Social Science History (2026), **50**, 409–434
doi:10.1017/ssh.2026.10126

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2026.10126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Recurrent Mechanisms, Evolving Practices, and the Past-Present Link in World History

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(Received 14 March 2025; revised 20 January 2026; accepted 1 February 2026; first published online 27 March 2026)

Abstract

This article examines the enduring connections between past and present in world history by analyzing recurrent social mechanisms and evolving practices that enact them. While sociology has traditionally emphasized discontinuities and social change, I argue that some foundational mechanisms persist across time and space, yet they appear under varying practices. Drawing from Charles Tilly's framework of mechanisms and repertoires of practices, I identify six recurrent mechanisms in world-historical processes: threat attribution, group identification, subordination, affinity bridging, rebellion, and commodification. Then, I provide a broad historical narrative tracing their gradual emergence, beginning with threat attribution in early hominid evolution, group identification in the Upper Paleolithic, and subordination with the transition to agrarian civilizations. During the Axial Age, institutional entrepreneurs and their followers developed affinity bridging and rebellion, which emerged as a reaction to subordination, first manifesting through religious movements and later through secular political practices. I then combine these mechanisms to briefly discuss further historical processes, including the trajectories of Islam and Christianity, the European conquest of Hispanic America, the rise of modern society (where I discuss the intensification of commodification), and the evolving global order following World War II. This perspective views human history as structured by both continuity and change between the past and the present: while mechanisms persist and recur, they are enacted through historically specific and evolving repertoires of practices.

Keywords: Social mechanisms; practices; repertories; world history; Charles Tilly

Sociology, Heraclitus, and Parmenides

The origins of Greek philosophy saw the opposition between Parmenides and Heraclitus. According to Parmenides, the world was always one and unchanging; change was merely an illusion. On the contrary, Heraclitus held that the world was constantly changing, like a fire or river water (Curd 2020). Sociology has, since its inception, faced its own version of this puzzle: how can we understand the

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contradiction that societies change while also persisting? Heraclitus might say that societies have changed enormously in the last few decades – consider the Soviet collapse, the Internet revolution, climate change, and the legalization of gay marriage in many countries. However, Parmenides would argue that many aspects remain, such as the faith of millions of people in Islam or Christianity, or the structuring of party systems along the left-right axis. How we conceptualize this tension has implications for our understanding of the relationship between past and present. A sociological view rooted in Parmenides would expect the past and the present to be remarkably similar, characterized by strong social inertia and continuities. Conversely, a Heraclitean view would emphasize discontinuities and mutations over time, suggesting that the past would be vastly different from the present.

Implicitly confronted with this dilemma, sociology opted for Heraclitus' solution. In response to the profound changes facing Western Europe during industrialization, sociology emphasized social change and the discontinuities between "traditional" and "modern" societies. As Marx wrote in the Communist Manifesto, "All that is solid melts into air."

Given this initial concern, the classical schemes of sociology often revolved around building models of change between types of societies, such as the transition from community to society in Tönnies, from mechanical to organic solidarity in Durkheim, and from feudalism to capitalism, among others. These theories are implicitly built upon earlier schemes, such as Comte's three stages of human thought development or Spencer's transition from simple to complex societies (see Ritzer and Stepnisky 2020 for a review). This Heraclitean instinct went beyond the foundational figures of sociology. Key twentieth-century social theorists also emphasized shifts between ideal types of societies – for example, from industrial to post-industrial (Touraine 1971) or from modern to post-modern society (Harvey 1989).

Sociology's obsession with constructing general models of social change, and thus emphasizing discontinuities between past and present, has led to a deemphasizing of historical continuities – how the past shapes the present or how some structural elements remain in place with few noticeable modifications. With the focus on the ruptures produced by dazzling technological advances, there was less interest in identifying the recurrence of basic building blocks that operated at different moments in time and geographic spaces and that structurally connected different types or models of societies. Parsons' structural functionalism, in a heroic Parmenidean fashion, identified "functions" that all societies must fulfill to exist, but he was criticized by "Heracliteans" arguing that his theory could not explain social change (Treviño 2020). The powerful criticisms toward structuralism led to a style of theorizing that emphasized "liquidity" and constant change (Bauman 2013), leaving sociology in a standstill when it came to providing models that integrated both views in a consistent manner.

Recurrent mechanisms and evolving repertoires of practices

This article presents a conceptual framework to capture both continuity and change across time and place and applies it briefly to large historical processes. Such a framework should avoid the type of claims that led to the discredit of perspectives like structural functionalism – claims about a constant set of conditions for all

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2026.10126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

societies. By being too general, such approaches fail to recognize substantial differences among societies across time and place. However, it should also avoid the opposite pitfall of assuming that society is just change and novelty.

To avoid both extremes, I turn to the sociology of Charles Tilly, particularly his conceptualization of social mechanisms and repertoires. While Tilly was not the only scholar to employ these concepts, he did so with notable consistency and analytical depth. I further complement Tilly's approach with insights from phenomenological sociology (Berger and Luckmann 1991; Kosselleck 2004; Schutz 1976; Szanto 2020; Torres 2022), which examines how actors reproduce society over time by engaging with their taken-for-granted lifeworlds – yet also subtly transform it through each interaction.

Throughout his career, Tilly mainly employed the concepts of *mechanisms* and *repertoires* to understand contentious politics and the processes of democratization and state-building in a historically bounded context – modern Western Europe (see Castañeda and Schneider 2017 for an overview). However, both concepts can be articulated to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the links between past and present beyond such historical and geographical focus, therefore encompassing larger chunks of human history. Specifically, *my argument is that sociology can make sense of long processes of historical continuity and change by identifying a series of general recurrent mechanisms enacted through evolving, historically changing repertoires of practices*. As phenomenology suggests, individuals adopt practices inherited from their predecessors to construct predictable worlds, and such practices become part of their collective "stock of knowledge" – in Schutz's (1976) terms. Individuals adapt these practices to their specific circumstances based on their typifications of the world and introduce subtle changes that, over time, accumulate and transform the repertoires of practices inherited by their successors (Szanto 2020: 299).

First, let us consider mechanisms. Tilly (2001: 25) defines social mechanisms as "a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations." An example in contentious episodes is "brokerage" – the joining of two or more previously less connected social sites through the intervention of third parties. Mechanisms are recurrent and combine in various ways to produce societal outcomes. In their analysis of contentious episodes, Tilly and coauthors (McAdam et al. 2001) uncovered recurrent and combining mechanisms such as certification, social appropriation, polarization, and resource depletion.

By highlighting repetition and recurrence, mechanisms enable us to discern the continuities between past and present. However, they are less helpful in identifying how people, as sense-making creatures urged to provide meaning to their everyday lives, choose practices to enact these mechanisms – of course, without thinking in these terms. For instance, brokerage is a recurring mechanism in contentious episodes (McAdam et al. 2001), yet it can manifest in diverse ways depending on people's lifeworlds and historical settings. For a labor union leader committed to a project of student–worker alliance, it might make sense to invite students to join a strike, allowing them to interact with workers. Differently, an environmental activist in Nigeria may find it natural to launch a digital campaign that brings together French and Peruvian activists. Thus, brokerage can take diverse forms depending on

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individuals' lived experiences and taken-for-granted assumptions. Mechanisms do not have a life of their own nor do they operate automatically; they become "visible" to analysts only through the practices enacted by creative agents.

Although mechanisms recur across different historical settings, Tilly showed that collective action repertoires – "the ways people act together in pursuit of shared interests" (Tilly 1993: 253) – vary across time and space. For instance, while medieval peasants resisted local lords through food riots or assaults on tax collectors, modern national-level social movements mobilize through mass demonstrations in capital cities (Tilly 1993, 2015). Collective action repertoires are historically contingent: what actors in context A perceive as routine and obvious may be unthinkable or unworkable in context B. The adoption of practices depends on how individuals interpret and navigate their everyday lives. Mechanisms do not "choose" practices – individuals, situated within concrete social contexts, do.

Drawing on Tilly's concept of "repertoires of contention and its pragmatist reformulation by Gold (2022), I introduce the notion of *repertoires of practices*: historically constrained sets or "packages" of interrelated actions for addressing everyday problems (political as in Tilly or not), learned from others and incorporated into individuals' routines, thereby becoming accessible to those who surround or observe them. *Practices*, for pragmatist sociology, are problem-solving actions people take in response to recurrent practical challenges (Gross 2009, 2010). Practices are primarily habitual patterns, occasionally leaning toward improvisation and experimentation (Gold 2022). While shaped by prior individual experiences and collective learning, practices remain flexible and open to transformation – they can be adjusted or reinvented when they no longer fulfill their purpose.

Recently, scholars building on Tilly's work have developed novel conceptualizations of repertoires. Yet, like Tilly, these remain focused on contentious politics and social movement actions. For example, Rossi's (2022) concept of "repertoires of strategies" expands beyond Tilly's emphasis on public and visible contentious actions to include non-contentious and private actions undertaken by movements. To explain tactical innovation in social movements, Gold (2022) draws a parallel between contentious repertoires and jazz improvisation, emphasizing that tactical innovation arises through performative experimentation and dialogue with other actors. Similarly, della Porta and Pavan (2017) introduce the concept of "repertoires of knowledge practices" to describe practices of knowledge production within social movements – knowledge concerning the "collective self," action networks, and the production of political alternatives.

While these conceptualizations remain anchored in Tilly's focus on contentious politics and social movements, my notion of "repertoires of practices" extends across institutional domains and can be applied to non-political spheres of social life – such as the economy, family, religion, and law, among others (Abrutyn 2014). It also travels beyond modern Western societies – the focus of Tilly and his followers.

Two examples may help illustrate how "mechanisms" and "repertoires of practices" can be used in conjunction. Consider religious proselytizing – a mechanism consisting of mobilizing resources to persuade or convert others to one's religion. While proselytizing is an abstract mechanism, "proselytizing repertoires" include historically varied practices like door-to-door preaching in modern cities,

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organizing large festivals with emotional testimonies by converts, or sending missionaries to build schools and indoctrinate conquered peoples, as Europeans did worldwide. Or consider "extraction" – Tilly's general mechanism for state activities to obtain economic and military resources from subject populations (Tilly 1990). "Repertoires of economic extraction" vary historically, from enslaving war captives to imposing medieval corvée labor on peasants to reducing individual incomes through modern payroll tax systems. Mechanisms recur; practices evolve. These are two different concepts rather than elements of the same concept.

By combining recurrent abstract mechanisms and varying repertoires of practices, we achieve a sociological approach that connects past and present. People's practices reflect the workings of mechanisms that emerged long ago and gradually became part of human action repertoires. By adopting and adapting these practices, people make small innovations that accumulate over time and transmit them to the new generations, which may change them as they try to make sense of their worlds and solve everyday problems in new settings (Berger and Luckmann 1991). As practices become ingrained in people's routines, they build a sense of continuity between past experiences and expectations (Kosselleck 2004). As analysts, we can identify abstract mechanisms, but mechanisms do not exist as tangible entities – they are conceptual tools that help us trace connections across time and space. Both mechanisms and practices are anonymous, gradual, and collective constructions rather than creations of singular individuals.

Reconstructing a few basic mechanisms requires revisiting the long-term past and examining diverse world regions – much as the founding figures of sociology did without trepidation. In contrast, current sociology rarely attempts comprehensive historical analyses (Mann 1986 is an obvious exception). Due to pressures for specialization and difficulty accessing distant past data, sociology tends to focus on recent events, often within the researcher's national boundaries (Inglis 2014). This resulted in sociology overlooking the historical genesis and persistence of pervasive abstract social mechanisms, as well as the practice repertoires through which they were enacted.

Six recurring mechanisms

The number of mechanisms in Tilly's and other scholars' works is considerable. I focus on six mechanisms particularly useful for studying "big structures and large processes" (Tilly 1984): threat attribution, group identification, subordination, affinity bridging, commodification, and rebellion. I provide a general account of how these mechanisms emerged historically and how they were enacted across time and place through changing repertoires of practices. This illustrates not only how past and present are connected through recurrent, general mechanisms (the Parmenidean answer), but also how they appear under different guises (the Heraclitean answer).

Across the article, the geographic focus moves from Africa to Eurasia to the Western Hemisphere and the current global order, but the mechanisms I discuss are general enough to – hopefully – shed light on other regions. Specifically, I examine how threat attribution developed gradually throughout hominid evolution. Then I explore how anatomical changes enabled the emergence of group identification during the Upper Paleolithic. Next, I analyze the rise of subordination regimes in

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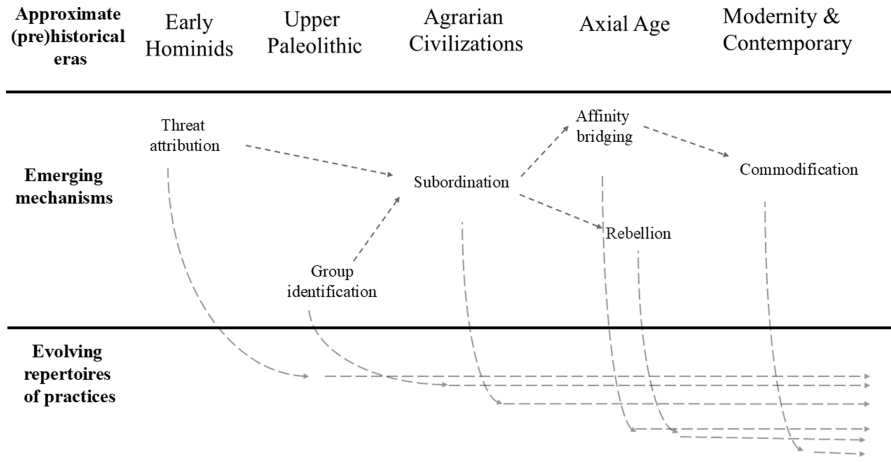


Figure 1. Outline of the historical argument.

agrarian civilizations. Tensions in such regimes gave rise to two new mechanisms: affinity bridging and rebellion. Then I explore the intensification of commodification in modern society. Ultimately, I integrate these recurring mechanisms to illuminate diverse historical processes, including the paradoxical trajectories of Muslims and Christians, the European conquest of the Americas, and the shifting global orders following World War II and the early twenty-first century. Figure 1 summarizes the argument.

Threat attribution and hominid evolution

In their work on contentious politics, McAdam et al. (2001) identified "collective attribution of threat" (threat attribution, in short) as a recurrent mechanism operating across varied contentious episodes. For instance, in 1946, southern US segregationists viewed President Truman's Civil Rights Committee and increased black activism as threats. During the French Revolution, aristocrats perceived the incendiary discourses and actions of revolutionaries as dangerous. Threat attribution is not automatic but depends on people's experiences and (often) implicit assumptions and typifications about what is risky and what is not. It results from people experiencing the world, reading the environment, and noticing alarming signs. Uncertainty leads them to cooperate to take preventive measures to reduce damage, move, or attack.

Threat attribution, however, goes far beyond the contentious episodes studied by McAdam et al. (2001). It emerged as a basic mechanism for the formation of early hominin groups. Six to seven million years ago, climate change in Africa fragmented tropical forests, creating forests mixed with savannas that threatened the resources of tree apes. The last common ancestor of hominids and chimpanzees, adapted to forest life, split into two lineages – hominids and chimpanzees. Bipedal hominids foraged in open grasslands and savannahs, developing new survival tactics such as surveillance systems, larger groups, and division of labor to escape predators (Klein 2002; Godsen 2018; Wenke and Olszewski 2006).

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Threat attribution was also a relevant mechanism in the survival of our Pleistocene human ancestors (between 2.58 million and 12,000 years ago). Human groups likely experienced drastic environmental fluctuations between warm and cold temperatures, which disrupted their daily survival routines, leading some to emigrate. Adaptation to changing environments favored humans with larger brains (Potts 1996), enabling them to develop new threat attribution practices, such as recognizing poisonous plants or distinguishing between safe and risky places to stay overnight (Fagan and Durrani 2020; Wenke and Olszewski 2006).

Sometime around 1.5 million years ago, when climate change caused edible plants to decline and game species to increase in abundance, African humans began forming larger group expeditions to hunt large animals such as mammoths and rhinoceroses. New hunting practices emerged out of the experiences with these large creatures, which had to be rounded up, chased, and killed (Fagan and Durrani 2020; Wenke and Olszeiwski 2006). This required coordination, communication, and the effective attribution of threats to risky situations encountered during the hunt. As human populations gradually increased, it also necessitated the development of warning systems against rival groups competing for the same game.

Group identification in the Upper Paleolithic

Threat attribution was not the only societal mechanism for our ancestors. Another relevant "fossil mechanism" that emerged during the Paleolithic was group identification – an individual's self-concept derived from their membership in a social group, usually accompanied by emotional significance toward it (Tajfel and Turner 1979). While nonhuman animals form herds, packs, and other kin-related groups, the human capacity for group identification is exceedingly flexible and abstract. The brain development of our ancestors enabled anatomically modern humans to develop feelings of group identification with both kin and non-kin and to create boundaries that separate the in-group from others.

Greater cognitive capacity allowed humans to identify with larger social groups. A larger brain enabled individuals to track and map social relationships with as many as 100 to 150 people (Dunbar 1992). It also enhanced imagination, allowing humans to form abstract mental representations of their group that extended beyond those physically present. This capacity made it possible to conceptualize deceased ancestors and hypothetical future descendants, laying the foundation for ancestral cults, which became a central practice for sustaining group identification – a practice advanced much later in Chinese civilization through elaborate genealogies.

The evolution of human emotions from basic to more complex, such as empathy, love, compassion, trust, and group recognition, was facilitated by brain changes in the prefrontal cortex and limbic system (Spikins 2015). These emotions extended to large, intricate groups, underpinning modern feelings like patriotism toward vast populations. Additionally, a larger brain supported social norms that promoted sharing, reciprocity, and cooperation, strengthening group identification (Richerson and Boyd 2008).

During the Upper Paleolithic (50,000–10,000 years ago), humans developed a more sophisticated oral language, aided by the growth of the pharyngeal chamber,

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which enabled nuanced vocalizations. Brain regions linked to speech, such as Broca's and Wernicke's areas, evolved around 100,000 years ago, facilitating full language development (Fagan and Durrani 2020: 82). This advancement allowed Paleolithic humans to communicate emotions, coordinate tasks like hunting, and form larger, more diverse groups, setting them apart from other great apes, which use limited gestures and sounds. Neanderthals likely possessed less effective spoken language (Wenke and Olszewski 2006: 162).

Early *group identification* began in face-to-face quotidian communities as described by Simmons (2014: 532), involving routine interactions among familiar individuals. With the development of larger brains, humans gained the ability for abstraction and to form attachments beyond immediate family. During the Upper Paleolithic in Africa, identification was reinforced through practices such as cave paintings depicting hunting, dancing, rituals, or warfare (Klein 2002; Richerson and Boyd 2008: 143, Wenke and Olszewski 2006: 175). Venus figurines represented sacred figures believed to ensure group protection and abundance. Additional group identification practices included constructing burial sites for ancestors, seen as part of a historical group, and the creation and recitation of myths about origins of families or villages, often around bonfires. Neolithic structures such as Stonehenge and Göbekli Tepe may symbolize group relationships with sacred entities. Together, these practices created social boundaries, strengthening cohesion within groups while excluding outsiders.

By the Upper Paleolithic, the combination of both mechanisms – *threat attribution* and *group identification* – prepared humans to engage in inter-group conflicts. About 12,000 years ago, humans occupied virtually all habitable areas of the planet (Cameron 1993: 21), and the human population had slowly begun to grow. Crowding began to occur between groups with well-defined identification practices in areas with better resources. Competition for hunting territories, water sources, and other goods could end in intergroup conflict and violence (Guilaine and Zammit 2004; Thorpe 2005).

Although Paleolithic groups engaged in violent conflict – raiding, retaliating, or destroying neighboring communities – these confrontations did not lead to subordination or social inequality. Lacking economic surplus and advanced weaponry, no group could dominate another through tribute, slavery, or vassalage. Technological limitations meant all members still had to hunt or gather to survive. Instead, warfare reinforced group identification, sharpened threat attribution, and helped define intergroup boundaries, without producing lasting hierarchies.

Subordination and the birth of civilizations

Paleolithic societies had internal hierarchies, but these were temporary and limited. Band leaders held only situational authority based on generosity, reputation, and legitimacy rather than force or tradition. Equality was maintained through coalitions that resisted dominance by suppressing aggressive or authoritarian individuals (Boehm 2009). Ethnographic parallels suggest that mockery, ostracism, and ridicule were used to curb excessive authority (Johnson and Earle 2000). No one could amass enough coercive power to impose control – authority had to be earned.

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The shift toward inequality and subordination began several thousand years ago. Two key innovations – agricultural surplus and metal weapons – allowed human groups to produce and accumulate material and symbolic resources, establishing subordination relationships within and between communities. About 12,000 years ago, the domestication of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent enabled food storage beyond immediate needs. This made attacking neighboring villages profitable, as it allowed the appropriation of their stored resources, encouraging leaders to launch expeditions to pillage rather than just defend against scarcity (Finley 1970). Likewise, over the last 7,000 years, the development of metal weapons – copper, bronze, and iron – further increased raiding profitability. Groups skilled in the use of weapons could subjugate local populations and neighbors, extracting surpluses through tribute or taxation and establishing political dominance. This process led to the emergence of aristocracies and leisure classes (Veblen 2017). Sargon of Akkad was possibly the first one to employ these practices in Mesopotamia around the mid-third millennium BCE, marking the beginning of the imperial era in human history (Burbank and Cooper 2021).

These two innovations shaped human organization for millennia. Under these conditions, the combination of group identification and threat attribution created a fertile ground for the generalization at the macro-level of a new mechanism of social organization: the extreme subordination of most of the population to an economically, politically, militarily, and ideologically powerful minority (Mann 1986).

Subordination means that one group routinely mobilizes power resources to achieve the obedience and cooperation of another, in ways profitable to the former. "Subordination" captures this notion more effectively than similar terms, such as economic exploitation (Marx) or political domination (Weber). Subordination connotes a hierarchical relationship based on the combined use of many power sources, not only political or economic. It indicates what happened in Eurasia a few millennia ago, when military entrepreneurs from Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and India began building states and empires out of villages and cities. For example, in Mesopotamia, priestly authority began to recede with the emergence of warrior leaders, who received exceptional powers because of the threat conjunctures produced by the incursions of neighboring nomadic peoples (Kramer 2010). When the danger passed, the warrior leader of the moment often retained these attributions, becoming king and passing the position to his descendants, thereby giving rise to dynasties. While the first groups experiencing subordination in each territory may have suffered a disruption in their everyday routines (Schutz 1976), after a few generations, subordination became naturalized and detached from the initial reputation and charisma of the leader.

Subordination did not occur in the abstract, but rather through a gradually evolving repertoire of practices, such as military conquest and pillage, legal codification, forced labor, or population reallocation (as seen in the Assyrian Empire). Through variable combinations of emulation and adaptation (Tilly 1999), these practices crystallized under the great institutional innovation of the time – the state: an ensemble of task-specific organizations based on stable networks of vertical cooperation between the king and specialized employees, paid with fiscal resources or other profit opportunities.

Each ancient state enacted subordination through specific practices tailored to its sociopolitical context (see Benjamin 2015 for a general overview). For instance, the

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Assyrian state, characterized by its strong militarization, imposed subordination through practices such as deportation and intimidation. In contrast, the Chinese state placed greater emphasis on meritocratic procedures for selecting central administrative officials (Burbank and Cooper 2021; Weber 1978). While Mesopotamian kings relied in part on the documentation of economic transactions on clay tablets – facilitating taxation – as a means of subordination, Indian rulers during the Vedic period legitimized subordination through precise religious rituals performed by Brahmin purohits. Across time and place, rulers drew from a broad repertoire of ancient state practices to subordinate their populations.

Interestingly, leaders such as Hammurabi in Mesopotamia did not benefit from the Egyptian model of religious legitimacy, embodied in the divine and immortal figure of the pharaoh. But Hammurabi established legal codes to further institutionalize his authority (Renger 2025). Legal codification crystallized social norms, sanctions, and informal practices into durable legal frameworks, thereby stabilizing interpersonal expectations and reinforcing societal reproduction. Within regimes of subordination, laws served to link past, present, and future, gradually realigning the space of experience with the horizon of expectation (Koselleck 2004) that were disrupted by the emergence of archaic states.

Threat and identification in subordination regimes

The rise of hierarchical societies did not eliminate threat attribution or group identification; instead, these mechanisms evolved through new practices. Regarding *threat attribution*, early agricultural states managed environmental risks crucial for survival by developing systems to monitor rivers and predict floods, such as those in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Vincent 2022). They also created calendars, observed climate patterns, and implemented mitigation strategies amidst ecological uncertainties. In large empires like the Roman one, extensive trade fostered interdependence, but shortages of essential goods posed ongoing threats. These crises prompted expansion via trade or conquest, while densely populated urban centers faced recurrent epidemics and high mortality rates (McNeill 2010).

Emerging geopolitical threats transformed how ancient Eurasian civilizations detected, attributed, and communicated information, prompting innovations in defense coordination. Nomadic incursions – by the Hittites, Gutians, Amorites, Xiongnu, and later the Huns – drove rulers to create surveillance and protection systems, including watchtowers, walls like those of Babylon, espionage networks, and professional armies (Benjamin 2015; Burbank and Cooper 2021). These challenges also advanced diplomacy through alliances, truces, and negotiations, led by newly institutionalized officials such as ambassadors. As an abstract mechanism, threat attribution prompted new practices adapted to novel conditions.

Ancient civilizations also developed new practices of *group identification*. In Paleolithic and Neolithic societies, group identification was confined to local- and kin-based groups. In contrast, rulers of early states developed practices that expanded group belonging to abstract and impersonal levels. Central to this shift were religious innovations. Priests and rulers in early civilizations articulated doctrines centered on deities whose power transcended familial or tribal boundaries. Supreme gods such as Anu in Mesopotamia, Ra in Egypt, Chaac in

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Mesoamerica, and Shangdi in China were believed to govern cosmic order, fertility, warfare, and calamity (Johnston 2004). These universalizing beliefs legitimized rulers' authority to demand collective ritual action in order to appease divine forces and avoid misfortune.

As a result, subjects lacking kinship or ethnic ties to each other came to share religious symbols and practices that fostered a sense of common identity. Emerging religious specialists (Abrutyn 2014) – priests, diviners, and seers – monopolized sacred knowledge, performing elaborate rituals, sacrifices, and public festivals that generated emotional energy and reinforced large-scale group identification (Bellah 2011; Collins 2004). State religions transformed people's lifeworlds. Myths of universal creation redefined their space of experience and established new horizons of expectation (Kosselleck 2004).

Interestingly, group identification and subordination worked in tandem. State religion "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006) were central to reinforcing subordination toward states, to the point that "the deity was identified with the interests of the political group, and the duties toward Him were identical with the all-embracing duties toward the latter" (Simmel 1955: 104). Membership in the state religion facilitated the cooperation among thousands of commoners for joining armies during wartime or working on large public works such as the Mesopotamian or Chinese irrigation works, the Egyptian pyramids, or protective walls. The gods could help humans, but could also punish them in case they were not sufficiently honored.

Still, some societies developed secular group identification practices, exemplified by citizenship in classical Athens and Rome (Scheidel 2019). These practices fostered deep emotional attachment to the *polis* or the republic rather than to divine authorities. This was advantageous to rulers seeking to limit priests' influence – a boundary activation process that was to be repeated many times during the European Middle Ages.

Affinity bridging in the Axial Age

Ancient civilizations were macro-level subordination structures in which a minority concentrated political, economic, ideological, and military power over masses of commoners (Mann 1986). However, they built the conditions for the emergence of a new mechanism that would eventually challenge subordination: "affinity bridging." It combines Simmel's (1955) ideas of rational or voluntary ties with Robert Putnam's concept of bridging social capital (2000).

While subordination relations tie people together through their differences in power resources, affinity bridging links people due to their shared interests, principles, or values. Such affinities may be aesthetic, religious, intellectual, emotional, or artistic. In the essay "The web of group affiliations," Simmel (1955) highlighted how, in certain historical periods, individuals form associations beyond family ties based on shared talents, interests, and occupations, fostering voluntary and "rational" affiliations. Most of Simmel's examples come from medieval and early modern Europe – universities where scholars unite around knowledge, worker guilds, trade leagues, and the "republic of scholars" during the Renaissance. I believe, however, that the mechanism has wider applicability.

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Simmelian ties of intellectual, religious, or aesthetic affinity create what Putnam (2000) calls "bridging social capital" – interpersonal ties connecting individuals across diverse primary social groups (based on kin, locality, or other close-knit "natural" communities). For Putnam, *bonding* social capital strengthens ties within homogeneous groups. However, *bridging* social capital is outward-looking and helps integrate different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Before the great civilizations, affinity was restricted to local sociability groups, being more bonding than bridging – individuals from different groups likely distrusted each other (Diamond 1997). Neolithic communities primarily interacted locally, as travel difficulties limited exchanges to nearby groups. Only a few individuals participated in long-distance trade for select goods (Diamond 2013; Gosden 2018: 68). While village life encouraged stronger social bonds, these affinities largely remained within restricted regional networks.

Subordination regimes, however, created a fertile ground for the increased relevance of affinity bridging as a societal mechanism – an unexpected and perhaps paradoxical outcome of subordination. Two "critical antecedents" (Slater and Simmons 2010) unleashed this.

First, in the most productive agrarian economies, elites utilized surplus resources to sustain a small class of symbolic specialists, including priests, scribes, artists, and philosophers. Freed from material labor and endowed with symbolic power (Bourdieu in Swartz 2013), these specialists legitimized subordination by serving in courts, libraries, and universities – notably in Islamic madrasas. Through artistic, religious, and intellectual work, they shaped ideology, disciplined the masses, and restrained local elites. Such "free-floating resources" (Eisenstadt 2017) were essential to the rise of increasingly global networks of symbolic specialists that underpinned the major civilizations of Eurasia.

Second, the commercial and administrative connections between distant cities in heterogeneous empires, and the appearance of more efficient writing systems (like the Phoenician and then Greek alphabets), provided an infrastructure that allowed symbolic specialists to create "cosmopolitan" networks of exchange (McNeill 1999). Thanks to them, they could disseminate and emulate their counterparts' ideas, techniques, tastes, and discoveries from distant places. These conditions occasionally transcended borders as symbolic elites from diverse groups connected to foster affinities, develop talents, and satisfy curiosity, experiencing broadening lifeworlds. While often supporting hierarchical philosophies like Confucianism, their explorations inadvertently paved the way for challenges to subordination through new religious, political, and moral ideas.

Affinity bridging gained prominence during the Axial Age (eighth–third centuries BCE), when major religious and spiritual movements founded by symbolic elites united diverse populations across Eurasia. Epistemic and moral entrepreneurs like Zoroaster in Persia, the Hebrew prophets in the Middle East, Confucius in China, and the Buddha in India, introduced innovative frameworks based on new conceptions of ethics and justice (Abrutyn 2014; Bellah 2011; Eisenstadt 2012). In some cases, the turbulent times created by wars and imperial expansion justified seeking transcendental meaning (as in Confucius's China or the declining Roman Empire in the time of Jesus Christ). Despite their obvious differences – and

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unresolved disputes about the temporal and geographical scope of the Axial Age (Mullins et al. 2018) – these movements created affinity ties that bridged networks of leaders and followers from widely different cultural, ethnic, and geographic settings. Buddhism originated in India but spread across into China via the Silk Roads; Persian Zoroastrianism influenced Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologies; and Greek philosophy took ideas from Near Eastern and Indian thought, both before and after the conquests of Alexander the Great (McNeill 1999).

Affinity bridging did not emerge in abstraction but depended on varied *repertoires of practices*. Monks, scholars, and philosophers created specific interactional contexts, including inclusive monastic communities, itinerant networks, and philosophical schools. They developed new intellectual and spiritual practices within these spaces, such as writing, studying, and translating sacred texts or philosophical essays; memorizing and reciting poetry; engaging in debates; meditating; undertaking pilgrimages to holy sites – all activities suited to their contexts (Eisenstadt 2012). Followers learned from and emulated the original practices of the masters and sages, but in the process, they adapted these practices to local conditions. For example, in India, where a widespread literacy culture had not developed, memorization and oral transmission were more decisive than in comparatively more literate Mediterranean communities. Varied as they were, these practices became institutionalized and transmitted across generations, providing a vocabulary to enact affinity bridging that reshaped people's everyday routines.

Affinity bridging unexpectedly combined with threat attribution, leveraging advanced symbols and concepts to shape moral and cognitive frameworks for followers. These frames depicted more sophisticated threats, including divine wrath, hell, divine punishments, Final Judgment, and eternal sins (Turchin et al. 2023). Additionally, affinity-bridging altered group identification practices. Historically, rulers aimed to foster identification with the state or deity. In contrast, these movements introduced new forms of belonging, notably through status groups and universal identification, expanding traditional group bonds.

Consider status groups. Symbolic specialists began to feel part of selected and distinguished status groups, where a few initiates shared expert or esoteric knowledge. Mesopotamian scribes, Indian Brahmins, Greek philosophers, Buddha's disciples, Christian apostles, and Chinese scholars all felt part of privileged elites with which they identified, creating status groups that Weber (1978) brilliantly studied.

But more consequentially, these movements also fostered experiences of universal group identification, wherein all individuals could conceive of themselves as belonging to an inclusive human community – transcending tribal, ethnic, class, and, at times, gender divisions. This radical inclusivism represented a revolutionary challenge to the subordination regimes within which these movements arose. It laid the groundwork for the modern conception of universal human rights, later institutionalized in the aftermath of the French Revolution. In doing so, these movements reshaped the collective horizon of expectation in a manner analogous to the transformations analyzed by Koselleck in his account of European modernity (2004).

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Rebellion

As an abstract mechanism, *rebellion* consists of collective actions where a group of individuals experiencing collective feelings of threat, injustice, or opportunity, mobilizes resources to challenge the elites ruling in a subordination regime (Tilly 1978). Rebellion is the obverse of subordination – no rebellion without subordination.

Rebellions are not exclusive of the modern world, let alone the West. Rebellion is an immemorial mechanism practiced by many ancient and medieval peoples against oppressive subordination regimes. Imperial elites knew the risk that conquered states or tribal peoples rebelled. So did the Celts of Queen Boudica, and the Jews, against the Roman Empire in the first century AD – to cite two among innumerable historical examples. Less often, the popular classes organized rebellions against authorities, as did the Roman plebeians against the patricians during the Struggle of the Orders, or Chinese peasants on multiple occasions (Twitchett and Loewe 1986).

However, in pre-modern times, the most consequential rebellions for building ties between past and present were not secular class rebellions but religious ones. Given the overwhelming military superiority of states over civilian populations, the opportunity to challenge subordination often consisted of creating new worldviews with sacred overtones that could move people to action and run risks that would be irrational from a military perspective. Often, the same affinity bridging movements reviewed above also served for rebellion.

Consider early Christianity. Emerging on the margins of the Roman Empire, this small movement was key to challenge traditional subordination structures. However, the forms of resistance it developed would have puzzled Cold War-era rebels. Instead of seizing weapons or launching armed uprisings, early Christians defied Roman authority through nonviolent resistance: refusing to worship the empire's gods and emperors, reinterpreting persecution and martyrdom as moral triumphs, establishing egalitarian communities within a rigidly hierarchical society, and asserting that God's authority superseded that of the emperor (Stark 1996).

While early Christians rebelled against imperial domination, they did so through a radically different repertoire of practices than that deployed by the enslaved gladiator Spartacus. Spartacus and his followers confronted Roman authority through armed revolt and guerrilla warfare (Strauss 2009). Early Christians, by contrast, enacted rebellion through alternative beliefs and ethical principles. They subverted Roman power through spiritual defiance and communal solidarity rather than military resistance.

Thus, both groups enacted the same abstract mechanism of rebellion in the same historical context but implemented it through distinct available practices. In doing so, early Christians helped consolidate a nonviolent repertoire of rebellion that later movements could draw upon: Gandhi reworked it in the context of anti-colonial struggle, and Martin Luther King Jr. subsequently adapted it within the US civil rights movement (Talebi et al. 2025). Practices of rebellion advanced historically in a leapfrog fashion. Later actors selectively reactivated and reworked earlier repertoires under new conditions.

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Common mechanisms among Muslims and Christians

By the end of the first millennium AD, Eurasian peoples – among others worldwide – were well-versed in enacting these five elementary social mechanisms through evolving and context-defined practice repertoires. Their lifeworlds rendered these practices as meaningful tools for navigating everyday experiences and addressing practical concerns. We can understand subsequent macro-historical processes by combining these mechanisms and situating them in their repertoires of practices.

Consider the analogies between Christianity and Islam. Both were born out of the *rebellions* of their prophets against the status quo of their time. Both relied on *group identification* among imagined communities of followers of Jesus Christ and Muhammad – nurtured by strong quotidian communities of local believers. Both also developed through *affinity bridging*: believers adopted a set of principles and ritual practices that made them substantively more like-minded – without, of course, avoiding bitter conflicts and schisms. The combination of group identification and affinity bridging was powerful enough for these religions to surpass local and kin circles and the boundaries of states and empires, which were the strongest power networks of their time (Mann 1986). Both religions reshaped people's lifeworlds and projected a sense of future time – the Day of Judgment– that transcended any existing secular community, polity, or king.

However, paradoxically, both religions somehow renounced their rebel origins and ended up feeding *subordination* regimes. Christianity went from a small dissident sect to becoming the Roman Empire's official religion in the fourth century CE. The initial impulse of state sponsorship with emperors Constantin and Theodosius, and the subsequent action of clever institutional entrepreneurs (Abrutyn 2014), allowed the medieval Christian church to become the most imposing subordination structure of the Middle Ages, concentrating moral authority, land, wealth, peasants, education, and knowledge (Bishop 2001). Likewise, from its inception, Islam – which means "submission" – fused religious authority with political, military, and legal authority. While caliphs were at the top of very hierarchical subordination regimes, the widespread notion of the *umma* (community of believers) generated a symbolic horizontalism that likely eased subordination.

Interestingly, in a Marxian-Hegelian dialectic movement, both subordination regimes eventually contradicted their original teachings, creating a fertile ground for internal *rebellions*. In Islam, the Kharijites emerged as a radical faction, characterized by rebellious practices that included an egalitarian, anti-elitist, and morally rigorous interpretation of the faith (Hagemann and Verkinderen 2020). In Christianity, the Protestant Reformation challenged Rome's subordination. Luther's rebellion practices were well-suited to the literate environment of his time. He challenged Papal authority through his writings and defied ecclesiastical control by translating the Bible into vernacular German, thus reducing the clergy's role as intermediaries between sacred scripture and the laity. These anti-subordination movements developed distinct rebellion practices, shaped by the habits, resources, and opportunities of their time.

Furthermore, the perception of religious *threats* played a crucial role in shaping the development of both Islam and Christianity. With the expansion of Islam into

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Europe in the eighth century CE, mutual perceptions of enmity intensified. This led to military conflicts – culminating in the Crusades – and fueled theological narratives that framed the opposing faith as a false and dangerous religion (Tolan 2002). This religious polarization persisted across centuries, leaving a legacy of conflict that built a bloody bridge between past and present.

Europeans subordinate the New World

The mechanisms discussed so far can be used to provide an account of how Europeans subordinated several world regions during the last five centuries. I briefly comment on just one case – Hispanic America (Restall and Lane 2018, for an overview).

The restrictions imposed by the Ottoman Empire on European trade routes in the fifteenth century prompted Portugal and Spain to capitalize on their geographical position in the Atlantic and explore alternative maritime routes. By that time, European polities were amassing incredible power-enhancing innovations (Mann 1986). The sixteenth-century military revolution provided firearms and military tactics. There were notable advances in maritime techniques. Europeans also carried mortal germs with them (Diamond 1997). Upon their arrival in the New World, the Spanish and Portuguese *conquistadores* strategically forged alliances with discontented indigenous groups, leveraging existing intra-native tensions to undermine dominant local powers. Through such practices, they rapidly established a violent *subordination* regime across the Americas – an interconnected system of military conquest, bureaucratic control, and political domination that facilitated the large-scale extraction of precious metals and the coerced exploitation of indigenous labor.

The subordination of indigenous Americans fostered new practices of *group identification* through the activation of ethnic and cultural boundaries (Tilly 2004). The conquerors established a boundary that divided Europeans, who justified their technological and military superiority through a discourse of civilization, from the "savages" and "pagans" of the conquered territories. Racist ideologies unified European elites, providing them with a legitimizing narrative: the mission to civilize the barbarians (Gotkowitz 2011).

As in previous subordination regimes, the conquerors resorted to religious practices to try to create a common identity under Christianity. Several Catholic religious orders arrived in the Americas to deploy group-identification practices such as baptism, mass conversions, catechism in schools, and the suppression of indigenous religions – all aimed at replacing indigenous identities with loyalty to the Catholic Church.

Yet once again, subordination provided fertile ground for *rebellion* in Hispanic America – although not led by the exploited lower classes. Instead, rebels were the wealthy *criollo* (Creole) elites – white descendants of Europeans born in the Americas. Creoles were a social category created by the very system of subordination established during the conquest. These elites had a lifeworld in tension: while they were privileged and wealthy, they remained an intermediate link in a subordination chain, positioned between the Spanish Crown and the enslaved and indigenous populations. By the eighteenth century, restrictions on trade and access

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to high political offices increasingly fueled their frustration, fostering aggrieved collective identities (Lynch 1986).

To rebel, Creoles resorted to *affinity bridging* – a network of ideological affinities that could channel their discontent into action. This network emerged through the circulation of new ideas about popular sovereignty and self-determination, developed by Enlightenment philosophers and recently put into practice by the French and North American revolutionaries. Many Creole leaders from different territories of Hispanic America traveled to Europe, where they were exposed to these revolutionary ideas, which they later disseminated in the tertulias, salons, and academies of their homelands. These intellectual resources provided them with shared frameworks and objectives, enabling them to coordinate the revolutionary movements that erupted and spread across the continent since 1808.

Rebel practices were shaped by leaders' interpretations of local conditions, grounded in their typifications of the social world. Creole elites, for instance, often promised slave abolition and land redistribution to mobilize popular support (Di Meglio 2013). Such a recruitment practice relied on colonial ethnic hierarchies and elite persuasive authority – a practice unlikely to emerge in more egalitarian rebel communities such as those of early Christianity. Future studies could compare the combinations of mechanisms that fueled modern anti-colonial rebellions across different parts of the world, thus extending the groundbreaking work by McAdam et al. (2001).

The unstoppable commodification of modern society

Commodification is the last mechanism I discuss. While it played a limited role for most of human history, it became central over roughly the last three centuries, fundamentally reshaping the globe - as noted by Marx, Weber, Simmel, and Polanyi among others (see Slater and Tonkiss 2013 for a comprehensive view). Commodification refers to the transformation of goods or services that satisfy human needs or desires into commodities that can be bought and sold on markets. Like other mechanisms, commodification is enacted through historically evolving repertoires of practices that vary across time and place.

Commodities were, strictly speaking, largely nonexistent during the Paleolithic era, which Sahlins (2013) famously characterized as original affluent societies. Exchange was rare and limited to a small number of items circulated through barter or gift-like transactions. For most goods, people directly appropriated resources from nature to satisfy immediate needs, consuming them promptly or sharing them within the family group or band. There were no formalized property rights over nature, and thus no institutionalized possibility of selling land or natural resources to others (Cameron 1993).

During the Neolithic period, commodification remained limited as well. Although certain forms of livestock could be raised for exchange or barter, land, humans, and human labor were predominantly organized as communal resources rather than as alienable property. Long-distance trade existed, but it was restricted to a small set of rare stones, minerals, or prestige goods, which were exchanged across groups rather than being commodified in a systematic market sense (Cameron 1993).

During agrarian civilizations, commodification increased mainly through state promotion rather than autonomous merchant classes. States and empires employed

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new subordination practices, such as imposing production quotas on families and villages, which could be traded with other polities (Benjamin 2015). Slavery, especially the capture of individuals during wars and raids for sale in slave markets, was a deeply exploitative form of commodification, prominent in ancient Greece and Rome (Finley 1999). However, excepting extraordinary settings – like the trans-Saharan trade routes and the Silk Road, and the Swahili Coast – commodification was limited compared to modern capitalism. Peasant communities primarily produced goods for subsistence or state obligations, with few items made for market exchange. Norms rooted in religion, ethics, and community often restricted commodification by prohibiting the buying and selling of certain goods or services, as Weber (2017) observed.

The transformation began around a thousand years ago in medieval Western Europe, with the rise of autonomous commercial cities and, later, the emergence of a feudal labor force that was gradually freed from traditional obligations. As peasants detached from subsistence sources, they were compelled to sell their labor in urban markets, laying the groundwork for capitalism (Bishop 2001). Commercial capitalism expanded in Italian city-states and northern Europe (consider the Hanseatic League) through new commodification practices such as currencies, credit systems, joint ventures, and early banking, broadening market activities before the industrial era (Cameron 1993).

A second critical juncture occurred about three centuries ago with European colonization, which heightened commodification. Through novel subordination practices, regions in Asia, Africa, and the Americas were incorporated into a global capitalist economy centered on production and trade. This system organized territories into core, periphery, and semi-periphery zones, marking a significant expansion of commodification practices worldwide (Wallerstein 2011).

Massive commodification transformed the world. Natural resources, previously managed according to communal or political criteria, came to be increasingly conceived as sources of commodities (Slater and Tonkiss 2013). The Earth, winds, oceans, and underground resources became raw materials to be extracted, produced, and sold – often resulting in environmental degradation. These transformations also disrupted the cultures and lifeworlds of Indigenous populations, many of whom had sustained ecological relationships with their environments for centuries.

Polanyi (2001) observed that massive commodification provoked reactive counter-movements centered on decommodification practices. In Western countries, labor movements from the mid-nineteenth century onward sought to protect certain groups, such as children, from the labor market dynamics by pressuring governments to prohibit child labor, and to mitigate the influence of markets on wages by advocating for minimum wage laws and improved working conditions. After World War II, social policies and welfare states emerged as key practices for decommodifying essential goods and services – such as education and pensions – as well as providing unemployment insurance to buffer against the inability to sell one's labor power (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Over the past decades, other industries have emerged that commodify goods traditionally provided by families or communities. Markets for therapy and self-help, pension funds, healthcare, and eldercare have become institutionalized, shifting these tasks from households to markets (Pelzelmayer 2018). Additionally,

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the entertainment industry, particularly in the audiovisual, film, and television sectors, has expanded as a form of commodification.

The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s further accelerated this trend through commodification practices, including the privatization of public companies, trade liberalization, and the outsourcing of public services such as security, prisons, and military functions. In this century, new commodification practices (e.g., paid dating apps like Tinder) conquered intimate emotions and personal relationships (Illouz 2007); and personal data, collected and sold to marketing firms, feeds "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019). Conversely, some actors have developed new decommodification practices using open-source software, Wikipedia, and Creative Commons. Aiming to detach knowledge and information from market logics, these new repertoires reflect a Polanyian countermovement.

Intertwined mechanisms in the post-war global order

Beyond commodification, the post-World War II global order resulted from a complex interplay of these mechanisms showcased through new, context-specific practices. *Threat attribution* was pivotal in shaping this order, especially after the advent of nuclear weapons, which introduced the unprecedented potential for global mass destruction. Unlike previous existential threats rooted in religious eschatologies, these threats were secular, exemplified by the genocides of World War II, nuclear devastation in Japan, and the Cold War arms race, creating a risk ecology where global annihilation seemed plausible. While global religions had historically extended the horizon of expectation – projecting a distant and often inscrutable future (Koselleck 2004) – the World Wars sharply contracted it, confronting humanity with the prospect of no future at all. In response, nations developed innovative threat management practices, including espionage, high-stakes diplomacy – such as the Moscow-Washington hotline – and proxy wars (Sulick 2014). Along frontlines from the Berlin Wall to Korea's 38th parallel, Afghanistan, and Cuba, superpowers continually employ intelligence and surveillance practices for threat management.

Group identification and *affinity bridging* practices shifted from religion to secular geopolitics after World War II, marking the end of a long historical process. Historically, as we saw above, global religions and philosophies served as the most abstract sources of affinity and identification, capable of bridging diverse peoples worldwide. This began to change with modern social revolutions (Skocpol 1979), where secular political ideologies, rather than religion or philosophy, became the primary sources of global realignment. Divisions among conservatives, liberals, and socialists, along with right, center, and left, structured new identifications among global political identities. These identities manifested in everyday communities such as political parties, labor unions, and social movements, which created tangible social ties within local contexts, making imagined communities meaningful to individuals. This process originated with the English and French revolutions, spreading across Western Europe and the Americas during the nineteenth century, and gradually extended worldwide after the 1917 Russian Communist Revolution (Hobsbawm 1996). Consequently, a Chinese Communist Party member in Zunyi in 1935 could feel connected to global counterparts in Italy, Chile, or South Africa,

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illustrating the expansion of political affinity beyond religious or civilizational boundaries.

The twentieth century also transformed the dialectical relationship between *subordination* and *rebellion*. The devastation of World War II significantly weakened European powers, rendering them unable to maintain their colonial empires. This created new opportunities for independence movements across Asia and Africa, leading to the development of innovative repertoires of *rebellion*. Some of the most influential ones derive from Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha, which is nonviolent resistance to evil. Within this framework, rebellion took the form of fasting, economic boycotts, and acts of civil disobedience, such as the 1930 Salt March (Encyclopedia Britannica 2025b). I already mentioned how Gandhi's practices later inspired the American Civil Rights Movement, which, in turn, influenced the wave of protests in the United States during the 1960s. Meanwhile, Mao Zedong innovated in China by adapting guerrilla warfare tactics to the country's geographic conditions. Perhaps the most intriguing rebellion practices against European colonial powers emerged through Pan-Africanism. This movement refined rebellion through discursive and diplomatic practices to challenge neocolonialism and highlight Africa's cultural unity and identity (Legum 1965).

Subordination among polities did not end with the collapse of colonial rule: it evolved into new subordination practices such as "neocolonialism" (Rahaman et al. 2017). The colonial legacy left newly independent nations in a state of severe poverty and political disorganization, rendering them highly dependent on external support. Their leaders often turned to former colonial powers for financial loans and technical assistance to gain legitimacy and implement developmental policies. These economic dependencies and diplomatic pressures led to governments being docile to Western interests. As frequently seen in Latin America, the latter sometimes reinforced subordination through military interventions and coups. Some countries, like Cameroon, only gained independence under conditions that allowed the former metropolis (France in this case) to control their economy (Taylor 2019).

Subordination within polities evolved with the emergence of the modern nation-state, which took shape across much of Europe during the nineteenth century and was later imposed or emulated elsewhere. As in any subordination regime, a ruling minority concentrated political, economic, and military power, extracting resources from the majority for its own benefit. However, unlike traditional monarchies that maintained power through hereditary succession, this new elite was chosen and replaced periodically through innovative practices of popular sovereignty, including elections and parliamentary representation.

These new practices required persuading the masses, who were still subordinated but now empowered as never before. Since the Napoleonic Wars, ruling elites gained an unprecedented capacity to mobilize the population into larger armies, compel them to attend schools, adopt a single, official language, and integrate them into industrial labor markets. However, this expanded control came at a cost: elites faced increasing pressure to grant concessions in self-government and political representation (Tilly 1990). This transformation was neither linear nor uniform but a gradual and uneven process.

After World War II, most Western nation-states successfully maintained subordination under liberal representative practices. Despite the growing potential for

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mass rebellion, empowered populations broadly accepted capitalist discipline in exchange for welfare benefits (Europe) or the delights of mass consumption (the United States). Since the 1960s, new practices of rebellion developed by labor, feminist, and student movements have challenged specific aspects of subordination, rather than seeking its complete overhaul, as Lenin or Mao did. However, in much of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, liberal nation-states proved less effective in assuring subordination, fueling the rise of both revolutionary movements and military dictatorships (Goodwin 2001). By the 1970s, military dictatorships had become a common mechanism of mass subordination in Latin America, often backed by domestic and international economic elites, as well as conservative political groups (Remmer 2025).

I close with a few comments on the global changes during the first quarter of the twenty-first century. They show both the enduring salience of these general mechanisms and the incessant evolution of their repertoires of practices.

Regarding *threat attribution*, the global risk ecology underwent dramatic changes with the fall of the Soviet Union, reducing the threat of a bipolar nuclear war but raising new threats, such as terrorism, regional conflicts, recent invasions in Ukraine and Palestine, US attacks on Venezuela and Iran, climate change disasters like droughts and floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments adapted to these scenarios by developing new practices of threat attribution that framed immigration, ethnic minorities, and foreign nations as the source of most problems. This reshaped *group identification* through restrictions in national borders and the strengthening of nativistic identities, paradoxically reminiscent of Paleolithic groups.

Digital communication has also generated new arenas for forming imagined communities around "thin *affinities*" – shared interests that are highly specific yet largely detached from broader social or political identities. Since the mid-twentieth century, the global entertainment industry has cultivated abstract communities of taste – consider, for instance, the Beatles' fans worldwide. Moreover, today's digital algorithms exceed any previously imagined capacity for linking otherwise disconnected individuals. They actively connect users through niche interests – photography, vegan cuisine, urban dance, tennis, and countless others – while decoupling these ties from other dimensions of identity.

Because these affinities are often thin and deterritorialized, they fail to produce the broad group identities characteristic of the pre-digital era, grounded in face-to-face, everyday communities shaped by political and religious doctrines. Consequently, group identifications are increasingly decoupled from substantive affinities. They retreat into intimate circles of close friends and family, generating unexpected parallels with the small-scale group identities of pre-state societies shaped by a community logic.

In the twenty-first century, new *subordination* practices emerged to challenge the model of liberal democracy, which was based on mass electorates selecting leaders who wield significant power. The new practices have been driven by actors unaccountable to voters, including major technology corporations, international hacker networks, and transnational organized crime groups. Capitalizing on the evolving technological landscape, these entities have amassed various forms of power – financial, informational, and coercive – while often operating beyond state

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boundaries (Naim 2014). Despite their differences, these unaccountable actors share common advantages: the ability to move fluidly across national borders, evade regulation and taxation, and establish direct connections with individuals – whether in their homes, on their phones or computers, or in public spaces. This capacity to bypass traditional state controls is increasingly undermining the nation-state's subordination regime, including its practices of democratic representation and governance.

As in the past, new subordination practices breed new *rebellion* practices. While states remain the primary targets of collective action, discontented citizens increasingly challenge transnational corporations and global elites (Pleyers 2010), often using the same digital technologies that have empowered nonstate actors (Gerbaudo 2012). Digital activism, decentralized protest movements, and cyber-disruptions have reshaped resistance, directly challenging both corporate and state authority. However, in a familiar dialectical cycle, some states ultimately co-opt cyber-rebels, harnessing their skills to neutralize local dissent and subordinate their own populations, as well as those of other countries.

Conclusions

In this article, I have presented a "recurrent mechanisms, evolving practices" perspective to explore continuities and discontinuities across vast and disparate periods of human history. Undoubtedly, this perspective is open to severe criticism: it groups very different historical events under a few general mechanisms, which may appear arbitrarily chosen; it references concrete practices in passing rather than describing them in depth; the narrative is necessarily broad and superficial; and there is an overrepresentation of Eurasian and Western phenomena.

While acknowledging these shortcomings, I believe this perspective offers five advantages for examining what remains constant and what changes in social life, effectively addressing the Parmenides-Heraclitus dilemma. It avoids the problematic assumptions of structural-functionalism and other structuralist frameworks; it enables meaningful comparisons between past and present, and across world regions – an enterprise increasingly rare in contemporary social sciences; it integrates insights from leading contemporary thinkers such as Tilly, Mann, and Eisenstadt, while drawing on key ideas from classics like Marx and Weber; it connects these authors with sociological phenomenology by asking how mechanisms and practices interact with lifeworlds and agency; and it raises critical questions about how past experiences might shed light in the increasingly volatile and unpredictable current world order.

This perspective could be further refined in many ways. I suggest four: developing a more systematic and comprehensive catalog of mechanisms to study different types of societies across time and space; theorizing and studying empirically the factors driving the emergence and decline of mechanisms; considering varied levels of analysis to differentiate among processes, mechanisms, and submechanisms; and refining the conceptualization of repertoires of practices to assess which kinds of historical studies and evidence provide adequate sources for their analysis.

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Acknowledgments. I thank the editors and reviewers of *Social Science History* for their excellent comments and suggestions and to Felipe Torres for his guidance regarding Koselleck's works.

Financial support. This research was funded by the *Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo* (ANID, Chile) through the COES (COES ANID/FONDAP/1523A0005 and COES ANID/FONDAP/15130009); ANID-Milenio NCS2024_065; and ANID/Fondecyt Regular grant/1240777.

Acknowledgment of AI use. I acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence to improve grammar, clarity, and the flow of writing, as well as to facilitate the search and organization of academic sources (articles and books). The intellectual content, interpretations, and conclusions are my responsibility.

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Cite this article: Somma, Nicolás M. (2026) "Recurrent Mechanisms, Evolving Practices, and the Past-Present Link in World History," *Social Science History* **50**:409–434. doi:10.1017/ssh.2026.10126

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2026.10126 Published online by Cambridge University Press