

**Special Contribution:  
Interview with Immanuel Wallerstein**

**Retrospective on the Origins of World-Systems Analysis**

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*Nearly four decades ago, in 1974, Immanuel Wallerstein published the first volume of his magnum opus, The Modern World-System. That same year, Perry Anderson, British historian and editor of the New Left Review, released the first two installments of his own large-scale history on the origins of modernity. The coincidence of publication invited many scholarly comparisons of their macro-historical perspectives. It is noteworthy that both writers think in terms of totalities. To totalize is to insist on methodological holism. Wallerstein conceives of totality in terms of world-systems, while Anderson advocates for totalization. This is a meaningful contrast. World-systems are closed totalities in the sense that they are historical systems, with a beginning, an end, and identifiable geographical boundaries. Totalization is historically open-ended, and thus invites analyses, in Anderson's case, beginning in Antiquity and without a specified end. While they each write about the modern world, Wallerstein and Anderson conceive of that world in drastically different terms. Neither scholar, however, has asserted his view as a singular paradigm of social analysis. Wallerstein has instead claimed world-systems to be a "call for a debate about the paradigm."<sup>1</sup>*

*In the seventies, Wallerstein and Anderson became familiar with the each other's research: they wrote, offered advice on books, and Anderson even taught a few courses in Binghamton at Wallerstein's invitation. Yet from their departure on the unit of analysis, their overall perspectives on world history and current events remain dissimilar. Wallerstein, unlike Anderson, chooses not to self-identify as a Marxist and has been skeptical of Marxism's stress on the bourgeois revolutions. Wallerstein also believes that the capitalist world-economy, as a closed totality, will collapse from the cumulative impact of its own contradictions; from there, individuals and movements can shape how the next world-system or -systems will function. Anderson contends that capitalism today is strong, although he concedes it could fall apart in time.*

*In our conversation Wallerstein discusses the origins and implications of his world-systems perspective. Our talk traces the evolution of Wallerstein's thinking, beginning with his thoughts on Anderson. We then turn to the issue of world-systems as an inherently ecological (or world-ecological) style of analysis. There had been some debate on whether Wallerstein's series on the capitalist world-economy, now in four volumes, was sensitive to environmental analysis. Today, Wallerstein believes the world-systems perspective is compatible with environmental history precisely because it is working in the tradition of holism. Totalities, in other words, are inseparable from their constituent parts. The economy, politics, society, and the environment*

cannot be separated from one another. This is why Wallerstein writes from a historical social science perspective, not merely a sociological one.

In fact, Wallerstein sees disciplinary divisions within academia as part of the present crisis in the capitalist world-economy. Newtonian science encourages the search for universal laws, impervious to alterations of time or space. This nomothetic view of knowledge accumulation is also widespread in the social sciences. Yet according to Ilya Prigogine, who won a Nobel Prize in Chemistry, even seemingly permanent laws are bound temporally and spatially. Wallerstein believes we should embrace the principle of uncertainty across all domains of knowledge. This is not because we have trouble gathering evidence, but rather because crises of world-systems have many possible outcomes. Therefore, he works to combat the Newtonian assumption that capitalism is a natural, not historical, system. Wallerstein even rejects nomothetic perspectives that are critical of capitalism—most notably, the belief that comparing world-systems can reveal fundamental world-historical truths. (Such comparative logic only works for periods of systemic transformation, when systems are essentially without rules.) Still, Wallerstein does not trade the nomothetic worldview for its opposite, the idiographic interpretation of history. He rejects the latter's glorification of case specificity without larger generalizations. World-systems analysis, in Wallerstein's opinion, relieves biases inherent in social science research.

Finally, in the last part of the interview, we turn to the revolutions of 1968. As a professor at Columbia University, and a member of the Ad Hoc Faculty Group, Wallerstein served as a negotiator between the administration and the students who had occupied buildings. Later, he came to see the uprisings of that year as a sign of the modern world-system in crisis. This is a fitting close to our interview because, in the present age of global social upheaval, Wallerstein believes we are witnessing the closing act of capitalism, whereby seemingly small actions can yield large returns. The end of the modern world-system is certain. The outcome of these struggles, whether they will improve or worsen the conditions of humanity, is intrinsically uncertain.

**Gregory P. Williams (GW):** You and Perry Anderson both published major works about the origins of the modern world in 1974. Did you feel like you and he were writing about something similar?

**Immanuel Wallerstein (IW):** Well, yes and no, I suppose. Yes in the sense that he's writing about the modern world and I'm writing about the modern world. I guess in that sense they're completely similar. There was a review in the *New York Review of Books* when his two volumes came out and my volume I came out,<sup>2</sup> which treated us together. It was called "Jumbo History" by Keith Thomas.<sup>3</sup>

**GW:** Your visions are somewhat different. His narrative begins in antiquity, and is driven forward from there.

**IW:** No, absolutely. His vision is more directly tied to classical Marxism in the sense that he sees historical stages: capitalism was born after feudalism. His view is, I suppose, the best historical explanation of the classical Marxist theoretical position.

**GW:** And in your own telling, you call what happened to create the capitalist world-economy a 'fortuitous simultaneity of events', meaning that if it hadn't happened in the way that it did, it may have been

avoided altogether.<sup>4</sup> Anderson's story is nuanced but teleological. You're often called a Marxist, but this break with Marxism is significant.

**IW:** Yes, in his reading it was inevitable. I think that's a major difference between the two, exactly. I reject the theory of inevitable progress, which tends to be a part of classical, what I call orthodox, Marxism. I'm not sure those are Marx's own views. Marx's own views are much more complicated. Orthodox Marxism is the Marxism of the party: the Marxism of the German Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. And it was really put in place by Engels after Marx's death. That's classical Marxism. Marx himself relates to classical Marxism with great difficulty in my view. But, there are contradictions, intellectual contradictions within his work, and it depends on what you want to read and emphasize.

**GW:** Would you prefer to be identified as a radical or would you call yourself a Marxist?

**IW:** I'm perfectly happy with being called a radical, and being called a Marxist depends on what you mean by Marxist. And I usually say there are four views of me as a Marxist: there are those who say that I am a Marxist and that's a good thing; there are those who say that I am a Marxist and that's a bad thing; and there are those who say that I'm not a Marxist and that's a good thing; and there are those who say that I'm not a Marxist and that's a bad thing. I can identify people who have argued all these things and I don't worry about that. I have said at various points that he is, as far as I'm concerned, the most significant social scientist of the nineteenth century, and I'm certainly happy to regard him as one of the several sources of my thinking. He's a

significant thinker of the nineteenth century, and things have moved on. He was writing some things wrong and not others, and you have to take him for what he offers you.

**GW:** I noticed how freely Anderson identifies with Marxism. He says that the freedom of Marxism is to be able to make revisions. It doesn't matter if Marx would have agreed with us.<sup>5</sup> Is it simply not permissible to do this with an American audience?

**IW:** It's more difficult in an American audience, but it's pretty difficult in British audience too. And again, it's what moment in time we're talking about. There was a time in Europe when it was not only respectable to be a Marxist, but it was virtually the only respectable position. That changed. Perry very much thinks of himself as a Western Marxist. He writes about Western Marxism. And in many ways that's correct in the sense that the sources of his ideas are really located heavily in people who are Italians, Germans, and French thinkers. And he, and the *New Left Review* in general, played a major role in introducing these ideas, and actually translating them into English. And they saw this as their first major function, since *New Left Review* has two moments in history. Certainly, it was the moment of the first series. Perry changed his position from being a kind of strong optimist to being a strong pessimist. And that infuses his writings since 2000, more or less. And since then, *New Left Review* has become more catholic in its taste, shall I say? I've just had occasion to look at that the other day, and I've over the years written ten articles for *New Left Review*. It's quite a bit. I suppose it's the journal I've published in the most, except for *Review*, my own journal. So, I certainly think of *New Left Review* as a journal which speaks to left intellectuals

around the world. It is its function, but it has a scholarly tone: the articles are serious articles.

**GW:** You two are also similar in that you announced you were originally planning on four volumes. Anderson's first two came out in the same year. You've released four so far and plan to write more. But it seems to me, in looking at your later writings, if you were to add up some of them, that those would comprise the final volumes.

**IW:** Well, the fourth volume only deals with what I call the long nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> And in the preface to the fourth volume I explain why there's going to be a fifth, and maybe a sixth, and maybe a seventh, if I survive that long. Okay? So, the project is going forward. His project is, to all effects and purposes, stuck. He was supposed to write another volume on the bourgeois revolutions, and he never wrote it. And I don't think he ever will, but that's just my view. But it's also most people's views. And he publishes, incessantly, right? He writes essays of all kinds. But you're perfectly right that in my other writings I have dealt with the material that will be in volume five, and maybe six, and so forth. And maybe I don't need to write it, but it isn't done as systematically, and as I think as persuasively as it should be done. So, if I were to die tomorrow, my views on the twentieth century, and even on the twenty-first, exist in all kinds of articles. But the volume doesn't exist. So I will try.

**GW:** Why is it that you think, and that others think, that Anderson won't complete that project?

**IW:** Well, he has given courses on the bourgeois revolution. He used to give a course at one point at Binghamton on that. But he's never written it. I myself don't

think much of the concept of the bourgeois revolution, let me put it that way. But I think he's going to have a difficult time demonstrating its pervasiveness across the world beyond what he and most people take as the classical examples, which are the British, the French, and maybe the American. I don't think it's doable. And he's too smart a fellow. You know, he is one of the most careful authors the world knows. He's one of the few people who won't let you record his talks. Absolutely refuses, because he doesn't want anything to come out that isn't his finished version. So he works on it, and works on it, and works on it. The two volumes he did publish were originally one volume, and he was persuaded by his colleagues at the *New Left Review* that it was too immensely thick and so forth. And so he broke it down into two volumes. But he won't publish on the bourgeois revolution until it's his definitive view. And he's not going to make it. I have always had the feeling that when I get to the point where I am ninety-five percent convinced of my own point of view, I publish it. He has to be one-hundred percent. It's really crippling in many ways. But what can you do? Given that, he's published an awful lot.

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**GW:** Jason Moore wrote an article where he demonstrated an ecological element to your *Modern World-System I*.<sup>7</sup> By my count, I found what looked to be thirteen separate instances where environmental change contributes to this larger, structural change you discuss. I counted climate, famine, food supply, population, and timber. Do you think it's fair to read this as a work of environmental history?

**IW:** Well, actually, his article startled me because I hadn't realized how much I had done that in volume one. But I don't think

he's wrong. I don't think he's wrong at all. I thought what he was trying to do was defend me against all those people who say I ignore these issues. He said no, not at all, they are central to what I was doing, and he's right. But I have to say that in 1971 when I was actually writing the book, I didn't think of it as environmental history. Nobody was doing environmental history at that time. It wasn't a concept that I was utilizing. But I was utilizing the concept of holism, right? And so it seemed to me perfectly natural to include all of these elements.

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**GW:** I saw a C-SPAN interview of you from 2002.<sup>8</sup> It was a morning program that feature calls from viewers. Some people would call in and say outrageous things. One caller, for example, assumed you were a Viet Nam draft-dodger. And your response was, essentially, 'I didn't try to escape it. That was too late for me: I fought during Korea.' Another caller criticized C-SPAN, suggesting that Rumsfeld or Rice should have been their guests instead. Do you find those types of attacks limiting in a way? Is the left a category that the public knows how to deal with?

**IW:** In terms of U.S. public debate, my position is considered very far out. The press, the media, tends to define what I think of as the center, they think of as the left. So you get the center versus the right in most of your media, and anybody who's to the left of the center is from the moon. They don't give the left any legitimacy. And this has moved steadily to the right. The locus of what is the center has moved steadily to the right over the last thirty or forty years. So, if people think of Obama as a wild socialist, what can I do?

**GW:** Maybe not in the same way, but academics do this too. Is it more frustrating

when it's someone who, in a sense, is supposed to get it right?

**IW:** My general view is, patiently, to re-explain my position, time and time and time again. After a while, it begins to penetrate. Some of the nonsense written in the 1970s people won't write today. But, you know, stay calm. The history of the last thirty or forty years has borne out my views. Not everyone would agree with that, but more people agree with that today than they would have agreed thirty or forty years ago.

**GW:** You refer to two types of traps in world-systems research. One is the nomothetic trap where researchers assume world-systems can be compared. The other is this idiographic trap, where researchers imagine the whole world as a single system. Is the capitalist world-economy really the largest unit of analysis we can use?

**IW:** Oh yes. Today we have a capitalist world-economy. It encompasses the entire globe, but there isn't anything else. That's the new situation. It started a little earlier than today. It starts in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it's the first time in human history where there's only one historical system on the planet at a given time. And that does change a lot of things.

**GW:** You write a lot about opening up the social sciences, making them more accessible, reducing the duplicative research from one field to another. Is this something that came out of your writings from the 1970s?

**IW:** I became more and more interested in the epistemological questions when I saw that a lot of critiques were based on epistemological assumptions which I realized I didn't share. And so I began to be more interested in these questions, already

in the late 1970s, but I suppose also in the 1980s, which was my first contact with Prigogine.<sup>9</sup> That was something of an intellectual breakthrough, and then I felt one had to face up to this intellectual crisis of knowledge systems that is part of the structural crisis of the world-system. So I began to write on that. And then I got involved in setting up the Gulbenkian Commission and put out the book, *Open the Social Sciences*.<sup>10</sup> I say that I write in three different domains, and one of them is on the basic epistemological issues and overcoming the concept of the two cultures.<sup>11</sup> I think it is a new one, in the sense 'new,' it only dates from the middle of the eighteenth century and is under serious challenge today, and hopefully won't exist twenty, thirty, forty years from now. But it's a big battle. A lot of people, I'd say even most people, are defending the legitimacy of the distinction.

**GW:** Simply because it's what they know?

**IW:** And they are invested in it.

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**GW:** Do you think the development of world-systems analysis would have been possible if it weren't for the revolutions of 1968?

**IW:** Well, that was certainly a major element in creating the ambiance in which world-systems analysis could come forward. Absolutely, because it undermined the hegemony of centrist liberalism, and it opened up all sorts of questions about forgotten peoples, and so forth. All of this raised a good deal of skepticism about classical political and economic explanations. I certainly had many of those ideas earlier, but in a more confused way.

**GW:** Your M.A. thesis was on McCarthyism. Did that help you?

**IW:** Well, in the sense that the importance of the McCarthyism thesis was to take this idea that there were, basically, two kinds of political right: the more sophisticated conservatives, and the practical conservatives. I took the categories from C. Wright Mills at the time. It was important in understanding what was going on politically in the United States but then, by extension, actually in many parts of the world, which is still going on. That same battle that I describe in 'McCarthyism and the Conservative' is the battle that's going on in the Republican Party today in the United States, between the Tea Party types and the more classical conservative establishment.

**GW:** You once described yourself as a kind of heretic for social science at the time.<sup>12</sup> Was there something about being at Columbia, or sociology at Columbia, that made it more acceptable to branch out? And did it reach a point where it was difficult to be there?

**IW:** Well, sure, I was. I was a product of Columbia sociology, but I was also a heretic. Columbia sociology in the 1950s was the center of the world. It thought of itself, and was thought of, as the center of sociological world. And it had a very strong point of view. But within that framework, they were somewhat tolerant. So, they tolerated me, because I was a good scholar, and because I was one of the family. But a number of years later, Paul Lazarsfeld said of me and Terry Hopkins that we were 'His Majesty's loyal opposition.' It reached a point where it was difficult to be there only because of the 1968 crisis, and the politics of the 1968 crisis. But not because of my intellectual views. It was part of my intellectual views, but anyway, not because of what I was writing.

**GW:** It was because of a position you took?

**IW:** The Sociology Department was split. The Columbia University sociology graduate students have the largest percentage in the occupied buildings. Robert Merton and Lazarsfeld had the only major fight in their life over 1968. Merton's position was really ultra-conservative on that, and I was involved in the Ad Hoc Faculty Group, and so forth. All of that was a strain at the time.<sup>13</sup>

**GW:** Do you see a direct connection between being there in 1968 and the development of the world-system perspective?

**IW:** Well, I certainly saw it as something which crystallized a lot of my views on a whole series of questions. So, absolutely, I think it was an important event, certainly in

my life, my own biography, but it was also important event in the collective biography of the world, you know? It was a major—it was, in my view, and this is where I'm really a heretic, it was the most important historical event of the twentieth century. It dwarfs the Russian Revolution. It dwarfs 1989. It's more important in terms of its impact on the world-system. But people these days try to play it down.

**GW:** Because they think it's simply not as important as other events.

**IW:** Well, yes, there are all sorts of reasons. It depends on who's trying to play it down. But I mean, basically, it was seen as a moment of madness, or something irrelevant because it died out, and was replaced by other things.

*We see today that 1968 was not a moment of madness, but has in fact lived on. Protesters in 1989, for example, also resented power-brokers of the modern world-system.<sup>14</sup> And recent movements the world over have maintained this discontent, including: the Arab Spring, the Occupy movements, and uprisings in Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Greece, and Spain. For Wallerstein, these movements are the expected outcome of a system on the brink of self-destruction.*

*The capitalist world-economy has outdone its predecessors by expanding to cover the entire Earth. In Wallerstein's opinion, it is also unique in preserving great inequality in the name of establishing equality.<sup>15</sup> Still, the modern world-system, like all historical systems, will inevitably come to an end. For 500 years, expansion has been its lifeblood: during times of social upheaval, modest concessions could be offset by expanding to previously external zones. Today, capitalism has simply run out of space. The pressure of social movements can no longer be relieved without threatening the fundamental requirement of profit maximization. As Wallerstein notes, factories have lost the option to "runaway" when profits decline.<sup>16</sup>*

*For Wallerstein, these movements also raise questions about our systems of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Social science of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was biased towards what was masculine, European, and bourgeois. Research, in turn, assumed that economic, political, and cultural advancement was to become more like Europe and the United States. The notion of developmental stages was used to conceal the relational nature of well-being: that comfort and luxury for a few was predicated on the misery of many. Drastically different social and political conditions could be justified (or even condemned!) by the notion that such peoples needed more, not less, interaction with the privileged. In times of expansion, this explanation may appear plausible to many. But as the system collapses under its own weight, the idea of stages loses credibility.*

*Far from being replaced by other things, the issues raised by 1968, of expansion and knowledge accumulation, are still unresolved. Out of the demise of capitalism, the next world-system(s) could potentially be egalitarian. Such a system has never previously existed, yet the power to make it a reality rests with everyday people. Wallerstein believes that we are living in a historically unusual time. During periods of stability, there is little opportunity for individuals to transform their circumstances. But when a world-system is in turmoil, individuals may fashion its replacement. The world-revolution of 1968 signaled that we are in such a period of instability. This may be cause for some hope, although triumph for the less well-off is far from guaranteed. When asked if he is pessimistic or optimistic about the future, Wallerstein has a "standard answer": 50-50. "That is my answer ..., fifty-fifty, and it depends on us."<sup>18</sup>*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Call for a Debate about the Paradigm," in *Unthinking Social Science*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, [1987b] 2001, 237-256).

<sup>2</sup> Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1974a); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974b); and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Keith Thomas, "Jumbo History," *New York Review of Books* (17 April 1975).

<sup>4</sup> This phrase can be found in "World System Versus World-Systems: A Critique," in *The World System: Five hundred years or five thousand?* Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, eds. (New York: Routledge, 292-296), 295.

<sup>5</sup> The quote, from *Passages*, reads as follows: "Marx and Engels themselves can never be taken simply at their word: the errors of their writings on the past should not be evaded or ignored, but identified and criticized. To do so is not to depart from historical materialism, but to rejoin it [...] To take 'liberties' with the signature of Marx is in this sense merely to enter into the freedom of Marxism" (1974b, 9).

<sup>6</sup> *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Jason W. Moore, "The Modern World-System as Environmental History? Ecology and the Rise of Capitalism," *Theory and Society* 32(3) 2003: 307-77.

<sup>8</sup> C-SPAN, "Washington Journal," (2 July 2002): <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/id/125735>.

<sup>9</sup> Ilya Prigogine, Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, and author of *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, and others, *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> This is from the introduction to *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The reference to being a "heretic" for social science appears in the preface to *The Essential Wallerstein*: "I essentially am, and was from the beginning, a heretic in terms of that mode of social science" (2000, xi).

<sup>13</sup> For a "blow by blow description" of the 1968 Columbia crisis, Wallerstein recommends Jerry L. Avorn et al., *Up Against the Ivy Wall: A History of the Columbia Crisis* (New York: Antheneum, 1970). Wallerstein's published



reflection, *University in Turmoil: The Politics of Change*, is more about the university's role in society (New York: Antheneum, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> See Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, "1989, the Continuation of 1968," *Review* 15(2), 1992: 221-242.

<sup>15</sup> See chapter four of *The Modern World-System IV* (2011, 143-217).

<sup>16</sup> "End of the Road for Runaway Factories?" Commentary No. 351 (15 April 2013): <http://www.iwallerstein.com/commentaries/>.

<sup>17</sup> *Open the Social Sciences* (1996).

<sup>18</sup> *The World We Are Entering, 2000-2050*, Immanuel Wallerstein and Armand Clesse, eds. (Amsterdam: Dutch University Press, 2002), 150.