

**World Systems Analysis: An Introduction**

Immanuel Wallerstein

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In a voluminous career that has spanned nearly half a century, Immanuel Wallerstein has acted as prolocutor-in-chief for the study of world systems analysis. As Director of the Fernand Braudel Centre for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations at Binghamton University (part of the State University of New York), Wallerstein has published nigh on thirty books devoted to unravelling the development and progress of the capitalist world economy. Given this, it is somewhat surprising that Wallerstein has felt the need to write a brief introduction to world systems analysis — after all, the approach is hardly nascent. Nevertheless, Wallerstein's short introduction to the subject seeks to (re)introduce the world systems approach, revitalize the Annales School, debunk Marxism, and rewrite the formation of the modern states system. Short in stature the book may be; short on ambition it is not.

For Wallerstein, there are three main turning points in modern world history: the development of the capitalist world economy during the long 16th century, the French Revolution of 1789 that generated the subsequent geoculture for this world system ('centrist liberalism'), and the 'world revolution of 1968', that presaged 'the long terminal phase of the modern world-system' (p. x). Each of these three 'turning points' can be questioned. First, it is not clear why analysis of the modern world economy should begin in the 16th century (a century later than in some of Wallerstein's earlier writings), given that its history in Europe predates this period (Teschke, 2003), and may be traced back still further in terms of its non-European genesis (Hobson, 2004). Second, it could be argued that, although the impact of the French Revolution on the formation of the modern world is unquestionable, it is the collapse of communism and the resultant unipolar era that has become the central locus for contemporary world affairs. However, most problematic of all is the place in Wallerstein's triumvirate for the events of 1968, apparently over and above the impact of two world wars, a century or more of colonization and decolonization, and the rise and fall of states, federations and empires. It is difficult to see how unsuccessful uprisings by French unionists, American anti-



war activists and Czech students can stand comparison with the scale, scope and impact of these world historical processes.

Wallerstein's overarching aim — to generate a 'holistic historical social science' ('undisciplinarity') (p. 98) that rejects the 19th century separation of subjects and methods — is laudable. As he puts it, Wallerstein is less concerned with time and space, than with 'TimeSpace' (p. 22). However, it is debateable whether this enterprise can be conducted under the rubric of world systems analysis. For Wallerstein, the world system is a socially constructed, historically contingent matrix of institutions. This system consists of states, firms, households, classes, and status or identity groups that act as sub-parts of the greater system. The trajectory of this system is mono-directional (towards inevitable crisis) and mono-causal (derived from the relentless accumulation of capital). In taking this approach, Wallerstein adopts a top-down, functional theory of global development, the problems of which are by now well rehearsed: the multi-linear trajectories within modernity itself (reactionary fundamentalism alongside progressive secularism for example); the place of bottom-up movements in generating significant processes of social change (such as the success of revolutionaries); and the need to recognize historical particularity within macro-level tendencies (even Marx included space for 'the Asiatic Mode of Production').

Most thorny of all is Wallerstein's much repeated incantation as to the 'inevitable terminal crisis' of world capitalism (pp. 76–90). In his magnum opus, *Historical Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983), Wallerstein presented a thoughtful critique of the circular, irrational tendencies of capitalism and its likely demise under the impact of various countervailing forces: the structural inequalities between 'core' and 'periphery' states; the rise of anti-systemic movements in the shape of new social movements; and the failure of entrepreneurs to commodify everything. In this, Wallerstein predated anti-globalization protests by a generation. However, to invoke the 'spirit of *Porte Allegre*' (p. 87) as a movement capable of ending the 500-year-old dominium of global capitalism, as Wallerstein does in this new book, sounds suspiciously like a cargo cult that incessantly prophesizes the end of world only to wake up each morning and find that it is still there. The 'final crisis of capitalism' and the decline of the United States have long been heralded, sometimes more theologically than empirically, by academics and politicians of the left. Just like other macro-level determinists, so Wallerstein is forced to follow a 'wait and see' policy that foretells the advent of a new global order within the next 50 years or so. In the meantime, events that Wallerstein (*pace* Braudel) derides as mere 'dust' (p. 15) obscuring the great patterns of world capitalism have rather moved on. It is the imperial tendencies of US foreign policy makers and the desire of states around the world to sign up to WTO rules and strictures that stand as more recognizable features of the global landscape than any universalist revolution along Wallersteinian lines.



In many ways, Wallerstein's work on world systems theory has been rather superseded in recent years by the efforts of a second generation of world systems analysts. It is these scholars who Wallerstein brings together in his edited volume on *The Modern World System in the Longue Durée*. Convened to mark the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the Fernand Braudel Centre, the overarching commitment of contributors both to the academic enterprise of world systems theory and to the broader political struggles with which the approach is associated gives the book a coherence not always evident in edited volumes of this kind. Hence, Samir Amin writes powerfully on globalization as 'apartheid' (pp. 5–30), Christopher Chase-Dunn on the prospects of 'democratic socialism' (pp. 31–46), and Giovanni Arrighi on anti-systemic movements (pp. 79–89). There are numerous other contributions to the volume on subjects as diverse as alchemy and proletarian internationalism; there are also a smattering of voices applying world systems theory to the 'south'. Some of these are impressive contributions to conjunctural analysis, demonstrating how organic tendencies and contingent events join in the creation of world historical processes. Others, however, are fairly obscurantist, and none are written with sufficient depth or thought to fully substantiate their arguments. Taken as a whole, this book does manage to capture the gamut of contemporary thinking about world systems theory. As such, it may serve as a more useful introduction to the field than Wallerstein's rather clipped call-to-arms.

Both these books illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of world systems theory. On the one hand, a systemic approach that is historically aware carries with it a fair degree of theoretical force and explanatory punch. On the other hand, world systems theory can look like an approach whose grandeur has somewhat faded, particularly in terms of its predictive capacity. I thought that neo-realists were the only group who thought that the European Union was about to collapse, and that Marxists were the only school-of-thought who believed in the likelihood of global class-based insurrection. Apparently not. All theories need to simplify reality in order to function as theories; however, when this process involves a distortion of reality, perhaps it is the theoretical *explanans* itself that needs addressing.

References

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