



# The meta-geography of the open society: An Auto-CM ANN approach

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an innovative operationalization of world-system analysis through attributional data, and makes use of an innovative Artificial Neural Network computational tool, the Auto-Contractive Map (AutoCM), to analyze the core-periphery structure of a database including five well-known, publicly available indicators that can jointly be considered an empirical proxy of an open society formulation of Western governmentality: World Competitiveness Index; Freedom of Press Index; Economic Freedom Index; Corruption Perception Index; and UNDP Human Development Index. We find clear evidence of a core-periphery structure in the data, which is largely coherent with a benchmark version obtained through an alternative computational method, the Self-Organizing Map (SOM). Moreover, we find that the resulting meta-geography of the world-system is still shaped by the colonialist geopolitics of the British Commonwealth as the key organizational backbone.

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## 1. Introduction

The economic and socio-political dimensions of development are deeply intertwined at the global level, and making sense of their relationship is a formidable yet unavoidable issue that cuts across a variety of disciplinary fields: geography, economics, sociology and political science among others. Despite the overwhelming amount of literature that contributes on relevant aspects, a basic dialectical tension can be singled out in terms of gradualist vs. hegemonic visions of the economic-social-political global development (Taylor, 2000a). The boundaries between the two positions are blurred, dynamically evolving, and subtly differing across alternative disciplinary vantage points. However, the dialectics revolves around two poles which, in their bare essentiality, can be phrased as follows (Chiot, 2015). One the one hand, there is a line of reasoning that sets as the ‘gold standard’ the developmental trajectory of Western countries, which has led to the formation of open societies characterized by a fully deployed ‘market democracy’, and that represents the model that all other countries could, and should, aspire to replicate, no matter how far they sit

from the benchmark. The wide cultural differences among countries, which are a result of a very complex constellation of factors and of markedly diverse socio-political histories, are not a hindrance here: the ‘market democracy’ model is presented as a *passepoutout* that is potentially compatible with any cultural context, and is the only viable outcome of any accomplished developmental trajectory, albeit the full goal may only be reached in stages. The transitional path moves through a sequence of intermediate stations, gradually approaching the target until the ideal, final ‘catching up’. This is the core of the gradualist vision. On the other hand, the hegemonic vision maintains that the social, political and economic gaps that characterize the global status quo are not due to developmental failures of (the majority of) non-Western countries, but are the intentional consequence of the asymmetry in political, economic and military power through which Western countries maintain their global supremacy, which secures them a considerable positive differential in resourcefulness and well-being – which is, in turn, the basis of the political consensus through which they politically reproduce themselves. By setting their own socio-political-economic model as the gold standard, and by orchestrating a full range of trans-national institutions which are entitled to the monitoring and implementation of its various aspects, hegemonic countries thereby define the rules of the game to which all other countries have to abide by (Agnantopoulos & Lambiri, 2015), securing an ample level of control upon their political and

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economic governance, in exchange of a modest if not detrimental effect on their socio-economic performance, with a consequent stabilization, or even a strengthening, of global inequality (Barnett, 2012). The extant cultural differences between the Western and non-Western worlds, which provide in principle a rich pool of developmental opportunities along different trajectories, are accordingly neutralized by the maintenance, at the global scale, of a cultural space where the mainstream is entirely defined by Western discourses and the local non-Western variations are accommodated as side elements of *coloeur locale* (Martel, 2011).

With the collapse of Socialist regimes after 1989, and with the consequential demise of what appeared at the moment the sole major alternative to the Western developmental model, the gradualist vision seemed to many to have reached its definitive historical probation. Fukuyama's (1992) thesis on the end of history is probably one of the most explicit and ideologically compact formulations of this position. As pointed out by Peet (1993), Fukuyama's argument clearly reaffirms a program of global hegemony under the disguise of a world peace perspective. The collapse of Socialism paved the way to a 'neo-liberal' reformulation of the 'gold standard' where the role of markets as the basic engine of social and economic progress was considerably up-scaled with respect to previous versions which still considerably emphasized the role of the public sphere in both setting the long-term developmental goals and in correcting market failures. From a hegemonic perspective, however, this new formulation is deeply contradictory. Its implicit authoritarianism (Peters, 2007), for instance, clashes with a notion of democracy as a mature form of self-determination of citizenship (Barnett, 2008; Bohman, 2016). After more than two decades, such contradictions have become evident, as the mainstreaming of neoliberal thinking and policing has been matched by a protracted phase of economic turbulence and global political turmoil, and by a concurrent surge of neopopulist forms of nationalism, also in countries with a considerable level of socio-economic development and a solid democratic history, as insightfully anticipated by Dalby (1993). Despite this, regarding democratization and market orientation as the twin pillars of the neoclassical geopolitics (Megoran, 2010) of growth and well-being has become the ideological backbone of the neo-liberal consensus, and of its normative multi-level governance model (Harmes, 2006), marginalizing alternative conceptions (Hursch & Henderson, 2011), and in particular those that radically question the ultimate compatibility between market capitalism and the pursuit of democratic values of inclusion, transparency and social justice (Polanyi, 1944). The promotion of democratic values as a side effect of the market orientation of society (Xing, 2001) has thus been associated to the deployment of civic virtue (Bell & Staeheli, 2001), whereas the defense of global corporate interests as a premise for a societal, market-based prosperity has become an argument for global military policing (Perkins & Neumayer, 2010) that ironically reflects the colonialist rule of the British Empire (Smith, 2006).

It can be argued that the neoliberal vision of a new world-order has a much earlier origin than suggested by conventional readings (Brennertot, 2015), and is in-built in the Western paradigm of globalization. The supposedly 'just' order that such globalization promotes (Venn, 2004) reflects into a normative approach to civil society development that 'industrializes' the most complex, critical aspects of social governance, such as anti-corruption action (Walton, 2016), and conceptualizes social conflict as a failure to adhere to the governmentality standards of neo-liberal open societies (Hart, 2010). This amounts to setting a premium for those social constituencies which can skillfully manipulate such standards to their own advantage, by successfully infiltrating the socio-material networks of power through which such governmentality is deployed (Müller, 2014). Consequently, in circumstances of threat to the privilege of the Western elites, as in the current phase of global

economic instability-cum-socio-political tension, the governmentality of the neo-liberal system prioritizes protection of privilege at the cost of increased social polarization (Brand, 2005; Harvey, 2011), both at a national and international scale (Peck, 2010). The increased targeting of ethnic minorities and of socio-economically weak constituencies in many of the advanced countries of the Western block, in terms of a combination of de facto restrictions to public welfare, social and civilian entitlement, and educational opportunities, and the increased military policing against migrants and refugees from poor countries ravaged by conflicts – whose exacerbation is often also linked to Western interventions – provide a clear exposition of such contradictions (Wacquant, 2009).

The bewildering complexity of the global space of flows that characterizes the current phase of globalized economic and social exchange challenges our ability to decipher the meta-geographical structures they insist upon (Taylor, 2000b). Such meta-geography is hardly understandable as a composition of the global strategies of Westphalian nation-states, and reflects a more articulate geopolitical logic that is best phrased in terms of Agnew's (2005) globalist sovereignty regime (see also Agnew, 2013). On the other hand, the nation-state geographical scale is still appropriate for the analysis of some aspects of globalization processes (Gritsch, 2005) without necessarily falling into Agnew's (1994) 'territorial trap'. The world-system perspective (for recent formulations, see Arrighi, 2005; Chase-Dunn and Hall, 2015; Wallerstein, 2004), due to its holistic view of the forces at work in the shaping of the global order at multiple levels (Chiot, 2011), provides a convenient conceptual background to try and develop a pertinent geopolitical space grammar that translates this idea into a specific analytical toolbox. The natural conceptual reference in this regard is the hegemonic approach, which does not remove the role of economic, political and social power asymmetries in the shaping of the world order, but acknowledges them as the driving force (Dalby, 2005). Moving from the seminal work of Snyder and Kick (1979), world-system analysis has become a natural field of application of social network analysis (Lloyd, Mahutga, & De Leeuw, 2009) as the most convenient way to operationalize the distinction among core, semi-periphery and periphery blocks on which the world-system perspective is built, and which constitutes the engine of the hegemonic dynamic (Straussfogel, 1997). However, drawing a clear line between core and periphery is not always straightforward, and a lively debate has flourished as to whether the distinction should be drawn in discrete, categorical terms or as a continuous range of variation (Mahutga, 2006; Smith & White, 1992). Sophisticated functional classifications have also been proposed (Dezzani, 2001). Another notable aspect in social network analyses of the world-system is the preeminence of relational over attributional data, namely, of data which explicitly encode the relations among different countries with respect to a given organizing variable, vis-a-vis data which measure the intensity of a given attribute for a given country and investigate their inter-country patterns of similarity. Yet another aspect is that the world-system structure co-evolves with other global structures rooted at other geographical scales such as world city networks, which can be significantly aggregated into relatively homogenous blocks by means of Principal Component Analysis (PCA) (Taylor, 2005), and analyzed according to the position-role logic typically adopted by world-system analyses.

In this paper, we develop a characterization of the meta-geography of globalist sovereignty in terms of world-system analysis, which does not rely upon relational data but rather upon attributional ones (see Lloyd, De Leeuw, Mahutga, & Galloway, 2008, for a comparative analysis of other alternative approaches). Moreover, we do not present a dynamic analysis the global world-order in terms of time series of data and structural transition processes (e.g. Dezzani, 2002), but rather consider a *single* year of reference:

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