

KNOWLEDGE IS FUNNY STUFF

Doug Cocks

I have long been an admirer of Immanuel Wallerstein and the school of macro-historical studies he has led at the State University of New York for many years. Wallerstein, the father of World-Systems Theory, argues that capitalism has been the world's dominant mode of production for the last 500 years and that the capitalist world economy is best seen as being organized into a core region of industrialized nations, a semi-periphery and a large peripheral region of states which provide the core with raw materials produced under archaic labour conditions. Unlike traditional development theory, Wallerstein does not see peripheral states following a path to industrialisation when primed by technology transfers, capital-goods investment and access to world markets. Rather, they tend to remain exploited because, in a sentence, they sell into competitive markets while industrialised nations retain a degree of monopoly for their products. As for geopolitical power, it follows economic power.

But the World-System is not to be seen in static terms. Economies go through waves of prosperity and depression and political-economic power cycles from one *hegemon* to another. For example, Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo destroyed French dominance of continental Europe and ushered in seventy years in which Britain rather than France would become the hegemonic power in the world system, just as, according to Wallerstein, the Dutch had been in middle half of the 17th century.¹

Richard Lee, author of *Knowledge Matters*ⁱ is clearly an acolyte. His is a serious and scholarly book, trying to bring World-Systems thinking to bear on our understanding of the contemporary world. His aim is to make a "contribution to a collective reflection on how we might best approach the times in which we live."

One criticism of World-Systems thinking is that it ignores the role of culture ("whole way of life") and the acquisition of knowledge in explaining social change. Societal change can always be seen as standing in a dialectical relationship to the 'history of ideas.'² For example, when the ideology governing the management of most first world economies lurched from Keynesian interventionism to something much closer to "free market" liberalism in the early 1970s, it triggered cascades of substantive change in the technology-product-job mix, income distributions, the distribution of economic activity around the world and employment conditions.

It is this gap which Lee seeks to address and, while I have great sympathy for this book, I don't think it succeeds; at least not in that particular task. Lee's starting point is his perception that the knowledge production system that is needed to serve the reproduction (ongoing needs) of the economic and geopolitical World-System is in crisis, meaning that it is not providing these sectors with the quality knowledge that, in turbulent and rapidly changing times, they need. True to his World-Systems

¹ Wallerstein, I (1983) The three instances of hegemony in the history of the capitalist world-economy, *International J of Comparative Sociology* XXIV, 1-2, 100-108

² Berger, P and Luckmann, T (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday, New York, p128.

background, Lee sees his primary task as one of identifying the *long durée* trends and cyclical rhythms in the ways we have “come to know” over the past five centuries.

This project, developing a grand history of ideas, is well-ploughed ground of course, but Lee, well-read and thoughtful, makes his own excellent contribution. The “structures of knowledge” which he identifies and follows through time correlate, loosely, with science and the humanities, with social science sitting uneasily in between. Thus, several times, he uses CP Snow’s essay on “The Two Cultures” as an anchor point for his argument.³

Let me say something of how Lee presents the methods, achievements, failures and convergences of his two engines of knowledge production in the post-World War 2 period. Conflict has been pervasive, not only as seen in the “science wars” and the “culture wars,” but in the hostility between practitioners of these epistemologically and ontologically contrasting approaches to knowledge production (vide Snow). Down on the ground, the visceral question is “What should be in the text books?”

Complexity and consilience

But now, beyond the in-fighting, come the ironies. Professional knowledge-producers of all stripes have suffered a loss of legitimacy in recent decades. The public has lost confidence in the ability of scientists, economists, historians and others to provide policy makers with policy proposals that will solve society’s perceived problems. There are all sorts of reasons. For example, Google and similar have ensured that anyone can be an “instant expert;” vested interests have learned how to destroy rational debate.

More fundamentally though, Lee sees *complexity* as the root cause of the crisis in knowledge production. The questions that society wants answered are big and “wicked” and have no “right” answers. At best, the knowledge produced by practitioners in contemporary discipline-based institutions constitutes a few pieces in the jigsaw of policy choice.

Now, it may be that there are both intrinsic and institutional reasons why complex phenomena cannot be usefully modelled for society by existing knowledge-production systems. For example, the behaviour of a complex system as it is pushed through its homeostatic limits is intrinsically unpredictable. Institutionally, there has been an increasing recognition of the need to organise knowledge production around *problems* rather than *disciplines*, especially traditional disciplines. The idea of *system thinking* has a sixty-year history now and is starting to become conventional wisdom and a basis for establishing multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary teams and groups---just as its limits are being increasingly recognised.

The only way of coping with an information explosion is to synthesise little bits into bigger bits and Richard Lee has done us all a service by painting a plausible broad-brush picture of the global dynamics of serious knowledge production since the advent of capitalism. However, unless I have missed it somehow in what is a pretty

³ Snow, CP (1965/1959) *The Two Cultures and a Second Look*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

dense read, he has not been able to reveal the coevolution between geoculture, geopolitics and “geo-economics” in the World-System.

ⁱ Lee, Richard E., *Knowledge Matters: The Structures of Knowledge and the Crisis of the Modern World –System*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane , 2010.