



3-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Alalykin-Izvekov, Vladimir (2020) "Honoring A Giant: Immanuel Wallerstein And His Contributions to Social Sciences," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 82 : No. 82 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol82/iss82/8>

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## Honoring A Giant: Immanuel Wallerstein And His Contributions to Social Sciences

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“...the causes of the wealth and poverty of nations –  
the grand object of all enquiries in Political Economy.”

- Malthus to Ricardo, letter of 26 January 1817. <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

As a salute to a preeminent social scholar of our times, Immanuel M. Wallerstein (1930-2019), this paper briefly highlights his biography, education, and academic career; however, it is mainly concerned with his scholarly concepts and theories. The author attempts to follow the development process of one of his main contributions to social sciences, the *world-systems approach*, as well as to analyze various important aspects of it, including its historic and philosophic significance. All efforts have been made to keep the paper informative yet also accessible and transparent, deferring, when appropriate, to Immanuel Wallerstein himself to expound his ideas to the reader.

*Keywords:* antisystemic movements, core countries, division of labor, economic sociology, geoculture, periphery, semi-periphery, world-economy, world-empire, world-system

### Biography

Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein was born in New York City on September 28, 1930. The future scholar's *alma mater* was Columbia University; there he earned a B.A. in 1951, an M.A. in 1954, and a Ph.D. in 1959. Through the years, he also studied abroad at Oxford University, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Université Paris 7 Denis Diderot, as well as at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Professor Wallerstein taught at Columbia University (1958-1971) and at McGill University in Montreal, Canada (1971-1976). From 1976 until 2005, Immanuel Wallerstein was at the helm of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations at Binghamton University in New York State.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Landes, D. (1999). *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company. P. VII.

The thinker served as a distinguished professor of sociology at Binghamton until his retirement in 1999. Between 2000 and his death in 2019, Wallerstein was a Senior Research Scholar at Yale University.

Wallerstein had a keen interest in the non-European world (1, p. XVI), and most of his early publications were on post-colonial Africa. *World-Systems Analysis* originated in the early 1970s as a new perspective on social reality (2, p. 1). The scholar elaborated his views in his *magnum opus*, *The Modern World-System*, which appeared in four volumes between 1974 and 2011. In 1975, the first volume of the set received the prestigious Sorokin Award from the American Sociological Association.

### The World-Systems Approach

In one of his now classic works, Wallerstein defined the term *world-system* “as a unit with a single division of labor and multiple cultural systems” (3, p. 75). The scholar envisioned the concept of a *world-system* as a unit of analysis in world history, instead of states, nations, nationalities, and other traditional groupings. In the Preface to the first volume of his work *The Modern World System I*, Wallerstein explains:

This book makes a radically different assumption. It assumes that the unit of analysis is the economic entity, the one that is measured by the existence of an effective division of labor, and that the relationship of such economic boundaries to political and cultural boundaries is variable, and therefore must be determined by empirical research for each historic case.

Further:

Once we assume that the unit of analysis is such a “world-system” and not the “state” or the “nation” or the “people,” then much changes in the outcome of the analysis. Most specifically we shift from a concern with the attributive characteristics of states to concern with the relational characteristics of states. We shift from seeing classes (and status-groups) as groups within a state to seeing them as groups within a world–economy (4, p. XI).

According to Wallerstein, the modern *world-system* originated in Western Europe and the Americas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. First the Dutch Republic, then Britain and France, led the way in its gradual expansion, until, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, virtually every area on earth was encompassed by it. The most prominent feature of the modern *world-system* was its division into a highly industrialized *core*, a moderately developed *semi-periphery*, and an underdeveloped *periphery*. The *semi-periphery* acted as a *periphery* to the *core* and as a *core* to the *periphery*, and, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it included Eastern Europe, China, Brazil, and Mexico.

Wallerstein elaborated on the intricacies of those zones' relations:

The semi-peripheral states which have a relatively even mix of production processes find themselves in the most difficult situation. Under pressure from core states and putting pressure on peripheral states, their major concern is to keep themselves from slipping into the periphery and to do what they can to advance themselves toward the core. Neither is easy, and both require considerable state interference with the world market.

These semi-peripheral states are the ones that put forward most aggressively and most publicly so-called protectionist policies. They hope thereby to "protect" their production processes from the competition of stronger firms outside, while trying to improve the efficiency of the firms inside so as to compete better in the world market. They are eager recipients of the relocation of erstwhile leading products, which they define these days as achieving "economic development."

In this effort, their competition comes not from the core states, but from other semi-peripheral states, equally eager to be the recipients of relocation which cannot go to all the eager aspirants simultaneously and to the same degree. In the beginning of the twenty-first century some obvious countries to be labeled semi-peripheral are South Korea, Brazil, and India – countries with strong enterprises that export products (for example steel, automobiles, pharmaceuticals) to peripheral zones, but that also regularly relate to core zones as importers of more "advanced" products (2, p. 29-30).

Pursuant to this scholar's thinking, the capitalist world-system is experiencing a number of structural imbalances, which, helped along the way by the so-called *anti-systemic movements*, may in the future cause its eventual demise (3, pp. 71-105).

Wallerstein also notes:

Like any other perspective, world-systems analysis has built on earlier arguments and critiques. There is a sense in which almost no perspective can ever be entirely new. Someone has usually said something similar decades or centuries earlier. Therefore, when we speak of a perspective being new, it may only be that the world is ready for the first time to take seriously the ideas it embodies, and perhaps also that the ideas have been repackaged in a way that makes them more plausible and accessible to more people (2, pp. 1-2).

If so, let us attempt to "deconstruct" the intellectual paradigm proposed here. An attentive reader can easily discern a number of intellectual influences in the Wallerstein's scholarly doctrine, including the comparative theory of civilizations, the Annales School, Marxist tradition, as well as dependency theory.

## The Comparative Theory of Civilizations

The world-systemic approach to history shares certain fundamental features with the comparative theory of civilizations. For example, both civilizational and world-systems paradigms tend to consider world history in units larger than traditional socio-historic units.

Wallerstein writes: “World-systems analysis meant first of all substitution of a unit of analysis called the ‘world-system’ for the standard unit of analysis which was the national state.” (2, p. 16) In fact, David Wilkinson notes that while the comparative theory of civilizations approach tends to be oriented more towards the cultural, and the world-systems approach towards economic phenomena, the entities they study largely are, and ought to be, the same; he even proposed to merge both theories into one (5, pp. 257-258).

Furthermore, the world-systems approach owes some of its essential concepts and even terminology to a prominent French comparative civilizationalist, Fernand Braudel (who also happens to be one of the leaders of the Annales School). Wallerstein notes:

Braudel’s influence was crucial in two regards.

First, in his later work on capitalism and civilization, Braudel would insist on a sharp distinction between the sphere of the free market and the sphere of monopolies. He called only the latter capitalism and, far from being the same thing as the free market, he said that capitalism was the “anti-market.” This concept marked a direct assault, both substantively and terminologically, on the conflation by classical economists (including Marx) of the market and capitalism.

Secondly, Braudel’s insistence on the multiplicity of social times and his emphasis on structural time – what he called the *longue durée* – became central to world-systems analysis. For world-systems analysis, the *longue durée* was the duration of a particular historical system. Generalizations about the functioning of such a system thus avoided the trap of seeming to assert timeless, eternal truths. If such systems were not eternal, then it followed that they had beginnings, lives during which they “developed,” and terminal transitions (2, p. 18).

## The Annales School

The Annales School of historiography was created by a group of French historians in the 1920s, and it received its name after the group’s scholarly journal *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*. The emphasis here is on very long-term (*longue durée*) trends and geography, as well as on social and economic themes.

For example, in his classic book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), Fernand Braudel used ideas from other social sciences, stressed geography, economics, and the *longue durée*, as well as downplayed importance of specific events and individuals.

Even more pronounced are the economic themes in Braudel's three-volume *magnum opus*, *Civilization and Capitalism*. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of essential terms of the world-systems paradigm has been acquired from his oeuvre. The French historian explains:

A world-economy (an expression which I have used in the past as a particular meaning of the German term *Weltwirtschaft*) only concerns a fragment of the world, an economically autonomous section of the planet able to provide for most of its own needs, a section to which its internal links and exchanges give a certain organic unity (6, p. 22).

Braudel further presented a number of “rules or tendencies” related to world-economies.

- Rule One: the boundaries change only slowly.
- Rule Two: a dominant capitalist city always lies at the center: the power and influence of cities may vary.
- Rule Three: there is always a hierarchy of zones within a world–economy: Von Thunen's zones<sup>2</sup> which he projected as spatial arrangements of the world-economy. Do neutral zones exist?<sup>3</sup> Further, we may observe envelope<sup>4</sup> and infrastructure. (6, p. 26-45).

These principles essentially underlie the world-systems theory. Braudel, to whom the second volume of the Wallerstein's work *The Modern System II* is dedicated, elucidated:

Every world-economy is a sort of jigsaw puzzle, a juxtaposition of zones interconnected, but at different levels. On the ground, at least three different areas or categories can be distinguished: a narrow core, a fairly developed middle zone,

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<sup>2</sup> *Von Thunen zones* – a hypothetical model of agricultural land use which was proposed by German amateur economist J.H. Von Thunen (1783-1850) in 1826. According to this pre-industrial schema, there are four rings of agricultural activity surrounding the city, i.e., dairying and intensive farming would occur in the ring closest to the city, timber and firewood are procured in the second zone, and while the third zone consists of field crops, ranching is located in the final ring (Author's note).

<sup>3</sup> *Neutral zones* – according to Braudel, backward and/or underdeveloped economically areas (Author's note).

<sup>4</sup> *Envelope* - Braudel uses this somewhat metaphoric term to reflect on a world-economy's area or scope (Author's note).

and a vast periphery. The qualities and characteristics of the type of society, economy, technology, culture, and political order necessarily alter as one moves from one zone to another. This is an explanation of very wide application, one on which Immanuel Wallerstein has based his book *The Modern World-System* (1974) (6, p. 39).

As is already obvious, the most important term of the world-systems approach, world-system, originated as a derivative of Fernand Braudel's world-economy.

### **Marxist Tradition**

To substantiate his world-systems approach further, Immanuel Wallerstein turns to a method of socioeconomic analysis that views class relations and social conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development, and he takes a dialectical view of social transformation, i.e. Marxism. Serge L. Levitsky reminds us about the method's premises:

Having in the *Communist Manifesto* assured the workers that capitalism was doomed and that the future belonged to them, Marx owed the world a more solid proof of his assertions. *Das Kapital* claims to do just that. The task which Marx set himself was an ambitious one. His goal was nothing less than the discovery of the economic laws of motion of modern society, and then to show that these laws assured the eventual triumph of the proletariat.

He sought to do this through the historical correlation of the rise of the modern proletariat with the general development of the technical means of production – to demonstrate that the processes of production, exchange, and distribution as they actually occur proved his thesis.

The result was a curious amalgamation of economic and political history, history, sociology, and utopia. Marx, in effect, attempted to unite all the philosophical, scientific, and moral strands of the Victorian age into one vast system of a universal scope. His dialectical philosophy was borrowed from German classical philosophy (Hegel in particular) and transformed into historical materialism. With it went a concept of state and revolution that was borrowed from French revolutionary tradition. His system of political economy was built on notions of labor theory of value and the theory of surplus value which he derived from classical (particularly British) economic doctrine.

Marx's method was not that of observation and scientific deduction. It was rather that of an *a priori* conceptual scheme, supplemented by a wealth of documentary material selected to fit the main tenets of the scheme (7, pp. X-XI).

He wrote elsewhere, on a similar subject:

In his works, Karl Marx creates an abstract model of capitalism, and then attempts to prove its inevitable self-destruction (8, p. 172).

Similar to Marx, Immanuel Wallerstein is attempting to develop a general schema of the last 500 years (from 16th century to the present) of world-historic development, mainly from the economic perspective. Also comparable to Marx, the thinker predicts that the capitalist world-system is destined for its self-destruction (3, pp. 71-105).

## Dependency Theory

Yet another root of the world-systems approach extended to dependency theory. The dependistas postulate that the core of wealthy, industrialized states profits at the expense of the periphery's underdeveloped and poor nations. Thus, Immanuel Wallerstein writes:

Core-periphery was an essential contribution of Third World scholars. True, there had been some German geographers in the 1920s who had suggested something similar, as did Romanian sociologists in the 1930s, but then Romania had a social structure similar to that of the Third World. But it was only when Raúl Prebisch and his Latin American "young Turks" at the ECLA<sup>5</sup> got to work in the 1950s that the theme became a significant focus of social science scholarship.

The basic idea was very simple. International trade was not, they said, a trade between equals. Some countries were stronger economically than others (the core) and were therefore able to trade on terms that allowed surplus-value to flow from the weaker countries (the periphery) to the core (2, pp. 11-12).

It is no wonder that the world-systems approach borrowed a number of terms and notions from dependency theory as well. These have included, for example, the industrialized core, the relatively developed semi-periphery, and the typically underdeveloped periphery zones or regions.

## Legacy

Immanuel Wallerstein developed an innovative macro-level and long-term socioeconomic theory, which he named the world-systems approach.

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<sup>5</sup> ECLA - *Economic Commission for Latin America*. The organization is also known as *The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean*, as well as *ECLAC*, *UNECLAC*, or, in Spanish and Portuguese, *CEPAL*. It is a *United Nations* regional commission to encourage economic cooperation (Author's note).

While working on this paradigm, the scholar creatively synthesized concepts and theories of other scholars and thinkers, such as the comparative theory of civilizations, the Annales School, Marxist tradition, and dependency theory.

The world-systems approach offers a number of plausible explanations to various pressing questions of our times. In fact, Frank W. Elwell considers the scholar among the few modern theorists who have succeeded in developing a truly macrosociological theory. (9, VII-VIII). The Wallerstein approach influences a certain number of contemporary schools of thought, such as the Russian School of Globalistics. Wallerstein's ideas also have had an effect on multiple aspects of one of the most fundamental and seminal civilizational paradigms of recent times, created by Polish and American scholar Andrew Targowski (10, p. 23; 11, p. 30).

One may maintain justly that Immanuel Wallerstein developed and presented a long-term historiosophic and world-historic paradigm of the last 500 years.

Conversely, it could be argued that the world-systemic paradigm is a part of the economic branch of the sociological school of sociological theories. According to Pitirim A. Sorokin, to this branch belong "those theories which have taken one of the so-called 'economic factors' as an independent variable and have tried to find out its effects on or its correlations with other social phenomena" (10, c. 514).

In the case of the world-systems approach, such an economic factor would be the division of labor between the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery. Having analyzed a number of such theories, Pitirim A. Sorokin, among other conclusions, postulated:

(4) Studies of a great many investigators have shown that so-called economic conditions are correlated with various and numerous social phenomena. For this reason, in an interpretation or an analysis of social phenomena they cannot be disregarded.

(5) In many fields social science can now tell not only whether the correlation of a certain social phenomenon with a certain economic condition exists, but even the degree, or coefficient of the correlation.

(6) These coefficients show that there is scarcely any social phenomenon which can be correlated perfectly with the economic factor. Some of them are correlated perfectly with the economic factor. Some of them are correlated quite tangibly; others, only slightly, and some others do not show any noticeable correlation. This means that in no way is it possible to take the economic factor as the omnipotent, primary, or the final cause, or even as the only "starter," while all others are "only dependent" on it.

(7) This conclusion becomes still more valid if we take into consideration that social phenomena are interdependent, but not one-sidedly dependent. For this reason, the non-self-sufficiency of the economic factor shown by the character of the correlations becomes even greater if we take it by itself as a “function,” and show its dependency on other factors taken in the above studies as “mere functions.”

This is done by other sociological schools which are logically and factually entitled to proceed in this way as much as (are) the economic interpreters in their way. ... (12, c. 598).

## Conclusions

1. The preceding analysis demonstrates that in his works, Immanuel Wallerstein presents an original, highly developed macro-level sociological theory dealing, for the most part, with economic realities of the contemporary and rapidly globalizing world.
2. In his world-systems paradigm, one can easily discern a number of intellectual influences, including the comparative theory of civilizations, the Annales School, Marxist tradition, and dependency theory.
3. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, the fundamental feature of his world-systems approach is the economic factor of the division of labor between the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery. Therefore, it could be argued that the world-systemic paradigm belongs mainly to the field of economic sociology.
4. However, was the scholar able to create a great philosophy of history? Apparently, the jury is still out on the question, and only time will give a definitive answer.

## Essential Terminology (as conceived by Immanuel Wallerstein)

**Antisystemic movements.** I invented this term to cover together two concepts that had been used since the nineteenth century: social movements and national movements. I did this because I believed that both kinds of movements shared some crucial features, and both represented parallel modes of asserting strong resistance to the existing historical system in which we live, up to and including wishing to overthrow the system (2, p. 93).

**Core-periphery.** This is a relational pair which first came into widespread use when taken up by Raúl Prebisch and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America in the 1950s as a description of the Axial Division Of Labor of the world-economy. It refers to products but is often used as shorthand for the countries in which such products are dominant.

The argument of this book is that the key element distinguishing core-like from peripheral processes is the degree to which they are monopolized and therefore profitable (2, p. 93).

**Geoculture.** A term coined by analogy with geopolitics. It refers to norms and modes of discourse that are widely accepted as legitimate within the world-system. We argue here that a geoculture does not come into existence automatically with the onset of a world-system but rather has to be created (2, p. 93).

**Semi-peripheral.** There are no semi-peripheral products, as there are core-like and peripheral products. However, if one calculates what proportion of a country's production is core-like and what peripheral, one finds that some countries have a fairly even distribution, that is, they trade core-like products to peripheral zones and peripheral products to core zones. Hence, we can talk of semi-peripheral countries, and we find that they have a special kind of politics and play a particular role in the functioning of the world-system (2, p. 97).

**World-economy, world-empire, world-system.** These terms are related. A world-system is not the system of the world, but a system *that is a world* and that can be, and most often has been, located in an area less than the entire globe.

World-systems analysis argues that the unities of social reality within which we operate, whose rules constrain us, are for the most part such world-systems (other than the now extinct small minisystems that once existed on the earth).

World-systems analysis argues that there have been thus far only two varieties of world-systems: world-economies and world-empires. A world-empire (such as the Roman Empire, Han China) is a large bureaucratic structure with a single political center and an Axial Division Of Labor, but with multiple cultures. A world-economy is a large axial division of labor with multiple political centers and multiple cultures.

In English, the hyphen is essential to indicate these concepts. "World system" without a hyphen suggests that there has been only one world-system in the history of the world. "World economy" without a hyphen is a concept used by most economists to describe the trade relations among states, not an integrated system of production (2, pp. 98-99).

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