the European intercity-state system. As in the interstate system later on, constant competition due to the “absence of a unicentric polity, that is, the existence of a multicentric political structure over most its space” (Mandalios, 1996: 283) is applicable in the Middle Ages as well. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of the political nature of the city-state system in direct symbiosis with the existing economic system of merchant capitalism (e.g., Epstein, 1993), disarms the criticism that WSA is “viewing political processes as epiphenomenal in relation to economic causation” (Zolberg, 1981: 255). Let me at this point make it clear to the reader that it is not my contention merely to “de-construct” theoretical perspectives and plead for a mere return to historical archival research in order to come closer to an “Objective Truth” (e.g., Grassby, 1999: 61–73). Historians’ incessant warnings about “imprudent generalizations” (Sosson, 1990: 348) and “pretentious and ill-founded grand hypotheses launched by some sociologists” (Dyer, 1991: 1) due to the latter’s construction of “theories that seem to have been plucked out of the air” (1991: 1) is however not a virtue in itself, for what is history without theory?

## THE INTERCITY-STATE SYSTEM OF THE MIDDLE AGES

I would like to propose an alternative theoretical framework in the remainder of this article. After 1100 AD, features of capitalism become more and more apparent in Europe, the mutual existence of feudalism and capitalism was entirely possible up to ca. 1350, and this within an intercity-state system, before a crisis made one logic (the capitalist one) more dominant over the other (the feudal one). Conceptually, most capitalistic phenomena<sup>64</sup> one finds in the six-

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divergence between the history of Europe and the history of Asia” (1969: 38). In focusing on the European medieval intercity-state system, I do not wish to homogenize the European town since it existed in different forms (Delumeau, 1998). But all over Europe the cities at some point reached a very high degree of autonomy, sometimes independence, as they were ruled by their merchant-elite. This distinguishes them from, for example, Chinese cities (Deng, 1999: 108, 199), or Islamic cities (Udovitch, 1993: 792) where merchants could not acquire significant political or military power.

<sup>64</sup> Wage labor, which is indeed central to capitalism (Wood, 1999: 94), specialization of industries, and a complex division of labor, class struggles, profits from trade derived

teenth century are already apparent in the Middle Ages.<sup>65</sup> My hypothesis is that capitalism was appearing in western Europe from the late twelfth century onward. True, the intercity-state system of the twelfth–fifteenth centuries had more interregional trade characteristics than the dominantly local autarchic productions that characterized Europe prior to the twelfth century or the more international space of flows that would shape the world-economy in the sixteenth century. Yet, one should not forget that “many aspects of the commercial exploitation of property that have been identified for the early sixteenth century had interesting equivalents two centuries earlier, at a time when the volume of commerce was probably greater” (Britnell, 1998: 115).<sup>66</sup> Therefore, I suggest to analyze the qualitative shifts that occurred in Europe in the twelfth century (the shaping of a political intercity-state system within mostly interregional trade networks and the emergence of the capitalist *world-economy* with an interstate system with international—indeed intercontinental—trade networks in the “long” sixteenth century).<sup>67</sup>

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from the fact that entrepreneurs who own the means of production are involved in specialized production and competition, complex financial techniques and the systematic construction of an exploitable periphery to further the ceaseless accumulation of capital, are in my opinion the key variables that constitute a capitalist system.

<sup>65</sup> To quote Mollat: “L’intensité, la fréquence en sont nouvelles [au 16e siècle], non la chose. Progrès quantitatifs certes; mais tonalité médiévale” (1977: I, 45) or Mauro: “dans le domaine des techniques financières, commerciales, industrielles, rien de nouveau après 1500. Ce qui fait le changement c’est leur multiplication” (1988: 758). Cf. also Lopez’s (1952: 320) statements and Jehel’s (1993: 438–40) conclusions in his impressive study on Genoese history.

<sup>66</sup> Therefore, “the assumption that English society was commercializing more rapidly [in the sixteenth century] than during earlier centuries” (Britnell, 1998:115) has to be abandoned. One should not forget either that the rural population of England and France was possibly greater c. 1300 than in the early eighteenth century (Titow, 1961: 218; Delatouche, 1989: 36). The volume of trade prior to the outburst of the plague in the mid-fourteenth century, should not be underestimated, *even when compared to* the early sixteenth century. For instance, scholars may make much of the banking activities of the Medici in the late fifteenth century, but the capital at their disposal—their economic power—was clearly inferior to that of the Peruzzi of the early fourteenth century. This is also reflected by the fact that “their employees numbered well below those of the Peruzzi and were not much more numerous than those of the Acciaivoli, the third ranking bank in the pre-plague period” (Lopez & Miskimin, 1962: 424–25).

<sup>67</sup> Thus, the qualitative shift from an intercity-state system to an interstate system can not be separated from the creation of a capitalist *world-economy*. Within the emerging European nation-state, the merchant class could not only aspire to occupy crucial posts in the bureaucracy and the administration (e.g., Prak, 1992: 192; Galland, 1998), but it could regularly use the (mercantile) state’s strength to support its own colonial and capitalist strategies all over the world, as these practices were rooted in the policies of

Acknowledging that initial commercial specialization in the eleventh century was a feature of regional development (Britnell, 1995: 16, 24) and regional markets, I suggest looking into regional studies (such as Derville [1996], Tebrake [1985], Wachter [1996], and others), which may in turn help us situate and analyze more adequately the emergence of capitalism prior to the “long” sixteenth century, that is, within the period of the Middle Ages (Morimoto, 1994: 17). Drawing on the Brennerian perspective, one can also investigate to what extent class formations change constantly over time and when during the Middle Ages the juridical basis of economic power (within the feudal logic) gradually becomes less significant when capital accumulation becomes the more dominant logic of an increasing number of merchant-entrepreneurs. Another very important and related issue is the correlation between the nobility’s power over its peasants in a certain area on one hand and the location of that area within the geographic, socioeconomic, and geopolitical realities of the early modern European region.<sup>68</sup>

It seems also clear to me that the medieval intercity-state system (twelfth–fifteenth centuries) had its specific political framework:

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medieval city states (e.g., Baratier, 1970: 338; Lopez, 1970: 347). Although city-states can be found elsewhere such as on the littoral of the Indian Ocean during the whole Middle Ages (e.g., Lombard, 1988: 15; Curtin, 1984: 121), it was only in Europe that a transition to an interstate system occurred, in which merchants retained so much political power (cf. also Rodinson, 1970: 32).

<sup>68</sup> It is, for example, quite clear that in thirteenth-century Britain peasants could run away from the land they lived on to escape a nobleman’s oppression. But, as Britnell points out, this implied “exchanging the likelihood of economic security for the certainty of insecurity [since] even if he was sore pressed by the exactions of his lord, custom would normally ensure that a hereditary tenant could feed his family from year to year. To abandon that hereditary right was to commit himself to a life dependent upon wage-earning” (1993: 75). Indeed, quite risky in thirteenth-century England, but much less so in thirteenth-century Flanders: the socioeconomic and geopolitical reality of peasants living in the proximity of the urban core was quite different. The far-reaching division of labor there and the employment of large numbers of skilled and unskilled workers (especially in the textile industries), significantly lowered the risk for peasants as far as the migration to the city (and wage-labor) was concerned. This in turn had an impact on the power of the nobility. Then one can raise the question to what extent the risks and opportunities of resistance of English peasants were altered depending on the hierarchical core-periphery relation between, for instance, England and the Low Countries (in the thirteenth century) or in the fifteenth century, when England’s socioeconomic and geopolitical position within the early modern European region had changed (cf. footnote 81). The same question can be raised regarding the freedom of peasants in eastern Europe and the urban core of the Low Countries in the fourteenth–seventeenth centuries (cf. footnote 31).

local authorities, i.e., the oligarchy—from 1200 AD essentially a commercial capitalist class—(Derville, 1997: 125), created deliberate policies regarding poverty relief to increase a reserve labor force and depress wages.<sup>69</sup> This poverty relief basically kept in check the poor who “were not willing to jeopardize their miserable allowance. In urban revolts, we find among the ringleaders craftsmen in well defined categories who had suffered loss of income or status . . . it was not paupers who led the fray but groups with a certain level of prosperity which they felt was threatened” (Blockmans & Prevenier, 1978: 56–57; cf. also Rotz, 1976). This governmental policy is not surprising since regarding cloth production (the economic backbone of city-states in the Low Countries) the “magistrate worked hand in glove with the entrepreneurs” (Brand, 1992: 17; cf. also Jansen, 1982: 176 or Wee, 1975: 208). The same is true in the Italian city states (Mollat, 1986: 200) or in some German city-states (e.g., Halaga, 1983; Stromer, 1991: 44). In most of Holland, the established elites succeeded in preventing the guilds from becoming powerful pressure groups: in 1313 Count William III even forbade the formation of guilds (Brand, 1992: 25).<sup>70</sup> The very strict wage policies in the Low

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<sup>69</sup> This “social policy was clearly inspired, not by the principle of Christian charity but by those of capitalist enterprise . . . the part played by public poor relief controlled the relative surplus of population in the towns and exercised supervision of the labor-market” (Blockmans & Prevenier, 1978: 56). Cf. also Soly (1975: 584–97).

<sup>70</sup> In the Dutch city of Leiden, according to Brand, drapers

were the only people with sufficient capital to purchase raw materials, pay wages and to run some risks [while] spinning, carding, combing, fulling and dyeing were done mostly by unskilled laborers. . . . First, the producers, descendants of the circle of small independent artisans, managed to climb to the position of merchant and capitalist. Second, some traders began to control production directly and thus became capitalist industrial entrepreneurs. Wealthy artisans focused on the concentration of labor, i.e., they invested in central workshops where laborers were put to work for low wages in order to market the final product at the lowest possible price. But entrepreneurs centralized production and divided it into a broad spectrum of treatments. Since the various stages of production could be done by relatively simple means, and much of the work was done within the family, investments were low. This system had many advantages for the drapers and strengthened their power over the part manufacturers; it was also a result of the differentiation of tasks which resulted in little mutual solidarity among the waged laborers, so that any attempt to revolt could easily be suppressed . . . the entrepreneurs (industrial capitalists working in close cooperation with the urban government) frustrated the emancipation of artisans by way of the putting out system and a repressive wage policy. The artisans’ way to the market was cut off and they were robbed of any possibility of organizing in politically influential guilds (1992: 26–32).

Countries were actually not surprising: it was precisely the fierce competition on the regional and international markets, which made the downward pressuring of wages combined with the increase of production, the only effective way to make profit. This was done by exploiting the fullers (and to a lesser extent weavers) who even in periods of economic upturn could hardly make ends meet (Brand & Stabel, 1995: 203–04, 219; Boone & Brand, 1993).<sup>71</sup> Some thirteenth-century merchants on the continent were capable of concentrating much power in the work place: they bought the raw materials to make cloth, controlled and supervised its fabrication, and preoccupied themselves also with the selling of the finished product on the market place (Haquette, 1997: 882).<sup>72</sup> It should also be emphasized

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Howell (1986) is therefore incorrect to classify the textile industry in Leiden as small commodity production (cf. Brand, 1996: 169–80). The suggestion that small commodity production was supported by some urban elites who preferred a “moral community” (DuPlessis & Howell, 1982: 80) over profits and capitalist relations, hinges upon the erroneous dismissal of subcontracting on one hand and the view that corporatism would somehow be antithetical to merchant capitalism on the other hand (cf. also Lis & Soly, 1997a: 12–17; Derville, 1987: 723; Stromer, 1991: 35–38).

<sup>71</sup> “In the Low Countries, textile guilds had very limited powers in controlling the supply and cost of their inputs, including labor, and thus in setting most wages. Furthermore, their price-setting powers were limited, since they could not prevent competition in their major markets” (Munro, 1990: 44). “The so-called weaver-guild was in reality an association dominated by master weavers who, as the chief industrial entrepreneurs, organized production by a domestic putting-out system. Most of their employees were unprotected, defenseless females whose piece-work wages the weaver-draper controlled without difficulty” (Munro, 1994a: 383–84). A common feature from the thirteenth century was “a steady multiplication and fragmentation of guilds, [which was] deliberately fostered in places (Venice, Siena) by a calculated merchant policy to divide and rule” (Jones, 1997: 250). Not only merchant-entrepreneurs, but also some fourteenth-century German city-states (ruled by the commercial elite) even acted as *verleger*, in employing poor unemployed women as textile workers (Stromer, 1989: 877). Effective resistance within the city-states by the working poor was difficult. According to Geremek “the cost of raw materials and the instability of the market, coupled with increasingly complicated technology demanding specialized skills and an extensive division of labor, often forced the craftsmen to submit and work for the merchants and entrepreneurs who organized production” (1994: 64–65). In addition, one should not forget many workers had no control over the price of primary resources (wool) since it had to be imported from far away (for the case of Flanders, first England, Scotland, and eventually Spain).

<sup>72</sup> This also applied for late fourteenth-century Holland (Kaptein, 1998: 43) and thirteenth century England, where entrepreneurs “bought wool and had it washed and dyed; they gave it out to carders and spinners; they employed weavers and fullers throughout the town, under stringent supervision, at piece-rates fixed by themselves; and they sold the finished cloth at the great fairs of eastern England” (Miller & Hatcher, 1995: 112). In her brilliant study on regional trade in medieval Exeter, Kowaleski clearly points out that “a closer look at the commercial relationship between cloth merchants and cloth

that capitalism not only intensified in the cloth industry of the Low Countries, but also in the Italian city-states, competing in the expanding European market,<sup>73</sup> which in its turn was part of a larger

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workers suggests that the capitalist clothier so common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had begun to emerge by the late fourteenth century in Exeter" (1995: 150). Even small English towns such as Stratford-upon-Avon were quite affected by the international textile trade: for instance, "the monks of Winchcombe Abbey, who held three manors within easy carting distance from Stratford, contracted to sell the wool of their whole estate in the early fourteenth century to Italian merchants" (Dyer, 1997: 56–57). According to Lis & Soly (1994: 372–73), in fourteenth-century Cologne and Florence the "overwhelming majority" of weavers were working directly or indirectly as sub-contractors for wealthy merchant-weavers who "controlled all stages of the production process" (cf. also Favier, 1998:185). Although corporate regulations did exist, they did not hinder the concentration of production through networks of small workshops. In late fourteenth-century England, the practice of dyers working for merchants (or weavers and fullers for local gentry and ecclesiastical institutions), on a contractual and sub-contractual basis, was quite widespread. The resulting "dependence of cloth workers on wages or payments from clients who contracted for their labor [through task work or piece work]" (Kowaleski, 1995: 153) is striking. Actually, the practices of subcontracting were even extended into the realm of warfare by the Italian city-states (France, 1999: 134).

<sup>73</sup> Strengthened by larger profit margins, the greater firms swallowed up the smaller, reducing many petty masters and independent craftsmen to the penniless status of wage-workers, proletarian sottoposti. And as the workforce expanded, their terms of employment hardened. Under the pressure (or pretext) of competition, working hours, including night hours, were stretched to the limits of endurance, wage rates lowered to what in many places by the fourteenth century was near starvation level, and wage earnings depressed by payment in debased coin or by truck in overvalued goods, and by loans and pay advances which tied workers to employers as much as peasants to landlords by rigid bonds of poverty and debt (Jones, 1997: 251; cf. also Ferguson, 1962: 271–72).

In fourteenth-century Paris artisans worked up to sixteen or seventeen hours per day in the summer and around eleven in the winter (Epstein, 1991: 189). In fourteenth-century London the journeymen working in the cloth industry "were used as piece workers (paid by the piece rather than by the day or week)" (Hilton, 1992: 84). Fullers in fourteenth-century Ghent were mostly paid by the piece (Boone & Brand, 1993: 173); so were wool combers and carders in thirteenth-century Genoa (Epstein, 1988b: 120). This of course, made their income unstable since it was subject to economic conjunctures and price fluctuations (Uytven, 1982: 208). In fourteenth-century Florence one can also see the contours of "le salariat de l'époque moderne; ni artisans, ni serfs, ni salariés de l'artisanat: contrôlés par un contremaître, nombreux, massifiés, interchangeables, libres de vendre leurs bras pour un salaire. Les contemporains ne les appelaient pas ouvriers salariés, ils avaient forgé un sobriquet de mépris pour désigner leur condition: Ciompi" (Stella, 1989: 544). The lowest social stratum of the agricultural workforce in the countryside was not better off than the urban proletariat, since landless laborers were also "dependent only on wage income: . . . sawyers were employed on a flat daily-wage and at a piece-rate paid per 'hundred' feet of board sawn" (Clark, 1991: 234). Although most studies focus on the exploitation of urban-based wage laborers, wage labor on the countryside was everything but exceptional: in fourteenth-century England, "the propor-

world economic system (Abu-Lughod, 1989: 356–61). In addition, due to the restructuring of markets and because of a deliberate policy of entrepreneurs, constant reallocations of capital from the urban centers to the countryside occurred (Heers, 1963: 121–24; Saey & Verhoeve, 1993: 107), since the latter “offered more abundant and cheaper part-time agricultural labor, with a lower cost of living, virtually tax-free production, and an escape from specific guild and urban regulations” (Munro, 1994a: 378; cf. also Geremek, 1994: 116).<sup>74</sup> This aspect of capital reallocation (investments in the countryside) which continued unabatedly up to the sixteenth century (e.g., Prevenier, Sosson & Boone, 1992: 164–66) also implied increased investments in technology there: for example, windmills and water mills.<sup>75</sup> In general, this “shift to lower wage zones and the possibility of further intraregional diversification” (Wee, 1993: 205–08) was in direct competition with the urban proletariat (Brand &

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tion of people who obtained most of their living from wage work must have exceeded a third of the whole country, rising to two-thirds in parts of the east” (Dyer, 1989: 213). Only after the Black Death, did wages go up (Gavitt, 1981), although this should not be exaggerated (Perroy, 1964: 244–45).

<sup>74</sup> Holbach, for instance, notes that

labor costs were the main motive for the relatively early transfer of weaving into the countryside. The transplantation of labor intensive tasks to cheaper centers of production intensified in the late Middle Ages [and] jeopardized the economy of the older centers. In drawing the countryside’s resources into the production process, “putting-out” presented (merchant and wealthy artisan) entrepreneurs with considerable competitive advantages. Older cloth towns could lose jobs to the countryside [while] entrepreneurs had more elbow room and could always transfer production to other places in order to evade unpleasant stringent regulation (1993: 238–43).

According to Stabel “average wages in the countryside were only 60 to 70% of those in the towns of the same region” (1997: 131) As van der Wee (1998) points out, there may be a significant correlation between increasing reallocation processes in the Low Countries on one hand and the implementation of a strategy of import-substitution in fourteenth-century England on the other hand, as the island was transformed from a raw producer of woollens for the textile industry of the Low Countries, to a producer of textiles, hereby increasing the competition and the subsequent need to reduce wages within the Low Countries.

<sup>75</sup> These technological innovations and techniques (mechanical fulling displacing labor power where water power was available) became widespread in the early fourteenth century (Carus-Wilson, 1952: 410–11) and their socioeconomic implications can not be underestimated: in fourteenth-century England (population 6 million), for every 400–600 people there was a mill; in fourteenth-century France (population 17.6 million) this was 440 persons per mill (e.g., Langdon, 1997: 284–85 and the cited literature there). According to Pacey, “by 1250–1300, the foundations had already been laid for the later technological ascendancy of Europe” (1978: 39).

Stabel, 1995: 220), which caused the guilds of larger towns such as Brussels and Ypres to organize futile “warlike expeditions to destroy looms in the rural areas around the towns” (Wee, 1993: 209).<sup>76</sup> Only within a radius of a couple of miles, however, were the guilds capable of eliminating competition from their immediate rural surroundings (Thoen & Verhulst, 1986: 54).<sup>77</sup> The expansion of a putting-out (*Verlag*) system beyond the town walls was characteristic for preliminary highly labor intensive tasks like “combing, carding, and wool-spinning” (Holbach, 1993: 235–36). Many urban-centered industries eventually managed to adapt themselves to changing socioeconomic situations (by specializing in higher quality products), but it is likely that in several cities (especially those which had no staple rights for grain) the wages of many unskilled and unorganized workers remained structurally insufficient (Blockmans, 1983: 88). Most urban-based unskilled wage laborers were quite vulnerable: the fear of massive “downsizing *avant la lettre*” and long-term unemployment was a daily reality (Jones, 1997: 253). Not surprisingly, social explosions could be sudden and violent during periods of economic recession. Social discontent in urban centers was focused on the

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<sup>76</sup> In the Low Countries, only Ghent was very successful in controlling its immediate rural hinterland (Thoen, 1992: 56–57; Boone, 1990: 191–97). For an overview of various military expeditions organized by urban militias against competing drapery production in the countryside, cf. Nicholas, (1971: 75–116, 203–21).

<sup>77</sup> The way Ypres and Ghent terrorized their hinterland in the early fourteenth century to protect their monopoly in cloth production resembles Wallerstein’s core-periphery model (Prevenier, 1997: 196). In general, the Italian city-states were the most successful in subjugating and dominating their rural hinterland, the *contado* (e.g., Nicholas, 1997: 87; Perrot, 1983: 93–97; Bowsky, 1970: 225–55; Stabel, 1997: 73; Redon, 1994) although the same can be said about many French cities such as early fourteenth-century Toulouse (Mousnier, 1997: 347–79) or fourteenth-century Bordeaux and the creation of its *banlieue* (Bochaca, 1997; 1998) or other cities with a *vignoblium* as equivalent of a *territorium* (Le Goff, 1998: 238–39). Since the countryside was subordinated to the city-state in a hierarchical division of labor between town and countryside, and the city-state enforced a virtual monopoly position regarding the distribution of goods to the urban and rural population alike (Stabel, 1992: 352), the rural industries were more complementary than competitive with the urban ones. Often undesirable work such as tanning was performed in the countryside because of the “annoying smells and pollution generated by the process” (Kowaleski, 1995: 160). At the same time one should consider to what extent the so-called upper class *buitenpoortelij* or *bourgeoisie foraine*, those who migrated from the city—while retaining their citizenship—to the countryside, strengthened (juridically, socioeconomically, and politically) the control of the city over its surrounding hinterland (Thoen, 1988a: 448–49; 1988b: 480–90; Boone, 1996a: 715–25) and to what extent similarly the “landowning rural membership of an urban guild linked the town with the political life of its hinterland” (Carpenter, 1997: 63).

issue of wages (Epstein 1991a: 116; Prevenier, 1998: 83; Munro, 1979: 111) because of relatively high inflation, but also on abuses such as truck.<sup>78</sup> Occasionally, the protest even took the form of vague socialist and communist aspirations, as when the weavers and fullers of Valenciennes in 1225 deposed the government, despoiled the plutocrats, and declared a commune (Carus-Wilson, 1952: 399).<sup>79</sup> According to Pirenne, virtually a revolutionary climate came into being in the fourteenth century (1939: 226–45). Because of its interconnection through trade, Flemish radical doctrines spread and influenced Watt Tyler's movement in England at the end of the fourteenth century (Pirenne, 1947: 199). Although some of Pirenne's writings were meticulously questioned in the last twenty years,<sup>80</sup> it is hard to deny the significance of social strife related to living and working conditions in the Middle Ages.<sup>81</sup> The revolt of the Ciompi in Florence is probably the most renowned example that revealed

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. Boone & Brand (1993: 184), Yante (1990: 372), Boone, Brand & Prevenier (1993: 73), Rosser (1997: 27) but also Holbach (1993: 229) and the cited literature there.

<sup>79</sup> The most violent turbulence occurred in the towns which were economically advanced: Douai in 1245, Arras in 1253, Genoa in 1258 and 1276, Siena in 1257, Ypres in 1280, Viterbo in 1281, Bologna in 1289, Florence in 1293–95, all located in Flanders and northern Italy (Mackenney, 1987: 2; Pirenne, 1963: 94–109).

<sup>80</sup> E.g., Despy & Verhulst (1986); Verhulst (1989b).

<sup>81</sup> Britnell points out that, as far as medieval England was concerned, one should

reject the supposition that standards of living improved for the whole population between 1180 and 1330 . . . the subdivisions of holdings and competition for employment pushed living standards downwards for the poorest families. Piece rates deteriorated during the period of commercial growth between about 1270 and 1320 [while] the merchant class was larger and wealthier in 1330 than in 1180 (1993: 125–26).

This is precisely what occurs in the capitalist world-economy on a *global scale* today: the standard of living of a minority (located in the core) increases, while the majority is facing more poverty and deprivation in the periphery. This is of course no coincidence. In 1100–1350 parts of England were peripheral to the core of the urban nexus in the Low Countries. Some scholars even define it outright as an economic colony (Rosenberg & Birdzell, 1986: 76; Cazel, 1966: 110). It was only after import substitution took place in the late fourteenth century that textile production for the international market increased while it gradually decreased exporting wool (Gutmann, 1988: 36). The fact that up to the mid-fourteenth century some English regions were peripheral *relative* to the Low Countries, of course does not mean there was no substantial and successful entrepreneurial middle class, as we can find it in eighteenth-century Brazil or twentieth-century Colombia. From the early fifteenth century onwards, the urban core of the Low Countries turned to Spain to extract raw materials (wool) for its industries, with profound implications for the latter's socioeconomic development: in Castile alone 1.5 million sheep have been estimated to produce wool c. 1350, while one century later the number was 2.7 million (Favier, 1996: 181).

quite well the presence of deep social and political grievances (e.g., Hay & Law, 1989: 249–51; Stella, 1993). The popular element in these revolts is undeniable (Mollat & Wolff, 1973: 7). Clearly the cities' dependence on the market for textiles made them vulnerable for social unrest, especially given the “unbending interests of exploitative capitalism” (Mackenney, 1987: 29). For Lestocquoy (1952: 131–37) the social struggles and the “egalitarian social visions” (Howell & Boone, 1996: 322) which emerged in the second half of the thirteenth century, even seem to resemble these of the period 1830–1848.<sup>82</sup> In essence, the medieval working class was a readily available pool of often seasonal extra labor, exploited when seen fit. This reserve labor pool was also increased by child labor: “Journeyman worked in shops that had a number of boys or girls [working] for meals and a place to sleep at night. These children served also to remind the journeymen that they had competition for work, especially in the unskilled trades” (Epstein, 1991a: 120).<sup>83</sup> Needless to say, not all production sites were reallocated to the countryside since urban locations also offered advantages such as better coordination and supervision of specialized labor required for high quality luxury cloth, urban financing (Munro, 1990: 45), and lower transaction costs if the textiles were made in an entrepot like Bruges,<sup>84</sup> which had direct links to the international market. The international competition was very real indeed since it ultimately induced the urban textile centers to shift their production of lower quality bulk goods

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<sup>82</sup> Concerning the problem of the existing social struggle in the medieval ages, Jacques Heers (1963: 315) warns us not to interpret warring party factions with the expression of social classes. Furthermore, classes do not have a permanent reality: thus, like all other social constructs, the emerging “bourgeoisie” should not be treated as a static phenomenon, but as a designation of a class in the process of perpetual re-creation and hence of constant change of form and composition (Wallerstein, 1979: 224, 286). Despite the fact that social strife in the Middle Ages cannot be simplified to class warfare between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as if they were two homogenous entities (Prevenier, 1988: 57), and that workers did not perceive themselves solely in function of “social and economic distinctions” (Rosser, 1997), it is undeniable that the social issue, symbolized by serious tensions between the lower and higher social strata was extremely important (Jordan, 1998: 132–33), since “the dependence of city economies to international markets made their stability sensitive to external disturbances” (Britnell, 1991: 29).

<sup>83</sup> Although many children performed low skilled work in the textile industry, as they were easily exploitable, many women—although this was not absolute—were also relegated to the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. For the complex sexual division of labor in the medieval Low Countries, cf. Howell (1997) and Kowaleski (1995: 153–54).

<sup>84</sup> Bruges produced cloth for export and was as an entrepot/gateway city crucial for the international trade flow into the Flemish urban network (Stabel, 1995, 1997).

towards more exclusive luxury goods for which demand was less elastic, while the countryside often took over the role of producing lower-quality products (e.g., Stabel, 1997: 144; Abraham-Thisse, 1993b: 172–73). However, the question remains to what extent “the international urban network” (Bartlett, 1993: 176) in the fourteenth century was a truly integrated one (Stabel, 1997: 72), although traces of a certain “inter-urban specialization” can already be found (Wee, 1975: 205). Regional economies were certainly interconnected (e.g., Masschaele, 1997; Kowaleski, 1995; Wolff, 1995: 65) and international trade was becoming more important as well,<sup>85</sup> but it remains to be explored *to what degree* the economies of scale and economic differentiation in the Middle Ages have had a considerable impact on uneven regional development in the long run (e.g., Ashtor, 1983: 375–433 or Mokyr, 1990: 44; cf. also the critical tone of Abulafia [1997: 36–39] or Galloway [1977]). Nevertheless, exploring the long-term impact of the intercity-state system on the evolution of western European history is a necessary endeavor. The medieval city with “its division of labor and its impulses on the monetary economy, brought about a fermentation process in the feudal mode of production that destroyed it in the long run” (Le Goff, 1998b: 15). Therefore it has to be understood as a crucial variable in the long-term history of western Europe.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Just one example is the English wool produced for the textile industries in the Low Countries and the Lombard towns.

By c. 1300 lords in the London region were selling approximately half of net demesne production and the fact that by this date money rents exceeded rents in kind suggests that peasants were not backward in selling much of what they produced. To take a single commodity: by the opening of the fourteenth century lords and peasants were directly or indirectly selling abroad the wool of over seven million sheep (Campbell, 1995c: 553).

Even in 1273, when the vogue of [English] wool had hardly begun, 44 Italian merchants in England exported 8000 sacks (about 1325 tons); but this amount was sufficient for the manufacture of only 24,000 pieces of cloths—a very small percentage of the total of Italian production. In the following years the demand for English wool increased (Lopez, 1952: 329); cf. also Lloyd (1977).

It has to be emphasized that the western European city-states did not only have to import their foodstuffs from increasingly great distances, but that the urban industries also often depended on long distance trade which procured them with vital “supplies of wool, cotton, silk, alum and dyestuffs” (Britnell, 1991: 29).

<sup>86</sup> Referring to an intercity-state system, I do not wish to downplay the importance of the countryside in the Middle Ages. After all, most Europeans lived there. Yet “the

## CONCLUSION(S)

The political system of city-states had a crucial impact on the long-term socioeconomic processes which occurred in Europe in that it enabled capitalism to survive, to grow, and ultimately to expand into a capitalist world-economy. Policies and techniques of domination and exploitation which had been implemented and experimented with by the elites within the medieval European city-state system were used by the elites of nation-states during the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries to foster the ceaseless accumulation of capital. Further comparative research between European regions and non-European regions (China, India, Japan) will bring about new insights on how socioeconomic history was profoundly affected by different political systems. One should also highlight the impact of medieval non-Europe on Europe to avoid *Eurocentrist* biases as if medieval development in Europe was nothing but auto-development (e.g., Delatouche, 1989: 26), while at the same time one has to be somewhat *Eurocentric* so one can attempt to pin down certain European specifics<sup>87</sup> which contributed to a qualitative shift on the European continent in the period 1000 AD up to 1500 AD. Of course, this does *not* imply that other regions were less successful in trade, waging war, or achieving technological innovations in the Middle Ages. Nor is it a value judgment about other civilizations. It does mean that only the convergence of *both* internal and external (thus *relational*) developments can provide a sound analytical basis to explain why and how features of capitalism (which subsequently spread out over the world) came into being in certain parts of Europe (or western Asia; it is only for hermeneutic convenience that I maintain the usage of the word Europe). I do not challenge the fact that after 1500 the capitalist logic *intensified* because of the “the great

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modernization of the commercial infrastructure was only possible after the emergence of European cities who created ever more, new and optimal conditions for an increase of productivity and thus allowed successive series of increasing growth” (Wee, 1981: 14). Cities are key to the “international commerce [which] had become an extremely dynamic sector, of a vital importance to the growth of the European economy” (Wee, 1981: 10) so they can be accurately labeled as the “nodes of capitalism” (Rosenberg & Birdzell, 1986: 47). Much of the socioeconomic changes occurring in the countryside were after all “fueled by urban demand [which] stimulated an intensive and highly commercialized agriculture” (Yun, 1994: 116; Menant, 1993: 293).

<sup>87</sup> As a consequence, the historical evolution of Europe cannot be copied in the Third World as some modernization theorists would argue.

maritime discoveries" (Sée, 1928: 41)<sup>88</sup> and the subsequent increased profits from trade and exploitation coming out of non-Europe to Europe and western Asia,<sup>89</sup> nor am I denying the emergence of an interstate system after 1500 or the shifts between different hegemonies (e.g., Arrighi, 1994). How then can one accept general concepts of WSA, and also explain the emergence of capitalism in the Middle Ages?<sup>90</sup> If one accepts that merchant capitalism was already maturing in Europe prior to the "long" sixteenth century, the development of a truly world (encompassing)-system after 1492 is not empirically challenged. What needs to be rethought and explored is the emergence of capitalism in medieval Europe before it expanded into a world capitalist economy: exploitation of wage labor, class struggle, reallocation of capital, the exploitation of a peripheral countryside by an (urban) core, substitution of labor power by technological inventions (e.g., wind mills and water mills) in order to minimize labor costs and further the endless accumulation of capital, the commodification of the material world, and the rationalization of the spiritual world, in short, modern features of contemporary capitalism, found their very roots in the Middle Ages: "as the high Middle Ages unfolded European societies experienced impressive rates of economic growth in terms of real GDP per capita" (Snooks, 1996: 305). And it was precisely within the urban nexus of medieval western Europe that economic "self-sustained growth" was realized

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<sup>88</sup> The link between world accumulation in the sixteenth century and capital accumulation prior to the sixteenth century has been acknowledged by Frank: "La production et la concentration d'un capital marchand fondé sur la production dans les cités italiennes étaient essentielles pour réaliser les voyages de découverte et créer pour la première fois un commerce *mondial* attirant et réalisable" (1977: 32). The question is: how did these features of capitalism appear in medieval (Italian) city-states?

<sup>89</sup> It is clear that after 1492

the combined output of central European and American mines supplied the treasuries of western Europe with large quantities of precious metals. The accumulated resources induced them to increase their commercial activities with the East. In the course of time, the influx of silver, coupled with the high value placed on this specie in the East, enabled Europeans to monopolize the trade of Asiatic countries and subordinate their economies, thereby laying the foundations of European domination and colonialism in the region. This domination ultimately enabled the Europeans to [channel] wealth and resources from every corner of that continent back to Europe (Bozorgnia, 1998: 180).

<sup>90</sup> Without using an extreme form of holism that Andre Gunder Frank's post-1990 research embodies.

(Uytven, 1987: 127).<sup>91</sup> But recurring growth was not an isolated phenomenon located within a city-state and its countryside: the presence of a large number of industrial activities throughout the whole urban nexus from southern England, the Low Countries, parts of France and Germany, and northern Italy, such as mining, textile production, glass making, shipbuilding, etc., enhanced “substantially the demand for both foodstuffs and land” (Hatcher, 1969: 217) and thereby created the possibility for a deepening of inter-regional trade networks.<sup>92</sup> To claim that western Europe managed to create some kind of take-off due to its internal features would be, of course, a gross exaggeration since the growth of its urban economies cannot be properly understood without capturing the vital importance of the international long-distance trade between Europe and non-Europe, as Abu-Lughod (1989) pointed out,<sup>93</sup> nor can one

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<sup>91</sup> For Blockmans the eleventh century is the key moment in history which brings about recurring growth:

Le XIe siècle donna un nouveau visage à l'Europe et mit en branche un dynamique qui ne fut plus interrompue et qui continue à se manifester aujourd'hui à l'échelle mondiale. La croissance à long terme de la production et de la population, ainsi que la formation d'Etats et le développement d'une économie de marché capitaliste, ont pris leurs départ à cette époque. Ces évolutions eurent lieu plus tôt dans certaines régions que dans d'autres, mais de telles régions donnèrent le ton. La stagnation et la régression s'affirmèrent ici et là, mais la dynamique des systèmes resta effective à long terme et l'est encore aujourd'hui (1997: 30).

In his magnum opus on the *longue durée* in Europe, Blockmans presents convincing evidence. What is, however, very problematic is his Eurocentrism: in dealing with ten centuries of European history, Blockmans pays hardly any attention at all to other civilizations or even the issue of colonization, which he legitimizes by stating that “si l'on fait exception du rayonnement de la science arabe en Espagne méridionale et en Sicile durant le Moyen Age, les influences extérieures subies par l'Europe ne sont devenues décisives qu'au XXe siècle” (1997: 30). A quite extreme internalist position of the European miracle in the late 1990's.

<sup>92</sup> The example which Hatcher (1969) gives for medieval ports in the west of England is quite illuminating: precisely because of their integration into a wider regional economy (as is illustrated by their relative diversified economies), they seem to “have weathered the economic storms” (1969: 226) of the postplague period much better.

<sup>93</sup> It is no coincidence that because of the Pax Mongolica over the Eurasian landmass, the market expanded for the western European city-states, and subsequently the division of labor in most of their industries increased c. 1250–1350 (Balard, 1983). Only when trade across Eurasia became more difficult after the disintegration of the Pax Mongolica, did the Europeans consider to revive attempts to circumnavigate the African continent (Richard, 1970: 363). A major problem with Abu-Lughod's (1989) study is the entire omission of Africa—with the notable exception of Egypt—in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. African gold, transported across the Sahara and Morocco, was very important

separate the ceaseless accumulation of capital in the core from the creation of multiple peripheries (colonial or neocolonial overseas territories providing cheap labor, raw materials, and markets). Although “economists generally loathe contemplating the uses of violence in the economic sphere [and] there seems to be a feeling that it cannot be a ‘true’ or ‘fundamental’ basis for any sustained economic gain” (Findlay, 1992: 159) such as recurring growth, the *historical reality of capitalism* proves otherwise.<sup>94</sup>

As I demonstrated, modernization theory, Marxism, “Brennerism,” and WSA all have certain problems with the emergence of capitalism in the medieval period. A recurrent theme is the backwardness of the Middle Ages: an artisan, rigid, stagnant economy with a feudal system in crisis waiting only to be swept away by the modern era/modernity under the cloak of capitalism. Hence often the artificial construction of an easy and misleading dichotomy: a feudal versus a capitalist era (Heers, 1992: 35–36). Unfortunately, the “distinction between medieval and modern times, entrenched in pedagogical tradition since the dawn of formal history teaching,” as Britnell (1998: 113) puts it, is still very much alive. Instead, one should attempt to look at the Middle Ages without prejudices and see to what extent, why, and how embryonic forms and features of capitalism came into being, matured, and were capable of transforming themselves, while expanding and intensifying in the “long”

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for the European economy: since silver was massively transported to the Far East because of a structural trade deficit, gold became “the prime metal for international transactions, whether commercial or political, and indeed for all considerable payments . . . in the last century and a half of the Middle Ages most countries of western Europe had an adequate stock of gold currency, however debased and however diminished their silver currency might be” (Spufford, 1988: 283–87). Cf. also Phillips: “the attraction of North Africa for European merchants arose from such bulky items as high grade merino wool and grain, but above all from gold bullion [which] was of great importance to the development of the medieval European economy” (1998: 140), but, of course, also of great importance for the Islamic economies (Watson, 1967; Bozorgnia, 1998: 83–85, and 121–41). Last but not least, the interest in gold and slaves was crucial to the Portuguese/Genoese efforts of bypassing the Muslim intermediaries and explore Africa in the fifteenth century (Phillips, 1985: 135–36; Favier, 1996: 198–99; Scammell, 1981: 164).

<sup>94</sup> Classical trade theory is utterly divorced from the historical realities of slave ships and silver argosies. The international division of labor did not result from the operation of the law of comparative costs because the world’s trading nations were *never* equal partners. On the contrary, it was *centuries of unequal exchange* that created a “chain of subordination” and led to the division of the planet into developed and underdeveloped regions (Day, 1999: 114. Italics added).

sixteenth century. Last but not least, I hope we can go beyond the limited focus of using the nation-state as the exclusive unit of analysis in order to explain the “transition.” Only then will we be able better to comprehend the complex essential features of the capitalist world-economy in which we live today.

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