

Immanuel Wallerstein

Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein (born 28 September 1930, New York City) is a U.S. sociologist by credentials, but a historical social scientist, or **world-systems analyst** by trade.

Contents

- 1 Training and academic career
- 2 Theory
- 3 Quotations
- 4 Works
- 5 See also
- 6 External links
- 7 Videos

Training and academic career

Wallerstein attended Columbia University, where he received a B.A. in 1951, an M.A. in 1954 and a Ph.D. degree in 1959, and subsequently taught until 1971, when he became professor of sociology at McGill University. As of 1976, he served as distinguished professor of sociology at Binghamton University (SUNY) until his retirement in 1999, and as head of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems and Civilization until 2005. Wallerstein held several positions as visiting professor at universities worldwide, was awarded multiple honorary titles, intermittently served as Directeur d'études associé at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, and was president of the International Sociological Association between 1994 and 1998. Since 2000, he has been Senior research Scholar at Yale University.

Theory

Wallerstein began as an expert of post-colonial [African](#) affairs, which his publications were almost exclusively devoted to until the early 1970s, when he began to distinguish himself as a historian and theorist of the global [capitalist](#) economy on a macroscopic level. His early criticism of global capitalism and championship of "anti-systemic movements" have recently made him a [grey eminence](#) with the [anti-globalization movement](#) within and without the academic community, along with [Noam Chomsky](#) and [Pierre Bourdieu](#).

His most important work, *The Modern World-System*, appeared in three volumes in [1974](#), [1980](#), and [1989](#). In it, Wallerstein mainly draws on three intellectual influences:

- [Karl Marx](#), whom he follows in emphasizing underlying economic factors and their dominance over ideological factors in global politics, and whose economic thinking he has adopted with such ideas as the dichotomy between capital and labour, the staged view of world economic development through stages such as feudalism and capitalism, belief in the accumulation of capital, dialectics and more;
- French historian [Fernand Braudel](#), who had described the development and political implications of extensive networks of economic exchange in the European world between 1400 and 1800;
- and – presumably – the practical experience and impressions gained from his own work regarding post-colonial [Africa](#) and the various theories addressing "developing nations".

One aspect of his work that Wallerstein certainly deserves credit for, was anticipating the growing importance of the [North-South-Conflict](#) already on the height of the [Cold War](#).

Wallerstein rejected the notion of a "[Third World](#)", claiming there was only **one** world connected by a complex network of economic exchange relationships -- i.e., a "world-economy" or "world-system", in which the 'dichotomy of capital and labour', and the endless 'accumulation of capital' by competing agents (historically including, but not limited to nation-states) account for frictions. This approach is known as the [World Systems Theory](#).

Wallerstein locates the origin of the 'modern world-system' in 16th century Western Europe and the Americas. An initially only slight advance in capital accumulation in [Britain](#) and [France](#), due to specific political circumstances at the end of the period of [feudalism](#), set in motion a process of gradual expansion, as a result of which only one global network, or

system of economic exchange exists today. By the nineteenth century, virtually every area on earth was incorporated into the [capitalist](#) world-economy.

The capitalist world-system is, however, far from homogeneous in cultural, political, and economical terms--instead characterised by fundamental differences in civilizational development, accumulation of political power and capital. Contrary to affirmative theories of [modernization](#) and [capitalism](#), Wallerstein does not conceive of these differences as mere residues or irregularities that can and will be overcome as the system as a whole evolves. Much more, a lasting division of the world in *core*, *semi-periphery* and *periphery* is an inherent feature of the world-system. Areas which have so far remained outside the reach of the world-system, enter it at the stage of 'periphery'. There is a fundamental and institutionally stabilized 'division of labour' between core and periphery: While the core has a high level of technological development and manufactures complex products, the role of the periphery is to supply raw materials, agricultural products and cheap labour for the expanding agents of the core. Economic exchange between core and periphery takes place on [unequal terms](#): The periphery is forced to sell its products at low prices, but has to buy the core's products at comparatively high prices, an unequal state which, once established, tends to stabilize itself due to inherent, quasi-deterministic constraints. The statuses of core and periphery are not, however, mutually exclusive and fixed to certain geographic areas; instead, they are relative to each other and shifting: There is a zone called 'semi-periphery', which acts as a periphery to the core, and a core to the periphery. At the end of the 20th century, this zone would comprise, e.g., Eastern Europe, [China](#), [Brazil](#). Peripheral and core zones can also co-exist very closely in the same geographic area.

One effect of the expansion of the world-system is the continuing commodification of things, including human labour. Natural resources, land, labour and human relationships are gradually being stripped of their "intrinsic" value and turned into commodities in a market which dictates their exchange value.

Wallerstein's theory has also provoked harsh criticism, not only from [neo-liberal](#) or

conservative circles, but even some historians who have averred that some of his assertions may be historically incorrect. As well, some critics suggest that Wallerstein tends to neglect the cultural dimension, reducing it to what some call "official" ideologies of states, which can then easily be revealed as mere agencies of economic interest. Nevertheless, his analytical approach along with that of associated theorists such as [Andre Gunder Frank](#), [Terence Hopkins](#), [Samir Amin](#), and [Giovanni Arrighi](#) has made a significant impact and established an institutional base devoted to the general approach. It has also attracted strong interest from the [anti-globalization movement](#).

Quotations

"In the sixteenth century, Europe was like a bucking bronco. The attempt of some groups to establish a world-economy based on a particular division of labor, to create national states in the core areas as politico-economic guarantors of this system, and to get the workers to pay not only the profits but the costs of maintaining the system was not easy. It was to Europe's credit that it was done, since without the thrust of the sixteenth century the modern world would not have been born and, for all its cruelties, it is better that it was born than that it had not been.

It is also to Europe's credit that it was not easy, and particularly that it was not easy because the people who paid the short-run costs screamed lustily at the unfairness of it all. The peasants and workers in Poland and England and Brazil and Mexico were all rambunctious in their various ways. As [R. H. Tawney](#) says of the agrarian disturbances of sixteenth-century England: 'Such movements are a proof of blood and sinew and of a high and gallant spirit. . . . Happy the nation whose people has not forgotten how to rebel.'

The mark of the modern world is the imagination of its profiteers and the counter-assertiveness of the oppressed. Exploitation and the refusal to accept exploitation as either inevitable or just constitute the continuing antinomy of the modern era, joined together in a dialectic which has far from reached its climax in the twentieth century."

Source: *The Modern World-System*, vol. I, p 233.

Works

- [1961](#): *Africa, The Politics of Independence*. New York: Vintage.
- [1964](#): *The Road to Independence: Ghana and the Ivory Coast*. Paris & The Hague: Mouton.
- [1967](#): *Africa: The Politics of Unity*. New York: Random House.
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- [1979](#): *The Capitalist World-Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [1980](#): *The Modern World-System, vol. II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750*. New York: Academic Press.
- [1982](#) (with [Terence K. Hopkins](#) et al.): *World-Systems Analysis: Theory and Methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- [1982](#) (with [Samir Amin](#), [Giovanni Arrighi](#) and [Andre Gunder Frank](#)): *Dynamics of Global Crisis*. London: Macmillan.
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- **1998**: *Utopistics: Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: New Press.
- **1999**: *The End of the World As We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-first Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- **2003**: *Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World*. New York: New Press.
- **2004**: *The Uncertainties of Knowledge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- **2004**: *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- **2004**: *Alternatives: The U.S. Confronts the World*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Press.
- **2006**: *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. New York: New Press.

See also

- [Dependency theory](#)

External links

- [Articles By Immanuel Wallerstein](#)
- [Curriculum Vitae](#)
- [Wallerstein's own fortnightly commentaries on current events](#)
- [Festschrift for Immanuel Wallerstein - Part I](#) *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. VI, Number 2, Summer/Fall 2000
- ["Modern History Sourcebook: Summary of Wallerstein on World System Theory"](#)
- [Festschrift for Immanuel Wallerstein - Part II](#) *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. VI, Number 3, Fall/Winter 2000
- [Interview on Cultural Globalization \(1999\)](#)
- Introduction to Social Macrodynamics: Compact Macromodels of the World System Growth by [Andrey Korotayev](#), Artemy Malkov, and Daria Khaltourina^[1]
- ^[2] Wallersteins World-Systems Theory

Videos



[The United States facing its decline](#) Conference given at the [University of Montreal](#) Fall 2006 (*in French*)

Categories: [1930 births](#) | [American sociologists](#) | [Living people](#) | [Geopoliticians](#)

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