

# CELEBRATING LEGACY OF A TITAN: IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN AND CREATION OF THE WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY

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## ОТДАВАЯ ДАТЬ УВАЖЕНИЯ ТИТАНУ: ИММАНУИЛ ВАЛЛЕРСТАЙН И СОЗДАНИЕ МИР-СИСТЕМНОЙ ТЕОРИИ Владимир Н. АЛАЛЫКИН-ИЗВЕКОВ

**Abstract.** The paper is a salute to a preeminent social scholar of our times – Immanuel M. Wallerstein (1930–2019). It 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 process of development of one of his main contributions to social sciences – the *world-systemic approach*, as well as to analyze various important aspects of it, including its historiosophic significance. All efforts have been made to keep the paper informative, however also accessible and translucent, conferring, when appropriate, upon 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.

**Резюме.** Эта статья является данью уважения выдающемуся социологу нашего времени Иммануилу М. Валлерстайну (1930–2019 гг.). В ней кратко освещается его биография, образование и академическая карьера, однако в основном она посвящена его научным концепциям и теориям. Автор предпринимает попытку проследить процесс развития одного из его основных вкладов в общественные науки – *мир-системного подхода*, а также проанализировать различные его существенные аспекты, в том числе его историсофское значение. Были сделаны все усилия, чтобы публикация была информативной, однако также доступной и прозрачной, предоставляя возможность, когда это уместно, самому Иммануилу Валлерстайну представить свои идеи перед читателем.

**Ключевые слова:** антисистемные движения, ядро, разделение труда, экономическая социология, геокультура, периферия, полупериферия, мир-экономика, мир-империя, мир-система.

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“Aristotle ... is also deeply interested in the affairs of “economic” life from a moral viewpoint. ... he is the first of the philosophers to sense that there was an analytical, as well as a moral problem in the conduct of market affairs.”  
- Robert Heilbroner.

## Introduction

The paper is a salute to a preeminent social scholar of our times – Immanuel M. Wallerstein (1930-2019). It 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 process of development of one of his main contributions to social sciences – the *world-systemic approach*, as well as to analyze various important aspects of it, including its historiosophic significance. All efforts have been made to keep the paper informative, however also accessible and translucent, conferring, when appropriate, upon Immanuel Wallerstein himself to expound his ideas to the reader.

## 1. Biography

Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein was born in New York City on September 28, 1930. His parents were originally from Galicia – a historic land straddling both Central and Eastern Europe.

The future scholar’s *alma mater* is Columbia University – he earns here a B.A. in 1951, an M.A. in 1954, and a Ph.D. in 1959. Through the years, he also studies abroad – at Oxford University, Université libre de Bruxelles, Université Paris 7 Denis Diderot, as well as at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Prof. Wallerstein teaches at Columbia University (1958–1971) and at McGill University in Montreal, Canada (1971–1976). From 1976 until 2005 Immanuel Wallerstein is at the helm of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations at Binghamton University in New York. The thinker serves as a distinguished professor of sociology at Binghamton until his retirement in 1999. Between 2000 and his death in 2019 Immanuel Wallerstein was a Senior Research Scholar at Yale University.

## 2. Early Thought

Since his high school years, Immanuel has a keen interest in the non-European world [1, p. XVI], and most of his early publications are on the post-colonial Africa. *The World-Systems Analysis* originates in the early 1970s as a new perspective on social reality. [2, p. 1]. The scholar elaborates his views in the *magnum opus The Modern World-System*, which appears in four volumes between 1974 and 2011. In 1975, the first volume of the set receives a prestigious Sorokin Award from the American Sociological Association.

### 3. World-Systems Approach

#### 3.1. Description

In one of his now “classic” works, Immanuel Wallerstein defines the term *world-system* “as a unit with a single division of labor and multiple cultural systems.” [3, p. 75]. The scholar envisions 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* the scholar 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. 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 the scholar, the modern *world-system* originates in Western Europe and the Americas in the 16th-century. First the Dutch Republic, then Britain and France, lead the way in its gradual expansion, until, by the 19th century, virtually every area on earth is encompassed by it. The most prominent feature of the modern *world-system* is its division into a highly industrialized *core*, a moderately developed *semi-periphery*, and an underdeveloped *periphery*. The *semi-periphery* acts as a *periphery* to the *core* and as a *core* to the *periphery*, and, by the end of the 20th century, it includes Eastern Europe, China, Brazil, and Mexico.

The scholar elaborates on the intricacies of those zones’ relations: “The semiperipheral 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 semiperipheral 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 semiperipheral 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 semiperipheral 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 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].

### 3.2. Influences

The scholar 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 scholar's intellectual paradigm. An attentive reader can easily discern a number of intellectual influences in the Wallerstein's scholarly doctrine, including *comparative theory of civilizations*, *The Annales School*, *Marxist tradition*, as well as *dependency theory*.

#### 3.2.1. Comparative Theory of Civilizations

The *world-systemic approach* to history shares certain fundamental features with *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 the economic phenomena, the entities they study largely are, and ought to be, the same, and even proposes 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 civilizationist* – 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. And 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].



### 3.2.2. *The Annales School*

The *Annales School* of historiography has been 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, 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 uses ideas from other social sciences, stresses geography, economics, and the *longue durée*, as well as downplays importance of specific events and individuals. Even more pronounced are the economic themes in the Braudel's three-volume *opus magnum 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 presents a number of "rules or tendencies," related to *world-economies*:

Rule One: the boundaries change only slowly. 2. Rule Two: a dominant capitalist city always lies at the centre. Rule Two (continued): the power and influence of cities may vary. Rule Three: there is always a hierarchy of zones within a *world-economy*. Rule Three (continued): *Von Thunen's zones*.<sup>2</sup> Rule Three (continued): the spatial arrangement of the *world-economy*. Rule Three (continued): do *neutral zones* exist?<sup>3</sup> Rule Three (conclusion): *envelope*<sup>4</sup> and *infrastructure*. [6, p. 26–45].

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

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<sup>2</sup> *Von Thunen zones* – a highly hypothetical model of agricultural land use, which has been 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, the ranching is located in the final ring. (Author's note).

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

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

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, 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 it is already obvious, the most important term of the *world-systems approach* – *world-system*, originates as a derivative of the Fernand Braudel's term *world-economy*.

### 3.2.3. *Marxist Tradition*

To substantiate his *world-systems* doctrine 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 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 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].

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

### 3.2.4. Dependency Theory

Yet another root of the *world-systems approach* extends to the *dependency theory*. The *dependistas* postulate, that the *core* of wealthy, industrialized states profits at the expense of located on the *periphery* underdeveloped and poor nations. Immanuel Wallerstein writes, using a habitual for the 1970s political language: “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 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* borrows a number of terms and notions from the *dependency theory* as well, for example, the industrialized *core*, relatively developed *semi-periphery*, and typically underdeveloped *periphery zones* or *regions*.

## 4. Legacy

Immanuel Wallerstein develops an innovative macro-level and long-term socioeconomic theory, which he names the *world-systems approach*. While working on his paradigm, the scholar creatively synthesizes concepts and theories of other scholars and thinkers, such as *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 a few modern theorists, who succeeded in developing a truly macrosociological theory. [9, VII-VIII]. The scholar’s approach influences a certain number of contemporary schools of thought, such as the *Russian School of Globalistics*. One may even contend, 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

<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).



Pitirim A. Sorokin, to this branch belong “those theories which have taken one of the so called “economic factors” as 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, postulates:

... (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 the economic interpreters in their way. ...” [10, 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 rapidly globalizing world.
2. In the scholar’s *world-systems paradigm*, one can easily discern a number of intellectual influences, including *comparative theory of civilizations*, *The Annales School*, *Marxist tradition*, as well as *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 there, and only the 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 that 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].

**Semiperipheral.** There are no semiperipheral 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 semiperipheral 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, 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 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, p. 98-99].

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