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# *World-Systems Analysis*

## *The Second Phase*

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*Immanuel Wallerstein*

**W**orld-systems analysis has existed under that name, more or less, for about fifteen years. Some of its arguments, of course, have longer histories, even very long histories. Yet, as a perspective, it emerged only in the 1970's. It presented itself as a critique of existing dominant views in the various social sciences, and primarily of developmentalism and modernization theory which seemed to dominate social science worldwide during the 1960's.

The worldwide revolution of 1968 did not spare the world of social science, and world-systems analysis shared in, was part of, a wider reaction to the ideologized positivism and false apoliticism that had been the counterpart within world social science of the U.S. hegemonic worldview. Although world-systems analysis was only one variant of this critique, it stood out in retrospect by the fact that it broke more deeply with nineteenth-century social science than did other critiques, albeit probably not deeply enough.

It is hard to know how to assess "what we have learned." What I shall do is spell out what I think are the major premises or arguments that I believe have been reasonably explicated. I choose carefully the verb "explicated." It does not mean these premises or arguments have been widely adopted or that they have not been contested, in detail at least, even among those who think they share in the world-systems perspective. What it means is that there has been enough elaboration of the arguments such that they are familiar beyond the bounds of the initiates (and thus, for example, they might appear in textbooks

as reflecting a “viewpoint”), and such that these premises and arguments might be seen as part of the defining characteristics of a world-systems perspective.

I see three such defining characteristics. The first and most obvious is that the appropriate “unit of analysis” for the study of social or societal behavior is a “world-system.” No doubt this assertion has led to enormous discussion around the so-called macro-micro problem, which in this case translates into how much of local and/or national behavior is explained/determined by structural evolution at the level of the world-system. I believe this is a totally false problem, but I shall not argue that here. I merely point out that, formally, the macro-micro issue is no different if one decides that the boundaries of a “society” are those of a “world-system” or that these boundaries correlate more or less with those of “nation-states.” There still can be said to be the macro-micro issue. The real novelty, therefore, is that the world-systems perspective denies that the “nation-state” represents in any sense a relatively autonomous “society” that “develops” over time.

The second defining characteristic has been that of the *longue durée*. This of course put us in the *Annales* tradition, as well as in that of the burgeoning field of “historical sociology.” But I believe the world-systems perspective was more specific than either, and spelled out some elements that are blurry in the other two traditions. Long duration is the temporal correlate of the spatial quality of “world-system.” It reflects the insistence that “world-systems” are “historical systems,” that is, that they have beginnings, lives, and ends. This stance makes clear that structures are not “immobile.” It insists, in addition, that there are “transitions” from one historical system to its successor or successors. It is this pair, the space of a “world” and the time of a “long duration,” that combine to form any particular historical world-system.

The third element of world-systems analysis has been a certain view of one particular world-system, the one in which we live, the capitalist world-economy. Let me list the various elements that have been explicated. Some of these were borrowed, directly or in modified form, from other earlier perspectives. Some others were relatively new. But it has been the combination of these arguments that has come to be associated with world-systems analysis. I merely list now the characteristics presumed to be the description of a capitalist world-economy:

- (1) the ceaseless accumulation of capital as its driving force;

- (2) an axial division of labor in which there is a core-periphery tension, such that there is some form of unequal exchange (not necessarily as defined originally by Arghiri Emmanuel) that is spatial;
- (3) the structural existence of a semiperipheral zone;
- (4) the large and continuing role of nonwage labor alongside of wage labor;
- (5) the correspondence of the boundaries of the capitalist world-economy to that of an interstate system comprised of sovereign states;
- (6) the location of the origins of this capitalist world-economy earlier than in the nineteenth century, probably in the sixteenth century;
- (7) the view that this capitalist world-economy began in one part of the globe (largely Europe) and later expanded to the entire globe via a process of successive "incorporations";
- (8) the existence in this world-system of hegemonic states, each of whose periods of full or uncontested hegemony has however been relatively brief;
- (9) the nonprimordial character of states, ethnic groups, and households, all of which are constantly created and recreated;
- (10) the fundamental importance of racism and sexism as organizing principles of the system;
- (11) the emergence of antisystemic movements that simultaneously undermine and reinforce the system;
- (12) a pattern of both cyclical rhythms and secular trends that incarnates the inherent contradictions of the system and which accounts for the systemic crisis in which we are presently living.

To be sure, this list is merely a set of premises and arguments that have been articulated, and that have become relatively familiar to many. It is not a list of truths, much less a list of creeds to which we all pay allegiance. No doubt much empirical work needs to be done on each of these items, and there may be in the future much theoretical reformulation of them. But, as a relatively coherent and articulated view of historical capitalism, they exist.

I should like now to talk about the "second phase"—the issues that have been raised, but are not yet well articulated, and that should, in my view, preoccupy us in the next decade or two.

(1) The first is the elaboration of world-systems other than that of the capitalist world-economy. This work has been begun by Chris Chase-Dunn and Janet Abu-Lughod, as well as by a number of archaeolo-

gists whose writings are largely unread by members of the PEWS Section of the ASA. As we pursue this kind of work, three things will probably happen: (a) We shall reevaluate what is in fact particular to our modern world-system. (b) We shall reevaluate what we mean by a world-system, both in terms of time and space. (c) We shall begin to compare different kinds of world-systems systematically. Whether this will then lead us astray and back into a new nomothetic worldview ("the science of comparative world-systems") or a new idiographic worldview ("the description of the unique world-system that has been evolving for at least 10,000 years") remains to be seen.

(2) The second field is the elaboration of how we define and measure polarization within the capitalist world-economy. In the postwar period, polarization had become a relatively unpopular concept. World-systems analysis revived it, but has never really elaborated it. How do we prove its existence? Indeed, how do we measure its existence? There is first of all the technical difficulty that no measurements are useful or relevant that are not world-system-wide, and that the boundaries of the system have been constantly changing over time. Secondly, polarization is not theoretically between states but between economic zones, and between classes and peoples. Finally, statistics have not been collected by state-machineries in a manner pertinent to such analysis. The problems of measurement are thus daunting.

Quite aside from the necessary invention of new data-bases, on which little real progress has been made in the past fifteen years, there is the question of how we conceptualize polarization. If we measure it in some kind of monetary income terms, we face relatively well-known and long-considered, but not well-resolved, issues as to how to translate into monetary terms income that is not monetized but is nonetheless real. This is, however, the least of our problems. The bigger issue falls under the label of quality of life. For example, since there are more people in the world today, there is obviously less space per person. Less actual space? Surely. Less usable space? Possibly. How much space do people at polarized ends of the income distribution use, or have at their disposition, and how would we know? And what about trees? Do the world's upper strata have more trees to look at and the world's lower strata fewer than 500 years ago? Then there is the issue of health. If we all live on the average  $x$  years longer, but some of us live those  $x$  years at a level of health that permits good func-

tioning and others are vegetating, this is a further polarization. The questions here are simultaneously technical (how to measure) and substantive (what to measure). They are knotty. They are also intellectually crucial in the debate with the still very much alive developmentalist perspective. Until we tackle convincingly the question of polarization, we cannot expect to become truly influential.

Thirdly, we must begin to do research on the historical choices that are before us in the future. If we believe that all historical systems come to an end, the one in which we are living will also do so. And if we believe that the secular trends of the existing system have brought it into the zone of systemic crisis or "transition," then it is more than time that we begin to engage in utopistics — not utopianism, but utopistics. Utopistics is the science of utopian utopias, that is, the attempt to clarify the real historical alternatives that are before us when an historical system enters into its crisis phase, and to assess at that moment of extreme fluctuations the pluses and minuses of alternative strategies.

In the rejection of nineteenth-century social science, world-systems analysis necessarily rejects its reigning faith, the belief in inevitable progress. I believe that a viable alternative model of change is that of nonlinear processes which eventually reach bifurcation points, whereupon slight fluctuations have large consequences (as opposed to determinate equilibria in which large fluctuations have small consequences). This is the model Prigogine has suggested for all complex systems ("order through chaos") — and the most complex of all known systems is an historical social system. Even for such simple systems as physical systems, the key variable becomes time, reconceptualizing reality as involving stochastic and irreversible processes, within which deterministic, reversible processes constitute a limited, special case. *A fortiori* for complex historical systems.

The fact that the solution of a bifurcation is indeterminate does not mean that it is something beyond the reach of rational research. We can clarify the network of forces at work, elaborate possible vectors (and therefore loci of possible conscious interference), and thereby illuminate the real historical choices that are before us. This is not a matter of speculation but of serious research. It is work that we should be doing.

I have left for the last what I believe to be the key issue, and the

hardest nut to crack. We have said from the outset that our perspective is undisciplined. But we have merely paid lip service to this view. There is hard work to do, at three levels: theoretical, methodological, and organizational.

Theoretically, the issue is simple. Everyone in the social sciences uses regularly the distinction of three arenas: the economic, the political, and the socio-cultural. Noone believes us when we say there is but a single arena with a single logic. Do we believe it ourselves? Some of us, no doubt, but not even all of us. And all of us fall back on using the language of the three arenas in almost everything we write. It is time we seriously tackled the question.

The theoretical question is whether this trinity of arenas of social action—the economy, or market; the polity, or state; the society, or culture—is at all useful, or whether it is in fact pernicious. Can any of the three be conceived to have, even hypothetically, autonomous activity? All economic activity assumes socio-cultural rules and preferences, and works within political constraints. Furthermore, markets are socio-political creations. Is there, for example, a true economic price that can somehow be stripped of its political and social base? All political activity serves the end of ensuring or pursuing economic advantage or need as well as the reinforcement of socio-cultural objectives. Can there be a pursuit of power that is stripped of these considerations? And socio-cultural activity is itself made possible and explained by economic and political location, and serves ends that are ultimately defined in these terms. How can one imagine social (and/or cultural) activity stripped of these factors?

Nor is it simply a question that the three arenas are closely inter-linked. It is that human activity within a given world-system moves indiscriminately and imperceptibly in and among all three arenas. Do they really then constitute separate arenas? It is sometimes suggested that, although they were not separate arenas before the advent of a capitalist world-system, they became so in this system. But the descriptive work of world-systems analysis up to now on how historical capitalism has actually operated leads one to be very skeptical that the separation of spheres has had any functional reality even in that system. If so, then we are pursuing false models and undermining our own argumentation by continuing to use such language. It is urgent that we begin to elaborate alternative theoretical models.

This will then force us to face up to and spell out the methodological implications of world-systems analysis: that neither nomothetic nor idiographic modes of knowing in fact exist and that the only epistemology that is plausible lies in the swampy middle ground of the concept of an historical system. That is to say, our knowledge is about structures that reproduce themselves while they constantly change and consequently never reproduce themselves. We may discover the rules by which the cyclical rhythms seem to operate, except that they never truly describe any given empirical situation. The science of the complex is the science of the optimal description of the inherently imprecise.

We must not merely explicate this methodology. We have in addition the enormous task of creating world-systemic data that reflect this imprecise reality with maximum relevance. This is an intellectually difficult, materially and temporally exhausting, work of imagination and drudgery which will take a good 50 years by tens of thousands of scholars before it begins to pay off significantly. We have been dawdling too long.

Finally, we may be reluctantly forced to face the politically difficult organizational implications of our work: the wholesale reorganization of the social science sector of our universities and our libraries. It has taken 100 years for our present disciplinary divisions to institutionalize themselves, and they are now well-entrenched. Social science is a mega-colossus, and even its feet of clay are large and not easy to chip at. Nonetheless, once we confront the theoretical and methodological issues, we may not be able to avoid the organizational implications of our radical views. But this is perhaps the third phase. The second phase is for the moment enormous enough.