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Conclusion

World-systems analysis as a knowledge movement

Immanuel Wallerstein

World-systems analysis is more than a perspective; more even than a theory, if it is a theory. It is a knowledge movement, and that is its crucial importance to the further development of the historical social sciences. A knowledge movement is an intellectual social movement. It proposes a reorientation of the ways we organize our understanding of the world. In the case of world-systems analysis, it is based on a rejection of social science categories inherited from the nineteenth century. It proposes to replace these categories with a new historical social science.

Over the millennia, almost any argument or proposition or concept in the historical social sciences has probably been asserted a thousand times. Tracing the history of concepts is an interesting and sometimes valuable exercise in intellectual history. But it is only when a concept or set of concepts is adopted by a large enough minority of persons that it becomes able to affect the ongoing evolution of collective knowledge. When that threshold is reached, one can speak of their being a knowledge movement, which means that there is a group of scholars strong enough numerically and coherent enough organizationally that they can hold their own in the collective debates, and perhaps win the debate over time. Of course, if and when they do win the debate, these concepts constitute a new temporary dominant mode of analysis, subject in its turn to a later challenge by new knowledge movements.

Today’s dominant premises of the historical social sciences were established in a period running approximately from 1850 to 1945. These premises were analyzed in the report of the Gulbenkian Commission, which I presided. (Wallerstein et al., Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996. This report has been translated into 25 languages.) The context within which these premises were adopted was that of the state of the world-system as it was during that period. It was the period of the height of Western domination of the world-system—politically, economically, and culturally. In the thinking of the dominant sector of the world-system, there were radical differences between “the West and the rest.”

This context changed after 1945. And the changed global realities presented various dissonances to the organizational model of the historical social sciences in effect as of 1945. The two principal changes in the global realities after 1945 were (1) the assumption by the United States of the role of hegemonic power, and the particular relationship it established with the USSR, and...
(2) the considerable strength that the traditional antisystemic movements came to show throughout the world-system in the post-1945 period.

The organizational model of the social sciences based on the radical epistemological difference between the West and the rest led to a sharp disciplinary separation of the mode of studying each. There emerged a clear division of academic labor. Research into the past of western societies was reserved to history. Contemporary western societies became the focus of the trio of nomothetic disciplines—economics studying the market, political science studying the state, and sociology studying the civil society. The study of the non-western world was divided between anthropology studying small so-called “tribal” groups and Oriental studies studying large but said-to-be frozen “high” civilizations. This pattern of study had trouble coping with the new post-1945 realities. This led to a debate about whether and in what ways one might adapt the dominant premises to make them more relevant to these new global realities.

In the period running from about 1945 to 1965/70, there were four different attempts to adapt the dominant premises of world social science to these new global realities. Each attempt seemed to make some plausible adjustments to the model, but each eventually demonstrated its limitations.

The first and probably most important attempt was that of modernization theory. Instead of separating the study of the “civilized” world from that of the rest of the world as distinct epistemological sites, modernization theory attempted to historicize the differences between the two sites. It argued that the “developed” world was not ontologically different from the “underdeveloped” world, but simply temporally ahead of it. The underdeveloped countries could “catch up” with the developed countries by learning from the model of more advanced countries and making certain essential changes in their socio-cultural practices.

The second attempt was that of dependency theory, emerging first out of the core-periphery analyses of ECLA under Raúl Prebisch and then elaborated with a more political emphasis by various Latin American and South Asian scholars. Unlike modernization theory, dependency theory had a different time model. As opposed to the idea that all states had started from the same point but some had moved forward faster than others, dependency theorists emphasized the “development of underdevelopment” (to use Gunder Frank’s famous phrase).

What this meant was that from the same starting point, some zones had moved forward to becoming “developed” and others had moved forward in time to becoming “underdeveloped.” It followed that the changes that were essential in order to catch up lay not in the socio-cultural arena but in the political and economic arenas. Only in that way could “underdeveloped” countries break out of their inferior position.

The third attempt was that of Marxist revisionism, which took two forms. The first variety was the consequence of the famous Khrushchev speech to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956. Like modernization theory, the post-1956 Soviet model historicized the difference, and the proposed way to catch up turned out to be surprisingly similar to that advocated by modernization theory, with, however, one crucial difference. The Soviet version suggested that the “advanced” country/model, the one to emulate, was the USSR and not the United States.

A second and possibly more important variety of Marxist revisionism went in another direction. It was launched by the discussion about the “Asiatic mode of production” that took place primarily in Hungary and some western European countries. The Asiatic mode of production was one of Marx’s less happy concepts, and one openly banned by Stalin. Giving renewed credence to this concept had two theoretical consequences. It raised into question the automaticity of the sequence of modes of production that presumably led from primitive Communism to the Communist world of the future. It thereby made possible discussion of the validity of the Enlightenment concept of inevitable, unilinear “progress.”
The second consequence related to the discussion of the “national question.” If some countries (or societies or social formations), but not all, passed through an Asiatic mode of production (or something equivalent), this meant that there was no longer a single path through which all countries passed. This implied that “Marxist” social analyses of particular parts of the world had to be based on the historical particularities of that part of the world. Classical Marxism was essentially nomothetic. This discussion led one in the direction of an idiographic epistemology. It enabled Marxist analysis to move away from trying to fit non-Western history into a sequence derived from the analysis of European thought and institutions.

The fourth attempt was that based on the Braudelian concept of the longue durée and its double emphasis on the central importance of socioeconomic history combined with the minimization of the importance of episodic political history, so-called histoire événementielle. This attack on traditional narrative politico-diplomatic historiography achieved great success in significant parts of the world historical community.

The limitations of each of the first three revisions is that they continued to regard states/societies/social formations as autonomous separate entities following parallel autonomous paths, at different paces, toward a more or less inevitable future. This failed to explain the continuing polarization of different zones of the world-system, a polarization that seemed to be widening rather than narrowing. The limitation of the Braudelian path was that its practitioners tended to confine their work to an analysis of the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, and were largely unready to look either at the present time or at the long itinerary of historical change across the millennia.

What undid the relative successes of all four forms of revisionism was the world-revolution of 1968. To be sure, the primary concern of the students and young people who led the various uprisings that we associate with 1968 was not the structures of knowledge. In their attack on the various structures of authority, they were first of all concerned with what they saw as the nefarious consequences of US hegemony as well as with what many (perhaps most) of them saw as Soviet collusion with the United States. And secondly, they were concerned with the failure of the historic antisystemic movements to carry through on their promised second step in the two-step strategy—first obtain state power, then change the world—adopted by these movements in the late nineteenth century. In effect, they said to these movements: you have achieved (for the most part in the 1950s and 1960s) state power, more or less, but you have definitely not changed the world.

However, as the world revolutionary process went on, more and more of the participants in these uprisings began to feel that the existing modes of organizing knowledge and the categories that were being used were themselves major obstacles to the kinds of transformation they hoped to achieve. They turned their attention to the ways in which the dominant epistemological framework systematically neglected the “forgotten peoples.” They began to demand that the institutions of knowledge refocus their attention on historical and sociological realities.

This new thrust—seen both by its advocates and its opponents as a political thrust—created another change in the realities of the world-system and made it possible for knowledge dissidents in all the disciplines to obtain sufficient support such that they could be said to have become knowledge movements.

World-systems analysis as a knowledge movement was born at this time and within this context. What world-systems analysis tried to do was to take features of each of the four revisionist attempts and, by joining them together, construct a tool that would be able to challenge more fundamentally the previously dominant epistemological premises that had fashioned the so-called disciplines—as intellectual arguments, as organizational apparatuses, and as cultural phenomena.
Like any other knowledge movement, world-systems analysis is not constituted by a disciplined army but rather is a collection of persons who, while they share certain key premises, pursue different emphases within this framework. I shall start by outlining what the combination of arguments that I call world-systems analysis means to me. I shall follow this with some discussion of other variants within the general camp of world-systems analysis.

The key element for me in world-systems analysis is the emphasis on the unit of analysis—a world-system rather than a state/society/social formation. The word “world” is not at all synonymous with global or planetary but is simply meant to refer to a relatively large unit (relatively large in terms of area and population) within which there is an axial division of labor. We are talking of “a” world, not “the” world, as Fernand Braudel would phrase it.

The second key element for me is that “world-systems” (like all systems) are not eternal. They have lives. They come into existence; they pursue their historical itineraries within the framework of the rules that define and govern the system; and they eventually move so far from equilibrium that the system enters into terminal structural crisis. The crucial thing here is the argument that therefore all systems are historical as well as systemic.

The emphasis of modernization theory on the historicization of the difference between core and periphery is fundamental. But so is the notion of Prebisch and the dependistas that the gap between core and periphery is widening rather than closing—a necessary part of explaining the drift from equilibrium over time.

A third crucial element is the refusal of the ontological separation of the imagined arenas so dear to the old dominant set of premises—the political, the economic, and the socio-cultural. For modernization theorists, just as for those who adhered to the dominant set of premises before 1945, the intellectual autonomy of the three arenas was the primary defining feature of what they called modernity. For world-systems analysis, the three so-called arenas are intrinsically linked. They define each other. None of the three is “primary” and all must be analyzed in their mutual defining of each other. Hence, world-systems analysis is inherently unidisciplinary (as opposed to being multi-, inter-, or trans-disciplinary) in terms of the historical social sciences.

Finally, world-systems analysis refuses the nineteenth-century institutionalization of the concept of the two cultures and stands for the overcoming of this false (and historically quite recent) epistemological divide. The idiographic-nomothetic divide between philosophy and science dates only to the second half of the eighteenth century. With the nineteenth-century invention of the “social sciences” as an in-between category, this divide was incorporated into the social sciences as the divide between idiosyncratic history and the three nomothetic social sciences. World-systems analysis asserts that this epistemological divide between history and the nomothetic social sciences was always false, and is now obsolete.

As world-systems analysis gained strength as a knowledge movement, there were versions more or less within the broad camp, which placed different and/or additional emphases on the research and epistemological agenda.

One such version was that put forward by Chris Chase-Dunn, Thomas Hall, and others. This version argued against limiting practical research efforts to that of the “modern world-system” as a “capitalist world-economy”—one that was located for most of its existence in less than the entire globe. Doing so, it was suggested, tended to leave certain major questions undiscussed. One was the analysis of what was happening in modern times in regions defined as outside the axial division of labor of the capitalist world-economy, as well as the complex processes by which external zones were incorporated into the axial division of labor.

Furthermore, this group worried not only that a practice of devoting research efforts primarily, even exclusively, to the capitalist world-economy led to what might be called spatial exclusions of the analysis. It worried also about what might be called long-term temporal exclusions of the
analysis. This group wished to look at two longer-term issues. One was the very long-term historical development of human social interaction. They actively confronted the long-standing issue of historical “evolution”—what “evolved,” and whether evolution was teleological.

In addition, however, this group felt that there was valuable knowledge to be unearthed by systematic comparison of different kinds of historical systems, for which the cases would necessarily have to be drawn from analyses of historical systems of all kinds and in all geographical areas over several thousand years. One might call this comparative historical systems analysis.

A second version of comparative historical systems analysis that nonetheless limited itself to the “modern” historical period (ca. 1500 to the present) was that put forward by Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita, and others. Basically, they proposed to compare the evolution of a China-centered trading system with that which developed as a western Europe-centered trading system over the post-1500 period. They looked at the ways in which the structures of the two systems differed—Arrighi arguing that the differences persist to this day—as well as at the increasing linkages between the two systems over the centuries.

The increasing economic and geopolitical importance of China in the world-system since the 1980s increasingly turned the attention of world scholarship to the historic role of China, and led in particular to complaints about the intellectual neglect of China’s role by pan-European scholars. In the period since then, a relatively large amount of literature has been produced on China and the world in both East Asian and European languages. This literature is diverse and only some of it can be considered to be within the broad framework of world-systems analysis.

Andre Gunder Frank in his post-1990 writings insisted on the concept that only one world-system ever existed (and he therefore spelled it without the hyphen), and he traced its existence back at least some 5000 years. For Frank, China was always the center of this system (except rather briefly in the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century). While Frank used many methodological tools derived from world-systems analysis, he attacked other versions (indeed all other versions) as being Eurocentric, and rejected the very concept of capitalism as a variable to include in the analysis.

Others in this group of China-oriented scholars, such as Kenneth Pomeranz, insisted on a re-analysis of the data comparing western Europe and China in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and sought to show that what he called “the great divergence” occurred only as of the nineteenth century. Pomeranz, however, does not seek to place himself within the family of world-systems analysts, even though his concrete analysis in some ways concords with the Arrighi–Hamashita version. In fact, Pomeranz’s version reinforces the traditional and mainstream social science view that the key shift in modern times was the “industrial revolution” that was considered to have occurred (at least primarily) in England at the cusp of the nineteenth century.

While this argument among world-systems analysts was going on in the period 1970–2010, two things happened, altering the character of world-systems analysis as a knowledge movement. The first was the rise, even triumph, of neoliberal globalization in the world-system. The second was the changed attitude toward world-systems analysis by the major disciplinary organizations and textbooks. Let us consider each in turn.

The stagnation of the world-economy beginning in the 1970s (a Kondratieff B-phase) was combined with the undermining of the dominance of centrist liberalism as a result of the world-revolution of 1968. The combination allowed conservative forces to launch a worldwide attempt to reverse all the political, economic, and cultural changes that had occurred in the 1945–70 period. This political campaign was given the deceptive label of neo-liberalism, and was
incarnated originally in the political success of Mrs. Thatcher’s transformed Conservative Party in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan’s transformed Republican Party in the United States.

The neo-liberals shifted the analytic framework they applied to the world-system from “developmentalism” (which had prevailed in the 1945–70 period) to something they called globalization. They used this new framework to impose, primarily via the US Treasury and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a practical program that came to be called the Washington Consensus. It demanded that all countries that were not “developed” institute a program that gave priority to export-oriented growth, while simultaneously opening their border to foreign direct investment, privatizing state enterprises, reducing their welfare programs, and downsizing their bureaucracies. Geopolitically, this political effort was enormously successful worldwide in a period running roughly from the mid-1970s to circa 1995.

Within the historical social sciences, the response to this new world political reality was to make globalization the principal buzzword of research and publication. One of the results was somewhat paradoxically to make world-systems analysis somewhat more academically respectable. Previously, world-systems analysis either was subject to strong denunciation for its alleged errors or was treated by a scornful refusal to acknowledge its scholarly character. Suddenly, world-systems analysis came to be seen, was even acclaimed, as a forerunner of globalization theory, if in a version that was too politically committed. World-systems analysis (usually referred to as world-system theory) came to be included in writings and textbooks as one alternative theoretical view among a list of alternative theoretical views of globalization.

In fact, however, world-systems analysis was not a forerunner of globalization theory but something quite different. World-systems analysis had never sought to be one among a list of alternative theories. It thought of itself as formulating a rejection of the entire framework of mainstream social science. World-systems analysis called for a drastic reshaping of the intellectual framework of the social sciences, calling for a unidisciplinary reorganization. World-systems analysis combined this view of the historical social sciences with a demand to overcome the epistemological division of “two cultures” and the recreation of a singular epistemological framework for all knowledge.

The triumph of the Washington Consensus came under political challenge in the second half of the 1990s, as the neoliberal promises of universal economic betterment turned out to be a mirage. This increasing disillusionment was reinforced by the successive financial crises that have been going on ever since, and which finally led to serious questioning about the viability of the promised return to universal economic “growth.”

The degree to which the capitalist world-economy can resume its traditional and repeated returns to normal expansion is a matter of some debate even within the camp of world-systems analysts. If one believes, as I do, that the modern world-system is in structural crisis, is therefore bifurcating, and is in the midst of a transition to some new global system, then one question is what happens to world-systems analysis as a knowledge movement in this process.

The strength of world-systems analysis as a knowledge movement is that it has resisted the temptation to define itself too narrowly and dogmatically, while still not allowing itself to be defined so loosely that anything that seems to deal with questions beyond the space of single nations/societies/social formations is deemed within the family. This has been a difficult organizational project, one however that thus far has worked. Indeed, world-systems analysis as a knowledge movement has been relatively successful in spreading its adherents within all the existing major disciplines of the historical social sciences and spreading its organizational base beyond the United States to other parts of the world—notably, but not only, to Latin America, western Europe, and east Asia.
The question for world-systems analysis as a knowledge movement is whether it can continue to play the organizational game the way it has played it up to now. To the degree that a structural transition occurs, success for world-systems analysis might be measured by its disappearance as a knowledge movement as a result of the radical reorganization of the world of knowledge. It is much too early to tell whether this will indeed happen. But if world-systems analysis ends up as being merely one more theoretical position within the social sciences, it will have failed in what it had hoped to accomplish.