Part II

Theory and critiques
3. Theoretical frontiers in world-systems analysis
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Wallerstein’s world-system
Roots and contributions

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Although many of the ideas at the heart of world-systems analysis had been articulated in the 1960s and even prefigured in the World War I era, it was not until the early 1970s that its basic concepts were either first developed or synthesized and then promulgated by Immanuel Wallerstein. He would go on to be its prime mover in an institutional sense and one of its four or five most innovative scholars in an intellectual one. Only by ignoring the contributions of others, amply demonstrated elsewhere in this Handbook, could one overestimate the importance of Wallerstein’s impact. He has been an original thinker, a masterful synthesizer, an intellectual coordinator and collaborator, an effective institution-builder, and a tireless activist. He called what he took the lead in developing “world-systems analysis” or the “world-systems perspective,” and the names have stuck. (See his website, http://www.iwallerstein.com/ for additional details and a complete bibliography.)

Wallerstein’s most significant intellectual contributions have been his reconceptualization of social change as occurring within totalities rather than national societies as units of analysis; his notion of “historical systems,” totalities with both systemic (interactive whole-part relationships) and necessarily self-transforming features; his critique of developmentalism, the idea prevalent inside and outside the academy and in both mainstream and Marxist circles that each society can (and should) change in the direction of “modernity;” his discovery of the “semiperiphery,” a structurally durable zone of world-systems that helps account for their stability and is one source of long-term change; and his four-volume work *The Modern World-System* (1974, 1980, 1989, 2011), which traces and analyzes the emergence, consolidation, globalization, and transformation of the capitalist world-economy from the sixteenth century into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (a fifth volume is projected), and which challenges the long-standing social science dogma dating the crucial transition to capitalist modernity in the eighteenth-century industrial and Atlantic revolutions.

Beyond his scholarly publications, Wallerstein’s impact on world-systems analysis has occurred in many arenas. He has coordinated and collaborated on multiple research and publication projects, including volumes published as part of the so-called “gang of four,” with Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, and Andre Gunder Frank (Amin et al 1982, 1990).

In 1977 he founded and for 28 years oversaw the journal *REVIEW*, one of two major outlets for article publication in the world-systems research community. With Terence Hopkins, he co-authored key works and established both the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton University and a doctoral program that became the most important training ground for
subsequent cohorts of world-systems scholars and teachers. In 1976 he led the founding of the PEWS section of the American Sociological Association, which has held annual spring conferences since 1977, seeking thereby to include scholars from multiple disciplines kept apart by institutional rigidities in universities. Starting in 1999, he began to publish semi-monthly op-ed articles on the Center’s website that receive hundreds of hits and have been widely printed in newspapers around the world, interpreting current political events through the lens of world-systems analysis. During his presidency of the International Sociological Association (1994–98) and through his chairing a Gulbenkian Foundation commission on reforming the social sciences, he vigorously advocated reorienting them toward macrohistorical “unidisciplinarity.” Most recently he has been an active participant in the World Social Forum, the global “movement of movements” whose coming together he had anticipated when attempting to understand the long-term institutionalization of twentieth-century revolutionary movements as they were running out of system-transforming steam.

Wallerstein’s intellectual formation depended crucially on his New York City upbringing and his formal education there at Columbia University (BA 1951, MA 1954, PhD 1959) in its heyday as a center of cosmopolitanism and critique. He continued as a young professor at Columbia until 1971, thus experiencing the city’s rise to global centrality as well as the beginnings of its demise (see Goldfrank 2000; cf Bergesen 2000). Wallerstein’s most important Columbia inspiration was probably C. Wright Mills, echoes of whose attacks on what he called “Grand Theory” and “Abstracted Empiricism” can be heard in Wallerstein’s repeated efforts to overcome the social science divide between the nomothetic (universalizing theories) and the idiographic (individualizing description). Having led to an MA essay on McCarthyism, Wallerstein’s formation then took great leaps forward when he shifted his primary scholarly focus to West Africa, particularly the francophone zones. His route there went via Paris, where Georges Balandier taught him how to study colonial societies as wholes, rather than focusing on tribes as units of analysis; where he came to know at first hand Third World radicalism, especially in the writings and person of Frantz Fanon; and where later he encountered Fernand Braudel and the works of the ANNALES school which were to prove critical in his understanding of capitalism. Wallerstein would eventually and for many years teach one semester at the University of Paris, one of fourteen foreign institutions to award him an honorary doctorate. New York, then Paris, then West Africa: it was in the Ivory Coast and Ghana, where he carried out his doctoral research, and then more broadly around the continent in preparation of his first major book (Wallerstein 1961), that he worked out an explanation for the rise of the indigenous socio-political forces that would lead to the demise of colonial societies. He would later come to understand that the “whole” of each colonial society was but a part of a larger totality with crucial causal consequences, a world context of US hegemony and Soviet challenge and of continuing asymmetrical interdependence between the first world and the third. It is worth emphasizing, however, that alone among the panoply of notable US macrosociologists who in the 1960s and 1970s revived the study of long-term historical change, Wallerstein benefited from an intellectual formation that included a deep immersion in imperialist realities as experienced from below.

Elements of four major intellectual traditions are woven together in Wallerstein’s world-systems synthesis, all of them running counter to the hegemonic Anglo-American sociological emphases on universalist liberalism, scientistic positivism and unidirectional modernizationism. The older pair of these traditions, Marxism and German historical/institutional economics, date from the nineteenth century but saw major advances in the twentieth; the younger two, Annales historiography and the dependency school, were twentieth-century creations.

From Marxism comes much of the bedrock that lies beneath the conceptual edifice, at the most general level and in the interpretation of capitalism. Generally, socioeconomic totalities are the
most important units of analysis; they are fundamentally conflict-ridden and historically changing; they have systemic yet contradictory properties. Specifically, accumulation and its attendant competitions and class struggles are central to capitalist structure and change, including the attempt to anticipate and encourage class groupings that may be the bearers of movement toward world socialism. Further, Wallerstein borrows from Lenin the importance of labor aristocracies and of inter-imperialist rivalry, and from Mao Ze-Dong the insistence that class struggles continue after soi-disant socialist revolutions. He often drew on the empirical work of European Marxist historians. But Wallerstein also broke from conventional Marxism on one hugely crucial point that it shares with the modernization paradigm when he rejected the idea that each national society goes through a series of stages.

He also borrowed heavily from the Germanic institutional tradition. The critical concepts here include, from Max Weber, modern interstate conflicts as the political framework of capitalism and (ethno-national) status-group struggles as central to all politics; from Joseph Schumpeter, the causal importance of economic cycles and the metaphor of creative destruction, including the long-term impermanence of capitalism itself; and perhaps most important, from Karl Polanyi, the model of three types of socioeconomic totality, reciprocal, redistributive and market, which Wallerstein renamed mini-systems, world-empires and world-economies. This tradition contributed conceptually, but Wallerstein rejected its characteristic and sometimes fatalistic acceptance of inequalities.

A third major source of conceptual inspiration was the ANNALES school, especially the work of its second-generation leader, Fernand Braudel, whose name graces the research center Wallerstein and Hopkins established at Binghamton. It was Braudel who centered his focus on long-term (enduring) deep historical structures rather than on either epiphenomenal and transitory events or on alleged universals such as “economic man.” It was Braudel who invented the use of the term “world” in the technical sense of a socioeconomic space with multiple cultures and polities (e.g., “the Mediterranean”). It was the Annalistes who insisted on the importance of rural zones and their peasantries as the underpinning of modern economies, and Braudel especially who homed in on what he called “the long sixteenth century” as the critical transitional period. The Annalistes also provided a large share of the empirical materials which Wallerstein would rely on for documenting his theses in volume one of The Modern World-System (1974). But Wallerstein would emphasize the importance of politics and the state much more strongly than the typical Annaliste.

The final ingredient in the world-systems synthesis came from the newest of these traditions, what came to be known as “dependency theory” in the 1960s. This approach directly confronted both liberal (modernizationist) and Marxist developmentalism by positing different and unequal trajectories of growth and change in the imperialist centers on the one hand and in the dominated peripheries on the other. Where liberals called for technology transfer and foreign capital (and Marxists called for bourgeois revolutions) to jump-start “development” in the Third World, this school called for “delinking” from exploitative center-periphery relationships and for “self-centering” growth. Wallerstein agreed with the diagnosis but found the proposed cure extremely unlikely, perhaps persuaded in part by Frantz Fanon’s trenchant critique of the typical neo-colonial governing elite in Third World countries. In any event, the two most extreme attempts at delinking, in Burma (now Myanmar) from the military on the right and in Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge on the left, proved disastrous failures and inspired no imitators. Wallerstein would also depart from his dependentista predecessors in focusing on dominated countries as integral parts of a single systemic whole, rather than as separate and separable units of analysis.

What are Wallerstein’s totalities? Historically there have been three types—mini-systems, world-empires and world-economies—each bounded by the basic provision of daily necessities,
including protection. Interactions between totalities such as luxury trade and political or cultural borrowing may have causal effects but these are defined as secondary to the slow transformative processes internal to each totality. (Wallerstein also proposes a fourth potential type, in a possible but by no means assured future: a socialist world government.) Empirically, over the course of human history, all mini-systems have been absorbed into world-empires or world-economies and by the twentieth century, all previously existing systems had been absorbed into the global capitalist world-economy, pace the claim of ideologues in the USSR to have created a separate and rival “socialist” world-system. The principal difference between a world-empire and a world-economy is that the former is ruled from a single political center while the latter involves multiple states competing for primacy or dominance but never attaining it for more than the short run. Pre-modern world-economies, such as that in the ancient Mediterranean, typically became world-empires, whereas the secret of both the durability and the dynamism of the capitalist world-economy has been its resistance to conquest by any single power despite occasional 30-to-50-year periods of one or another state’s system-wide hegemony.

Although he elaborated a world-historical typology of wholes, Wallerstein has devoted almost all his intellectual efforts to studying the capitalist world-economy, with some attention to its possible future transitions. His tripartite division of the world-economy into core, semiperipheral and peripheral zones is probably his best-known contribution, with his and Hopkins’s (1986, see also Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994) ancillary concept of commodity chains crossing zonal boundaries inspiring an impressive amount of research. At any given point in capitalist time, core zones feature relatively capital-intensive and monopolized production processes, relatively free and well-paid workers, and relatively strong states both internally and in international politics. Peripheral zones reverse this picture, in part serving as the “countryside” of the world exploited by the core. Monopolization of scientific and engineering institutions enables core zones to develop new products along with new armaments, tending to reinforce existing inequalities once they are established by shifting the location of competitive and hence less profitable processes to semiperipheral and peripheral zones. The history of textiles is exemplary in this regard: a core industry from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, textile factories began migrating to the semiperiphery in the twentieth century and are now becoming important in the periphery as well. Meanwhile, the incorporation of new, mostly peripheral zones into the capitalist world-economy during its long centuries of expansion from its sixteenth-century origins in Europe and parts of the Americas has made it possible for originally semiperipheral zones like Sweden to rise to the core and originally peripheral ones like Brazil to rise to the semiperiphery.

Identifying the semiperiphery as having major enduring structural importance has proved to be among Wallerstein’s most controversial contributions because it challenged all previously existing schools of macrosociological analysis. Modernizationists treated intermediate countries as “transitional” between tradition and modernity. Marxists treated them as semi-feudal or semi-capitalist or sub-imperialist. Dependency theorists treated them as blocked by technological reliance on the core, and the more Manichaean among them as if they were not significantly different from the periphery. In Wallerstein’s view, semiperipheral parts of the modern world-system have existed from its origins in the sixteenth century and have continued to be reproduced and newly created ever since. Like the middle class in Aristotle’s political sociology, the semiperiphery stabilizes the system. Politically, it often contains peripheral discontent while acting as client or proxy for one or more core states. Economically, it supplies low-skill, low-wage products to the core and/or intermediate-level products to the periphery. In times of profit squeeze in the core, it is a major site of industrial relocation and capital investment; in times of boom in the core, it is a major source of labor migration, both educated (“brain drain”) and unskilled. Undeniably, the concept has many fuzzy aspects, for example, the geopolitical weight of large semiperipheral zones like Russia;
however, it has spawned a large volume of interesting scholarship and is likely to be regarded as an
enduring idea as well as a non-transitory reality (see, e.g., Martin 1990).

On the political dimension of the modern world-system, Wallerstein took Max Weber’s understand-
ing of interstate competition as one of capitalism’s necessary foundations and contributed his
own conceptions of state strength and of hegemony. In general terms, state strength internationally
derives from economic advantage, class alliances, military organization, and geopolitics, while
internally it is less a matter of bureaucratic mass than of class compromises that lessen the need for
heavy-handed administration. Peripheral states remain weak both because they are dominated from
outside and because their ruling groups typically prefer minimal state capacity for interference in
their freedom to sell on the world market. Meanwhile hegemony, for Wallerstein (1983), refers to a
temporary situation in which one core state dominates and leads the world-system as a whole. In this
view, there have been three moments of hegemony: under the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth
century, under the British in the mid-nineteenth, and under the United States in the mid-twentieth.
Hegemony is achieved through successive but overlapping superiority in productive efficiency,
commercial success and financial superiority buttressed by effective military force. After a period of
glory, it is lost in the same order, as competitors eat into profit margins, rival centers of accumulation
emerge, and the costs of policing and stabilizing the world become overly burdensome. Amsterdam,
then London and then New York each had its turn as the world-system’s financial capital,
symbolizing the transitory hegemonic prominence of their countries.

Wallerstein’s structural concepts have proved his most widely recognized contributions to date,
but his ideas about dynamics also deserve attention. Three seem especially important: the cyclical
rhythms and secular trends of the system as a whole, and the process of incorporation of new zones
from external arenas into the capitalist world-economy. Drawing on Schumpeter and on the
Russian economist Kondratieff, Wallerstein argues that 50–60 year cycles with an A-phase of
expansive growth and a B-phase of stagnation and crisis are constitutive of the accumulation
process due to the anarchy of the market. A- and B-phases differentially affect differently located
zones, with B-phases especially likely to lead to increased misery in much of the periphery and
semiperiphery as well as to a few examples of dramatic ascent—which in its most recent incarnations
(Taiwan, South Korea) is hailed as “development” and offered as a model for other countries
to follow, as if that were possible. As with Marx and Schumpeter, recurrent crises are necessary
parts of the capitalist process rather than failures of monetary or fiscal policy. Caused by over-
production given the scale of the market, crises are overcome when some combination of
geographic expansion, technological innovation and downward income redistribution recreates
the conditions for profitable investment in production by lowering costs and expanding markets.

In crisis supercession, we see cyclical processes and secular trends intersecting. Geographic
expansion is one such trend. The modern world-system has expanded from its Euro-American
origins—and with a boost from human pillage in West Africa—to encompass the entire globe in
uneven waves of both colonial and trade-based incorporation. A second such trend is the ongoing
commodification of land and labor, a key phenomenon highlighted by both Marx and Polanyi.
Mechanization of production (increasing the ratio of constant to variable capital), bureaucratiza-
tion of organizational structures (Weber), and degradation of the natural environment, now
entailing ever-higher input costs, are additional trends. Wallerstein’s important contributions
here are first, that these trends transform the world-system even as they (temporarily) stabilize it,
and second, that each of them clearly entails a ceiling, an asymptote that can be approached but
never fully reached. What characterizes modern capitalism above all is not so much its tripartite
structure as the process of moving toward these asymptotes. Some of these limits have already been
reached, or almost, to such an extent that Wallerstein believes the current world-system to be
arriving at its final crisis—a crisis “of” the system rather than merely a crisis “in” the system.
A third dynamic contribution worth highlighting is Wallerstein’s (1989, Ch. 3) relatively neglected analysis of the process by which new zones become absorbed into—rather than merely trading in luxuries or interacting at a military frontier with—the capitalist world-economy. In a stunning comparative analysis, Wallerstein shows essential similarities in the ways in which in the century after 1750, four hugely different cultural areas—Russia, India, West Africa and the Ottoman Empire—went from being part of the external arena to becoming peripheral zones responsive to and dependent upon world market forces. In all four cases there were three moments: external arena, then incorporation, then peripheralization. In all four cases, new products came to be produced and exported and new imports accepted, with local manufactures declining; the size of enterprises grew; and the coercion of the labor force increased significantly. In all cases, though with more variation due to vastly different initial conditions, states were strengthened internally and weakened externally. Perhaps not incidentally, during the very period when the Atlantic revolutions and British reforms advanced freedom and participatory citizenship in the core, new levels of oppression were being enforced in the periphery.

It is perhaps too soon to appraise two further Wallersteinian contributions to world-systems analysis: his borrowing of Prigogine’s chaos theory to argue that the current (or impending) systemic crisis will lead to increasingly wild economic and political fluctuations; and his calls for Unthinking Social Science (2001) to reformulate and reshape the institutions and structures of knowledge. Wallerstein’s futuristics mimic the environmental predictions of many climate scientists, although they were articulated well before such predictions became current. Some world-systems adherents accept them, even act on them in their political participation, but others find them too apocalyptic or too telescoped, arguing in effect that the asymptotic limits of capitalism have yet to be approached so closely as to presage an imminent age of chaos, turbulence and system transformation. As for the issues raised in Wallerstein’s analyses and programmatic recommendations for reorganizing the structures of social scientific knowledge, it is clear that we are witnessing an efflorescence of boundary crossings among academic disciplines and even between the broader areas of natural and social sciences and the humanities. But it seems highly unlikely that these intellectual developments will lead to reduced specialization and compartmentalization, or to movement in the direction of a “unidisciplinary” social science. Possibly such academic and intellectual reorganization will emerge along with other new structures in a post-modern world-system. It is difficult, however, to discern in present power configurations the interests that would be served by such changes.

Polyvocal from the start, the world-systems school would have one most prominent voice for most of the 1970s and 1980s: that of Immanuel Wallerstein. Then, as its concurrent founders began to further develop and differentiate their individual contributions, and as newer generations of scholars added theirs, this polyvocality became more pronounced than before, perhaps even to the point where Wallerstein’s later work has been too little pondered or drawn upon. From his roots in New York, capital of the world in the period of his intellectual formation to his contributions at the World Social Forums of the twenty-first century, Wallerstein has been a trailblazing pioneer, a prolific scholar, a mentor, a mensch.

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