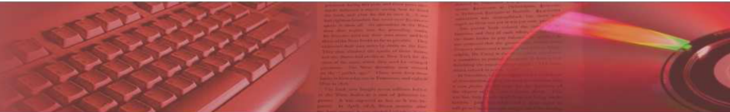

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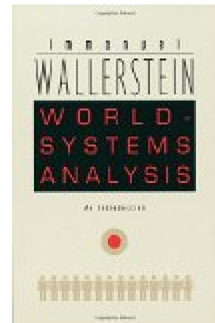

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World-Systems Theory: Sizing Up the Units of Spatial-Temporal Analysis

Deeply influenced by Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, and Fernand Braudel, Wallerstein is one of the best known practitioners of a subdiscipline that combines sociology with history: world-systems analysis (indeed, some credit him with forging this disciplinary marriage). Best known for his three-volume *The Modern World-System*,[1] Wallerstein was originally an Africanist who has argued that our current global circumstances must be analyzed within the context of centuries-long politico-economic processes that have their origins in the sixteenth century. In the book under review, Wallerstein summarizes his main contentions.

This book was written for three audiences: the general reader (such as an undergraduate or a member of the general public); the graduate student with an interest in the historical social sciences; and the "experienced practitioner" in the academic world. This book, Wallerstein makes clear, is an introduction to his thinking, not a *summa* of his previous research. The judicious scholar will want to read Wallerstein's formidable corpus of works in order to appreciate a level of detail and sophistication that is understandably absent from a highly abbreviated introductory text, that given its contents, is actually a work about methodology. A helpful nine-page glossary and an annotated bibliography append the book (comprised of four sections: Wallerstein's own writings, "Writings by World-Systems Analysts," "Critiques of World-Systems Analysis," and "Relevant Works: Forerunners of Influential Writings").

In a prefatory section called "To Start: Understanding the World in Which We Live," Wallerstein writes that, if we consider what is new and what is not new from an informed historical perspective, the broad outlines of the post-September 11 world were predictable (though the historical details were not). Three key turning points led to this current global situation. The first is the sixteenth century during which the capitalist world-economy emerged. The second is the French Revolution out of which developed two radical ideas: that political change is normal, even desirable, since it evidences the march of "progress," and that sovereignty resides with "the people" (basically a politico-economic idea about inclusion/exclusion) rather than with a monarchy or some type of legislative institution. The third turning point is the "world revolution of 1968," which saw an undermining of the centrist liberal world-view and Old Left movements that had characterized, for the most part, political economic arrangements since the nineteenth century.

Wallerstein's view of the significance of the sixteenth century is certainly debatable but not indefensible. Likewise for his interpretation of the French Revolution. It is his understanding of the events of 1968 that is the least convincing and he seems to romanticize their significance. He returns to the "world revolution of 1968" in the last chapter, but to this reader he fails to marshal enough evidence to illustrate why the events of 1968 are as momentous as the first two turning points.

Interested readers will benefit from familiarizing

themselves with a list of terms associated with world-systems analysis (though not all of these terms were coined by Wallerstein). The most fundamental intellectual implement in Wallerstein's conceptual toolbox is "historical system," a term meant to stress how all social systems are at once systemic (they have continuing traits that can be described) and historical (they are always evolving and are never the same from one moment to the next). There are three types of historical systems: mini-systems, world-economies, and world-empires (the latter two are collectively known as world-systems). As Wallerstein indicates, mini-systems, world-economies, and world-empires reflect Karl Polanyi's distinction between reciprocal, redistributive, and market economies. Mini-systems (simple agricultural and hunting and gathering societies) are for the most part now extinct, so our attention should be directed toward world-systems, which are "not about systems, economies, empires *of the world*, but about systems, economies, empires *that are* a world" (emphasis in original, p. 17). A world-system encompasses a spatial-temporal zone that cuts across different political and cultural units, and here the influence of the Annales group (led by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch), who argued that centuries-long generalizations were possible, becomes evident. After 1945, Fernand Braudel continued the Annales tradition, criticizing "event-dominated" or episodic history that prevented researchers from seeing underlying long-term processes at work in history. Wallerstein, along with others, has applied Braudel's *longue duree*, an approach that recognizes that certain problems in history and the social sciences must be addressed by employing a long-term perspective.

A world-economy has multiple political centers and cultures, and is characterized by an "axial division of labor," i.e. an axis binding together "core" and "peripheral" productive processes (the core-peripheral notion was originally developed by Raul Prebisch, though Wallerstein introduced an intermediate concept, "semi-periphery"). A world-empire (e.g. Roman Empire, Han China) is "a structure in which there is a single political authority for the whole world-system" (p. 57). Throughout history, states have attempted to turn a world-economy into a world-empire. However, none have succeeded because a world-empire would stifle capitalism, i.e., a centralized political structure would be able to override the priority of the endless accumulation of capital. Nevertheless, some states have had their day in the sun as hegemonic powers.

Another term that deserves consideration is "unidisciplinarity," which speaks to Wallerstein's ambitious attempts to reorder the academic landscape. Unidisciplinarity is intended to demonstrate "a lack of deference to the traditional boundaries of the social sciences" (p. 19). Terms such as "trans-disciplinary," "multidisciplinary," and "inter-disciplinary," while seemingly Catholic in spirit, imply a social reality that is ontologically fragmented into history, political science, sociology, anthropology, etc. Such scholarly balkanization hinders fruitful analyses and the very administrative organization of the university becomes a hindrance to insightful research. To understand how we have reached this state of partition requires an acknowledgment that the boundaries of the traditional fields are artificial, arbitrary, and historically contingent. This problem of disciplinarity is treated in the first chapter ("Historical Origins of World-Systems Analysis: From Social Science Disciplines to Historical Social Sciences"), in which Wallerstein examines the birth of the social sciences within the context of the politico-economic upheavals of late-eighteenth-century France. A crucial and innovative element of revolutionary political thought was "the people," who, of course, became "society" or an object of scientific investigation. Such investigations aimed at accelerating the "progress" of the people and the nation.

In the late-eighteenth century, philosophy split into the sciences and the humanities. Traditionally, the humanities had been a unitary endeavor, thought to be in search of the true, good, and beautiful. Emerging forms of knowledge seriously challenged this view and raised the question of where the new object of study, society/"the people," should be positioned: in fields that used empirical and experimental methods, or in fields that relied on empathetic and hermeneutic approaches (e.g. history)? Social science would come to situate itself uncomfortably between the humanities and the natural sciences, or between idiographic disciplines predicated on the uniqueness of social phenomena and the nomothetic disciplines in search of universal, scientific laws.

By the late-nineteenth century, other intellectual shifts had transpired that separated social reality into three major spheres: the market, civil society, and the state. These were studied respectively by economists, sociologists, and political scientists. Eventually it became evident that another field–anthropology–was needed to study parts of the world dominated by European colonization and lacking a recognizable modernity. As Eric Wolf famously put it, these parts of the globe had peoples "without history."[2] But still another field, Orientalism, was necessary to explore the "high civilizations" of China, India, Persia, and the Arab world. Such societies,

since they were perceived to be frozen in time, were also not modern. However, they were sophisticated enough that they did not fall under the purview of anthropology, which originally was premised on the search for the "primitive."

After the Second World War, intellectual configurations that had been forming for the past 150 years produced "area studies" and notions of "development" for those places "left behind" on the march to modernity. And the question still remains: where is social reality? In any case, the "two cultures" of C. P. Snow still shape debates about how society should be understood and, although history, anthropology, and Orientalist studies are for the most part regarded as humanistic, idiographic disciplines, this is not true in certain varieties of the social sciences.

In chapter 2 ("The Modern World-System as a Capitalist World-Economy: Production, Surplus-Value, and Polarization"), Wallerstein proffers his understanding of capitalism: it cannot be reduced to wage labor or profit seeking, since these have always existed in some form and to some degree. A truly capitalist world-system "gives priority to the *endless* accumulation of capital" (p. 24) and requires a multiplicity of states (capitalism relies on the patronage of states which help maintain "quasi-monopolies"). In addition to states, firms, and classes, a capitalist world-economy possesses "households" (not necessarily kin-based groups) and exhibits a proliferation of status-groups (or to be more up-to-date, "identities"). These also function as income-pooling units. Moreover, capitalism is characterized by Kondratieff cycles.

Chapter 3, "The Rise of the State-Systems: Sovereign Nation-States, Colonies, and the Interstate System," provides some historical perspective about how the Westphalian order emerged. The legitimacy of state sovereignty came to rest upon "reciprocal recognition" among states (the least costly strategy followed within the international arena). Sovereignty also operates internally, since central authorities and local powers mutually recognize each other. Such legitimacy is crucial to the workings of the capitalist order because states establish rules about work regulations, corporate governance, property rights, taxation, and the flow of commodities, labor, and capital. It is through these regulatory regimes that the state is intimately involved in the endless accumulation of capital.

Chapter 4, "The Creation of a Geoculture: Ideologies, Social Movements, Social Science," is a history, or one is tempted to say, a grand narrative, of the social sciences and their political implications. Wallerstein argues that debates about "the people," i.e., the excluded and the included, such as workers, women, and ethnic groups, occurred in three arenas: the social sciences (comprised of "specialists"), ideologies, and, antisystemic movements (national or social movements that resist historical systems). Consider the first two arenas. Within the arena of social scientific investigation, three types of cleavages developed: between the Western "civilized" world and the "non-modern world," between the past and present in the Western world, and between the state, civil society, and the market within the Western world. The second arena is closely associated with the French Revolution, a period when ideologies became necessary in order to advance a group's stance toward the speed of politico-economic change. By the early nineteenth century, three major ideologies had emerged: conservatism (wary of rapid change and reform; the "Party of Order"), liberalism (accepted change and reform; the "Party of Movement"), and radicalism (demanded accelerated change and was associated with antisystemic movements). Eventually, a consensus was forged between conservatism and liberalism, producing a centrist liberalism that came to dominate the workings of the major capitalist powers.

The last chapter, "The Modern World-System in Crisis: Bifurcation, Chaos, and Choices," concludes with some general observations about the current state of the world. According to Wallerstein, the "world revolution of 1968" marked the end of a long period of centrist liberal supremacy. The structures of the global capitalist order have become considerably unsettled. The three costs of production (remuneration, inputs, and taxation) for the producers have been steadily rising, so a coalition of centrist and rightist forces have attempted to keep these costs down (expressed most clearly in neoliberalism). We can expect to see the more extreme ideologies on the left and right come to the fore.

There are as many critics of world-systems theory as there are advocates, and Wallerstein addresses some of the charges leveled against his work (see the section called "Critiques of World-Systems Analysis" in the bibliography). Wallerstein categorizes his critics as nomothetic positivists, orthodox Marxists, state autonomists, and cultural particularists. The most common criticisms claim that world-systems theorizing is tautological, too vague, overly selective in the historical examples it employs, and excessively capitalist-centric.[3] Consider the last charge: according to Wallerstein, the "imperative of the endless accumulation of capital had generated a need for constant technological change, a constant ex-

pansion of frontiers–geographical, psychological, intellectual, scientific" (p. 2). The prime mover here seems to be "the endless accumulation of capital," but this capital-oriented perspective, inspired by Marxist abstractions and generalizations, sounds economically reductionistic. Surely there is more to the story than accumulating capital for capital's sake. Despite Wallerstein's arguments based on judicious research, some of his conclusions do appear too sweeping. An example of over-generalization is Wallerstein's concept of "antisystemic," e.g. nationalism. However, an ideology such as nationalism has simultaneously legitimated *and* destabilized the international order.

Moreover, the human subject seems swallowed up by grand generalities. For instance, Wallerstein points out that many scholars have relied on the "industrial proletariat," the "rational individual," "political man" [sic], or a "discourse specific to a particular culture" to play the role of the main actors on the stage of global history. However, he writes that for world-systems analysis, these are products, rather than "primordial atomic elements" (p. 21). Of course, in a certain sense they are products, but they also most definitely involve human agency and subjectivity, which deserve a more robust recognition.

Despite these issues, Wallerstein challenges our conventional units of analysis (such as the national state) and the temporalities that we habitually rely on to frame our understandings of the world. His work may be read as a much-appreciated corrective to trendy postmodernist assaults on comparative research, temporal trajectories, and research strategies in search of patterns. One does not have to believe in metaphysical essences to see the need for accepting some commonalities across the globe. There are, after all, grand patterns to history, that, if carefully assessed, may reveal crucial aspects of the human condition and how it relates to social change, property relations, and technological innovation. Certain types of questions can only be addressed using the *longue duree*. This book affords a convenient introduction to such research agendas that are in need of long-term analysis.

Notes

[1]. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System.* 3 volumes (New York: Academic Press, 1974, 1980, 1988).

[2]. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[3]. See the review by Arthur L. Stinchcombe, "Review Essay: The Growth of the World System," *American Journal of Sociology* 87, no. 6 (1982): pp. 1389-1395.

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