



A Theorist's Appreciation of Immanuel Wallerstein's Analysis of Inter-Societal Dynamics

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In the 1950s and well into the 1960s and 1970s, a “modernization” approach dominated much analysis of the study inter-societal dynamics. The basic thrust of this approach was to argue that if the motives and orientations of individuals in less economically developed societies could be altered, it would be possible over time for such societies to get on track to modernization. Of course, economic capital and less despotic political systems were needed but, still, it was often



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assumed that if individuals' orientations would change to embrace modernization and to manifest achievement motivations (in education and economic activity, as well in more democratic politics), entrepreneurial and professional orientations of actors would transform societies. Of course, this approach depended upon the patronage of more "modern" societies and their affiliated non-state NGOs and international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as the foreign-aid agencies of governments in developed, capitalist societies.

Somewhat to my surprise in 1967, I found myself buying into this vision, conveniently ignoring the patterns of economic and political domination that existed among societies. Such domination by external actors—both governments and NGOs and international organizations mainly under the control of "advanced societies"—could be used to implement practices in less developed societies that would be conducive to modernity. Foreign aid was also a tool of domination, often masking its interests in sustaining domination by developed societies and key economic actors in these societies.

The first frontal attack on this modernization approach was Dependency Theory, which was proposed by Argentine economist Raul Prebisch (1950) and later appeared (apparently independently) as an exchange theory developed within North American sociology to study power/dependence relations among individuals and groups by Richard Emerson (1962) and later expanded upon by key theorists, such as Peter Blau (1964). Raul Prebisch (1950) challenged the Ricardian notion of comparative advantage that was predominant in economics, contending that the division of labor that had emerged between the global North and the global South based on the exchange of high technology manufactured goods for low-wage mineral and agricultural goods was exploitative and a barrier to the development of colonies and former colonies in the global South. This idea was taken up by other social scientists in Latin America and was brought to the English-speaking world by Andre Gunder Frank in his 1966 *Monthly Review* article "The Development of Underdevelopment." This was well after the appearance of Richard Emerson's (1962) *American Sociology Review* article on "Power Dependence Relations" which was apparently inspired, not by Latin American dependency theory, but by Thibaut and Kelley's 1959 *The Social Psychology of Small Groups*. If this is correct it is an interesting case of intellectual parallel evolution that occurred at different levels of analysis (inter-social versus small group relations) earlier in Latin America but did not diffuse to the global North until after Thibaut and Kelley and Emerson had developed it independently.

Emerson's (1962) theory was explicitly intended to be relevant for explaining power relations at micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis and was influenced and cited by later studies of what world-systems theorists came to call the core/periphery hierarchical division of labor. But as late as the 1990s, I attended meetings of social scientists with the "modernizationist agenda" still very much tied to a view of "foreign aid" that encouraged new motives and orientations of individuals in communities as the key to long-term economic development. Emerson's "exchange-power" theory was more of an academic exercise, and a most useful one, that had little impact on policies of development by more advanced capitalist societies. Yet it contained what Emerson termed "balancing strategies" by which dependent actors—whether individuals or collective units of

organization such as whole societies—could reduce their dependence. These strategies were, in fact, to become very much part of dependency theories postulated by sociologists.¹

Yet, as mentioned above, heterodox scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank (1966, 1969, 1978, 1979) were presenting more theoretical statements, emphasizing that “traditional” institutional systems, lack of technological development, and shortages of domestic capital formation, or even lack of entrepreneurial orientations and motivations, were ultimately *the result of strategies that all dominant actors pursue*. These strategies revolve around giving as few resources as possible to secure valued resources that can help support the domination of the firms and states of the global North. Thus seemingly benign and philanthropic efforts to help dependent societies were, in fact, designed to sustain dependence and thwart broadly based development in societies possessing resources needed by hegemon. Investments by developed societies were generally negatively targeted to secure valued resources at low prices and limited investment in infrastructures, often coupled with bribery and payoffs to key actors in government. In this way, resources could be gained and shipped back to dominant societies at low costs, while at the same time sustaining “dependency” and “low development” across the institutional systems of what were labeled “developing societies” (which, in fact, *were societies being held in* underdevelopment).

Since Marxian theory is, in essence, an exchange theory of conflict emphasizing that persistent unequal exchange sets into motion the conditions for mobilization of the exploited to rebalance relations with super-ordinate capitalists, dependency theorists argued that these basic arguments by Marx could be generalized to stratification *among* societies (as well as within societies). Even if the contradictions predicted by Marx for capitalist societies to did not fully fall into place and mobilize revolt, the presumption was that these contradictions would eventually become evident in inter-societal stratification. This shift of Marxian analysis to the inter-societal level initiated the re-invigoration of inter-societal dynamics that had always been part of early sociology (e.g., Spencer 1874–1894). The focus remained on Marx and in some cases Lenin as the key historical figures inspiring dependency theory and, hence, world-systems analysis in the recent era tends to be heavily Marxian. As a theorist, I think that world-systems analysis would look very different if the value-neutral theories of power-dependence articulated by Emerson (1962) and Blau (1964) had been adopted by early world-system analysts. The field would have had a much stronger base to initiate world-systems *theorizing*. Still, Franks’ work was (probably unwittingly) reproducing many of the key ideas of general theorizing in sociology, although his and others’ versions of dependency theorizing would have profited from a closer look at Emerson’s emphasis of “balancing operations” initiated by disadvantaged actors in an exchange relationship.

In Table 1, Emerson’s (1962) and Blau’s (1964) key ideas are stated as propositions. These are the kinds of propositions that a science of world-systems dynamics should, from my narrow view, be developing. They have several key properties. First, they are highly abstract and can apply

¹ As mentioned above, dependency theory arose originally from Latin American economists (e.g., Raul Prebisch 1950, 1959, 1970) and sociologists (e.g., Fernando Cardoso and Enzo Faletto 1979). Apparently, none of these scholars (and in the case of Cardoso, sociologist turned politician) were aware of the work by American sociologists on exchange dynamics that was highly relevant to their work.

to many different types of exchange relationships among social units. Second, they are relevant to the full range of relationships evident in human societies, from interpersonal behaviors at the micro level through exchanges among various types of corporate units at the meso level, and at the level of societies and inter-societal systems at the macro level of human social organization. They are value-neutral and contain little ideology; rather, they seek to specify a fundamental, generic, and even universal dynamic in human societies: the formation of power-dependent relations and the likely strategies of dependent actors as they seek reduce power-dependence. Thus, as I will emphasize, this kind of theorizing offers much to world-systems analysis and yet, this type of theorizing is rarely practiced. But the form of the propositions is what I advocate as one future tract of explanatory inquiry as a “next step” to the base of knowledge that Wallerstein and many other distinguished scholars have provided.

Table 1: Richard Emerson’s Basic Theory on Dependence, Unequal Exchange, Exploitation, and Balancing Strategies²

1. The more actor B is in an unbalanced exchange with actor A, when actor B is dependent upon A for a given resource and B has alternatives for the resources provided by A.
2. The more imbalanced the exchange relationship between A and B, the more actor A can engaged in *exploitation* of actor B, seeking more of the resources provided by B in exchange for the same or even less of the resources provided by A.
3. The more this condition of dependence and exploitation persists, the more motivated will actor B become to *balance the exchange relationship* by engaging in one or more of the following *balancing operations*:
 - a. Actor B can decrease the value of resources provided by actor A, thereby reducing actor B’s dependence on actor A
 - b. Actor B can increase the number of alternative sources for the resources provided by A, thereby reducing dependence on A and increasing bargaining power by putting multiple sources (A1, A2, A-3, etc.) into competition with each other for providing resources to B
 - c. Actor B can attempt to increase the value of the resources that it provides for A, thereby increasing A’s dependence on B for resources provided by B
 - d. Actor B can seek to reduce the alternative providers of the resources that B provides for A, thereby making actor A more dependent on B
 - e. Actor B can engage in conflict with actor A, thereby increasing the costs for A in the exchange relationship (this was added to Emersons propositions from Peter Blau’s (1964) theory).

Thus, Immanuel Wallerstein did not develop the first modern view of world-system dynamics—that trophy should probably go to Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century (a figure rarely read anymore by sociologists) and to Richard Emerson (1962) in social psychology, who formalized a dependency theory on small groups that, he argued, could be generalized to any level of social organization involving exchanges of resources at more macro levels of social

² This set of propositions summarizes much of the argument in dependency theory and suggests balancing strategies that are likely. A more mature statement would be to specify the conditions under which balancing operations 1 through 5 are likely to be pursued; and this would be easily done in world-systems analysis because of the large empirical base of data that has accumulated.

organization. Instead, early world-systems “theories,” and just about all other brands of world-systems analysis in sociology, remain decidedly focused on Marx and hence are not value neutral, even as some additional theoretical approaches were added to the mix of explanatory tools. Despite the many contributions of others in the last five decades, Immanuel Wallerstein was the key figure in the transformation of dependency theories into an approach to inter-societal analysis that would change modern sociology. As a staunch Marxist who was both a sociologist and historian, Wallerstein pushed forward re-emerging theoretical and empirical forms of sociological analysis from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including firstly a shift to the macro level of social organization; second, the analysis of geo-economics and geo-politics; third, the historical analysis of inter-societal relations; and fourth, the focus on rise of capitalism and the emergence of its “contradictions” at the macro, inter-societal level of social organization. His Weberian ideal-type of the world-system as being composed of a *core*, *periphery*, and *semi-periphery* were the key actors in his Marxian view of the dynamics of inequalities among societies. It was Wallerstein’s combination of Weber and Marx that caught on because it resonated with the biases of most sociologists. If the more value-neutral theories of Emerson (1962) and Blau (1964) had been followed, world-systems analysis would probably have become more value neutral, and perhaps less influential without the value-based ideology driving and attracting many of those who became world-systems analysts.

Wallerstein was more of an historian than an abstract theorist; and of course, he did not consider his approach to be a theory but, rather, an historical perspective on the emergence and expansion of global capitalism. Indeed, while inter-societal analysis was once again becoming visible in sociology, so was evolutionary analysis of societies that had been prominent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And while the whole approach today is often labeled “world-systems theorizing,” most world-systems analyses are heavily empirical, historical, and descriptive—even as elements of Marx’s analysis were formalized by modern theorists (e.g., Emerson 1962; Turner 1998, 2019, 2017). Yet, Wallersteinian world-systems analysis is, in essence, as much Weberian ([1922] 1978) as it is Marxian in that it seeks to classify the key properties driving the history of emerging capitalist societies from the fourteenth century to the present and into the future. The theoretical part, which is again highly descriptive, is the conceptualization of the dynamic relations among core, periphery, and semi-periphery over the last 500 or so years. And while notions of contradictions and conflict arising from economic domination are Marxist in tone, Wallerstein seems to have been unsure in his later analyses that the revolution at the world level leading to a new age of world socialism would materialize. Still, the hoped-for revolution at the inter-societal levels remains the driving motivation for most world-systems analyses, thus privileging ideology over value-neutral theorizing.

Wallerstein’s conception of the processes driving the rise and spread of capitalism has a Marxian flare dressed up in a more subdued Weberian category system of core, periphery, and semi-periphery. His approach has dominated inter-societal analysis in sociology and in other disciplines, even as many new theoretical elements were being added to his tri-part model by a long list of scholars. Indeed, as a perhaps unintended outcome of Wallerstein’s approach, many

others became motivated to add additional conceptual layers and empirical contents to the very large corpus of knowledge that has been accumulating over the last 50 years. Indeed, the future of world-systems analysis is likely to reflect all of these new conceptual and empirical analyses, which from my view, is all to the good in making world-system analysis more value neutral and less ideological.

A Personal View of Wallerstein's Contribution

I am a general theorist seeking to develop value-neutral (as far as is possible) and highly abstract models and systems of theoretical principles of all levels of human social organization (e.g., Turner 2010, and 2012). To say that I am among a dying breed of sociologists would be an understatement. Also, unlike Wallerstein, I am not a Marxist or any other “-ist” because I am committed to discovering the fundamental properties and the operative dynamics within and between these properties that drive human patterns of social organization. And, for me at least, the most efficient way to conceptualize these properties and dynamics is with abstract and value-free models and propositions. Sadly, what I advocate is now considered an “archaic view” of sociology’s mission, which is now much more sympathetic to an ideologically driven assessment of problematic conditions. I am, therefore, a seemingly unusual person to be writing a tribute to Immanuel Wallerstein’s fabulous career.

Why would someone who in his theoretical work is *ahistorical*, seeking to develop general models and propositions about the dynamics of the social universe, be participating in this tribute? I am participating because I have always been a “fan” of Wallerstein’s work, even though everything about it seems to be at odds with my approach to sociology. There are several reasons for this appreciation of Wallerstein’s substantial corpus of work. Perhaps even more revealing is that I never met Wallerstein in person and, moreover, I am pretty much an outsider to world-system analysis in general, knowing only a handful of scholars in this now large subfield within sociology.

General theorists are often “outsiders” to specific subfields and schools of thought, even though a general theorist such as I (still engaged in the now discredited “grand theorizing”) depend on the empirical and conceptual works of others, especially their historical works, to gain knowledge about how every facet of the social universe operates. So, a scholar such as Wallerstein, whose work transformed modern sociology, is naturally a scholar of interest, as are all those who have been contributing to world-systems analysis over the last 50 years. Indeed, the “data” that I need in developing theories comes *from all of sociology*; and a focused period of history—documenting geo-economic and geo-political processes—provides me with the data to assess my reworking of others’ analyses into more formal models and propositions. Indeed, armchair theorists are intellectual vultures consuming the scholarship of those who, like Wallerstein (e.g., 1974, 1979, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1998, 2004), created descriptions of fundamental processes that some may consider historical (as did Wallerstein) but that I consider to be potential insights that can be generalized to all times and places across the 500,000 years of human societal history. Of course, the level of abstraction needs to be raised, as does the level of motivation to think that

general theory is useful, which many world-system analysts do not think is viable, as do many sociologists in general. But undaunted by my marginality, let me list explicitly what I see as Wallerstein's most important contributions.

Strong Points in Wallerstein's Sociology

Core, Periphery, Semi-Periphery. One strong point of Wallerstein's approach is that it confirmed some of my own misgivings about my PhD dissertation completed in July of 1968. I had bought into the modernization literature of the late 1950s and 1960s because I was still very much a social psychologist who over the next 60 years would become a generalist and, for better or worse, a "grand theorist."³ Wallerstein's (1974) first book of a series books confirmed my own misgivings about my dissertation, leading me to generate just three articles because my data were clearly deficient for describing the structural properties of societies at different levels of modernization. I still find it amazing that these three articles get cited some fifty-plus years later. But, while scholars like Andre Gunder Frank in dependency theorizing certainly deserve to be considered alongside Wallerstein, it was Wallerstein's work that initially got my attention, and only later did I realize that dependency theory was emerging at the very time I was doing an empirical dissertation on achievement values and achievement motivations in communities in the American south at different stages of economic development. The flaws in modernization theory and my interest in scholars such as Talcott Parsons pushed me to examine more meso- and macro-level structural properties of societies, and eventually to develop models and theoretical principles about the dynamics of all levels of human social organization. Wallerstein's world-systems analysis brought back inter-societal analysis to sociology and to my theorizing, although it is in only the last few years that I have ventured into offering for publication my accumulated theoretical views on inter-societal dynamics (Turner 2017, 2019; Turner and Roberts 2023). Wallerstein's works as well as the works of so many others, including my colleagues Randall Collins and Christopher Chase-Dunn at University of California-Riverside who were part of my department at different times, have been on my reading list for at least five decades. I have thought a great deal about the dynamics of inter-societal formations and now, at a ripe old age, I have begun to write about these dynamics. Without the push from Wallerstein's initial book (1974) on the topic, I probably would not have developed what I term "a more general theory" (Turner and Roberts 2023) which was fun to write, and in many ways, it is a quiet tribute to Wallerstein's influence on my work, even though his view of "theorizing" (Babones 2015) was not oriented to hard science as is my work.

Thus, like so many all over the world who were influenced by Wallerstein's conceptualization of core, periphery, and semi-periphery as a useful typology for studying the evolution of capitalism over the last 500 years, I increasingly added inter-societal dynamics to analyses of my list of important topics to study. And once I did this, I had a new set of macro-dynamics to understand,

³ This is a label meant to demean what many consider impossible: the development of a scientific theory of human patterns of social organization. I personally carry it as a badge of honor and wish more sociologists would pursue this worthwhile goal and get off their ideological soapboxes.

as they affected other layers of social organization from institutions and stratification systems through meso-level units of social organization down to micro levels of interpersonal behavior and interaction. And conversely, micro and meso dynamics flow up the hierarchy of social structures and their cultures that make up societies to inter-societal systems. Hence, my theoretical playing field was dramatically expanded once I had read Wallerstein.⁴

The Revival of Historical Analysis in Sociology. Early sociology in many guises had been historical; and in the late 1960s, there appeared to be a revival of historical analysis that, by the 1970s, was robust. Indeed, some of the best historical analyses of societal dynamics by sociologists appeared at about the same time that Wallerstein's (1974) first volume on the modern world-system was published.⁵

Wallerstein was a master at writing what I often think of as *analytical historical analysis*. Max Weber was another such scholar who, like many historically oriented scholars today, was suspicious of general theoretical arguments because of the contingent nature of history. Wallerstein, at first, appeared to offer more to a data-hungry grand theorists such as I. He created an ideal-type that could classify the social universe at its largest level, that could provide an historical analysis that offered more than historical details from which I could make generalizations that suggest the operation of universal and generic forces. Indeed, all the historians whom I cited above generate, if only implicitly, theoretical generalizations about historical dynamics, which always excite a general theorist. And Wallerstein, with his commitment to a Marxian vision of how the world should operate, provided many generalizations that had the potential to be generalized into more abstract theoretical principles covering even larger time frames in the evolution inter-societal systems.⁶

The Use of History to Make More Abstract Generalizations. Marx certainly bent his historical analyses to fit more abstract theoretical prepositions, albeit changing with each of the historical epochs in the evolutionary march of society to the final end of history phase: the institutionalization of socialist society (and in Wallerstein's case, a world-level socialist system). Wallerstein began to waffle a bit on the inevitability of world-level socialism in his later works, but I am not able to draw conclusions since I never had a chance to ask him about the matter. Certainly, many who

⁴ At about the time that I first read Wallerstein, I decided to see for myself if what people had been saying about Herbert Spencer was true and, thereby, I began reading Herbert Spencer's work. I was blown away by how powerful his work was and, moreover, how much Spencer's work anticipated Wallerstein's and others doing evolutionary analysis like Gerhard Lenski (1964). I had put off reading Spencer because of the seemingly universal opinion that Spencer's work was passé. What I found, instead, is that from a theorist's point of view, Spencer is the best of the classical theorists, a position that may seem ridiculous, but I am willing to debate the issue with anyone. I have written one book on Spencer, and I plan to write another very soon because his genius has not been appreciated.

⁵ My favorites included works by scholars like Barrington Moore (1966), Fernand Braudel (1975, 1977, [1979] 1992, 1982), Charles Tilly (1975, 1978), Michael Mann (1986), Jack Goldstone (1990), and Peter Turchin (2003, 2006).

⁶ Over the decades, I have tried to formalize and make more value-neutral Marx's theory. See, for example, Turner: 1975a, 1975b, 1978: 131–137, 2013: 107–111.

have followed him have made this “end of history” argument. I always have ignored this argument because it is not based on any coherent theory but, rather, on an ideology, or an emotionally-loaded view of how societies and inter-societal systems *should operate*. Hope for the future is not a particularly useful way to develop explanatory theory, but Wallerstein couched much of his history at a level of abstraction that made one such as I, who is committed to formulating universal theoretical (as out of step as such a commitment may seem in today’s sociology), pay attention to what he was arguing. Indeed, I kept reading world-systems analysis with the hope that I could eventually extract abstract principles from the data being accumulated as world-systems analysis became a major subfield in sociology. Analytical historical analysis is often the first step to more general theorizing; and while I have always found Max Weber’s work rather ponderous and not nearly as interesting as Wallerstein’s writing, I found that, in a second reading of nearly all of Weber’s work twenty years after getting my PhD, Weber suddenly became interesting because I could now see the theory that was buried in what, in Weber’s case, were rather boring and tedious descriptions of historical details. But, with the second reading, the propositions simply jumped out of the pages. In contrast, in reading Wallerstein’s historical analyses for the first time, the embedded generalizations that might make for more abstract propositions are clear and easily extracted and abstracted into more general theoretical statements, even if Wallerstein and other historically oriented sociologists might disagree with this strategy. But I do not read scholars such as Wallerstein or Weber for scholastic reasons but, rather, for ideas about the generic forces driving patterns of human social organization. If scholarship does not lend itself to this goal, it is less interesting to me and to any general theorist. Wallerstein’s work would always inspire me or anyone else to generalize and to develop theoretical models and principles, just as my second reading of Weber had done.

The Legitimation of Evolutionary Analysis. Gerhard Lenski’s (1964, 1970) first books on the evolution of societies changed sociology, or at least one wing of sociology. Lenski, much like Herbert Spencer some eighty years earlier, demonstrated that it was possible to view human societies as not only having a history (never written down for hundreds of thousands of years) but, moreover, *an evolutionary history driven by dynamics that can be theorized*. Herbert Spencer (1874–1896) had clearly done this, and recall, that I was finally reading Spencer in the 1970s at about the same time I was reading Wallerstein’s first book. Spencer was more like Lenski, but more generally theoretically; and so I came to believe Wallerstein’s historical analysis of geopolitics and geo-economics could be amenable to producing abstract theoretical principles once the level of abstraction was raised. At the same time, as was the case with Spencer and Lenski, data were being supplied by Wallerstein and all of those who joined him to illustrate the dynamics that could, if one was so inclined (as I always am), to develop abstract theoretical statements on models of the dynamics of societies that are always present and operative through the evolutionary history of human societies. If Wallerstein wanted to confine his analysis to the last 500 years, this

is fine, but he inspired me to extend the time frame to all of history. In so doing, it became possible to develop more abstract and universal processes operating in all inter-societal systems, from the beginning of evolutionary history of humans to the present, and into the future (as is outlined in Turner and Roberts 2013). Granted, this sounds overly ambitious, but Wallerstein's work made me theoretically ambitious and, even though he would probably disapprove of the level of abstraction that I have applied to his ideas, he nonetheless inspired me to try to generalize beyond the time frame that he imposed on his analysis. And the arrival at the University of California-Riverside two decades ago of my current colleague, Christopher Chase-Dunn, convinced me that it would be possible to generalize because he had demonstrated that more precise theoretical statements can be gleaned from the data on inter-societal systems at any point in human evolutionary history (e.g., Chase-Dunn and Mann 1998).

The Revival of Economic Sociology. For much of the twentieth century, sociologists had ceded the analysis of the economy to economists, which from a sociological point of view, was not good news, because economists rarely have a view of how economies are embedded within institutional domains and their cultures. Finally, by the 1970s and 1980s, sociologists had the good sense to realize that economists are not prepared to analyze the economy in its most robust form as a basic social institution as opposed to a market system mediating relations among "rational" actors. Wallerstein's emphasis on the history of the capitalist world-system from a sociological and historical perspective inspired many of the original organizers of the sociology of economy section of the American Sociological Association. The rather splendid flow of work on the economy over the last 35 years has demonstrated what economic analysis by sociologists can accomplish when it recognizes the embeddedness of the economy within institutional domains, particularly the polity. And, increasingly, as geo-politics on a global scale is again reasserting itself, world-systems analysts are in a unique position to understand the relationships between economy and polity, as long as they accept that the world-system is now evolving in a very new, and quite dangerous, direction compared to the predictions of many world-systems analysts. But, a macro sociology of economy and polity coupled with a much better understanding of the institutional evolution of societies than is typical of economists and political scientists opens many new intellectual opportunities for sociologists, assuming that they do not get stuck in the often-implicit idea that geo-economics is more significant in global capitalism than geo-politics. Nothing could be further from the reality of today, and for quite some time into the future. Still, if world-systems analysts are willing to rekindle their interests in geo-politics, sociology can be highly relevant to the policy issues that all societies in the contemporary world-system will be forced to confront. Wallerstein's work has certainly put world-system analysts in a front-row seat, if not the podium, in guiding geo-political policies in the twenty-first century

Problematic Elements in Wallerstein's Analysis

What I see as problematic most sociologists might well consider strengths in world-systems analysis. But my goals are different than most historically-oriented analyses of society. History at any point in time or place is to a general theorist a set of data points revealing *more generic and fundamental processes driving human patterns of social organization*. There are, of course, always unique and idiosyncratic elements revolving around the time and place of historical events. Some welcome, and indeed embrace, these unique features of historical periods; but for a general theorist, the focus is on the more generic and fundamental processes being illustrated by data from historical analysis. I always push the level of abstraction up a few notches to liberate processes from their historical context to see if they can be applied to other historical contexts. So, this is the context in which I mention “problematic elements” (to a “grand theorist”) in Wallerstein’s work and that of most other world-systems theorists. History can delimit and limit what one can analyze, but it can also inspire a theorist to generalize to other historical cases on the road to developing abstract models and theoretical principles of the operative dynamics of societies in all times and place, *throughout* history. For me, there is no “end of history” because the generic forces driving human social organization are always in operation; and as the empirical loadings change, so does the structure and culture of societies change, thereby making history never-ending (if humans are here to record it, which is no sure thing in the coming geo-political confrontations). Yet, to a theorist, histories are made by changes in the values and interrelations among *universal and generic social forces*. In this sense, sociology is very much like physics; history is seemingly a chaos of intersecting forces, but theories about these forces make the chaos understandable. And so, if inter-societal relations have existed in all times and places that humans have organized over the last 450,000 to 500,000 years, there *must be some generic and fundamental processes that are operative*, and these are what theorists seek. And they can be found in almost all historical descriptions once one is willing to extract and abstract from historical particulars. More specifically, to a general theorist, here are what I see as problems in Wallerstein’s and in most world-systems analyses. These are “problems” only from the perspective of trying to develop abstract theories of socio-cultural dynamics, including the formation and evolution of inter-societal systems. They are not problems from a more historical approach to describing inter-societal dynamics which is a legitimate and respectable way of looking at the social world.

Scope Conditions and Time Constraints. The initial decision in Wallerstein’s sociology to study the rise of capitalism, often within the context of geo-political dynamics, imposed a scope condition: the last 500 years. Part of this emphasis may be the result of Wallerstein’s attention to market evolution that was outlined by Fernand Braudel (1975, 1977, [1979] 1992, 1982), extending this analysis to a history of capitalism as it began to affect inter-societal dynamics. As an historical project, this scope condition is highly appropriate, but when searching for general “laws” of inter-societal evolution, it is an unfortunate constraint.

Some scholars, such as Christopher Chase-Dunn and co-authors⁷ have argued as I would: inter-societal dynamics, even when on a very small scale among hunter-gatherers (both settled and nomadic) and among even early horticulturalists, have *always existed*. Moreover, at times early in human societal evolution, they have also revolved around discernable markets and forms of money as common currency in market exchanges. Of course, scale does make a difference in the dynamics involved, but scale does not obviate the common dynamics driving all patterns of inter-societal organization. Thus, only by dropping the temporal scope condition imposed by Wallerstein can scientific laws be developed. Theories of 500 years are not theories, but general histories. Of course, in broadening the scope conditions, interesting and important empirical details are often not addressed. Such is the price of seeking universal laws of human social organization; they should be universal in that they are evident in all manifestations of societies and inter-societal systems. In my and Anthony Roberts's (2023) new book, *Inter-Societal Systems: Toward a General Theory*, we have taken this assumption to the extremes, developing highly abstract theoretical principles that apply to *all types of societies and inter-societal systems*. We have, in essence, extended Chase-Dunn and Mann (1998) who have studied very small inter-societal systems in pre-literate societies, which offer our best look back in time before there were historians who wrote things down (see also the fascinating volume by Grierson 1903, Earle and Ericson 1977, and later, Earle 1984). But data on late remnants of hunter-gatherers,⁸ coupled with more recent archaeological data, convinced me that dropping scope conditions when analyzing inter-societal systems offers clear evidence that the underlying dynamics are much the same in small and larger scale systems of geo-economics, geo-politics, and geo-cultural dynamics.⁹

In fact, I would argue that the development of explanatory theories requires that we drop most conditions, even though this means increasing the level of abstraction and, hence, eliminating many important and interesting historical details unique to historical times and places. Wallerstein's work covered a long period of history, basically following Marx's notion of epochs, seeing the evolution of capitalism as fundamentally changing the nature of human social organization. Such a view, however, makes what I seek untenable—theoretical principles that apply to all times and places. And, like Marx, Wallerstein originally seemed to argue that there was a direction to capitalism, although in later writings he seems to be unsure about what types and forms inter-societal relations will evolve. Such is inevitable with historical analyses because, without theoretical models and principles, explanation involves extrapolations of historical trends without explanatory theories to explain why these trends are evident and what they may eventually generate in the future. Theories that seek to develop models and principles that are about the

⁷ See, for example: Chase-Dunn (1988); Chase-Dunn and Mann (1998); Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997); Chase-Dunn et al., (2008); and Chase-Dunn and Lerro (2014).

⁸ Who were surely not dramatically different from early hunter-gatherers.

⁹ See also: Patterson (1970, 1990), Tilly (1975), Layton (1986), Jackson (1989, 1992), Peregrine 1991, 1992, 1995), Nolan (2003), Dogan (2009), and Fletcher et al. (2011).

universal properties and processes of human social organization can potentially predict in a way that history cannot.

Conceptions of Core, Periphery, and Semi-Periphery. This tri-partite typology was the centerpiece of Wallerstein's analysis; and it is what made his analysis so influential. The theoretical part of Wallerstein's argument revolves around the relations among these three types of societal formations operating in an inter-societal system. This typology—really, a kind of Weberian ideal type imposed on a Marxist set of assumptions—is what made Wallerstein's approach to world-system analysis so appealing. It provided a relatively simple scheme that incorporated much of dependency theorizing in describing the evolution of the modern world-system (in accordance with the scope condition of the last 500 years). Indeed, it made teaching students about world-system dynamics much easier, and it gave history a focus and a degree of universality in the principles describing the interaction among core, periphery, and semi-periphery.

There is, however, a problem with this typology: it's existence is *not* universal, today and over the last 500 years to say nothing of the last 500,000 years. And so, in essence, Wallerstein has imposed an additional scope condition. His analysis of inter-societal dynamics can best apply *only* to inter-societal systems in which core, periphery, and semi-periphery exist and/or in which the semi-periphery is evolving. Even when a semi-periphery does not exist, he seems to assume that the semi-periphery will evolve as the world-system develops, but without specifying sufficiently the generic conditions under which semi-peripheral states evolve and change the dynamics of the modern inter-societal system. Of course, sometimes a potential semi-periphery exists as simply a result of the history of a region—as was the case with China, India, and the United States, and many other societies. At other times, however, the semi-periphery evolves because of an existing inter-societal system and it should be possible, thereby, to specify the conditions (as some have done) under which semi-peripheral societies evolve during the evolution of inter-societal systems. Thus, to assume for descriptive purposes that inter-societal systems always have a semi-peripheral societal formation in the mix is simply not empirically the case.

Thus, the tri-partite typology is what made Wallerstein's analysis so intriguing and useful in understanding the evolution of capitalism. Yet, from a theorist's point of view, it is problematic because it is not universal. Still, it should be possible to theorize beyond what has currently been done about the conditions under which semi-peripheries will evolve and once evolved, the effects they will have on existing inter-societal systems. And so, Wallerstein's analysis can be very helpful in understanding the dynamics of inter-societal systems with an evolving semi-periphery). Wallerstein was correct in the assertion that much of the history of geo-economic systems over the last 500 years have involved the evolution of the semi-periphery but, again, it is not a universal ingredient in all world-systems. Still, to the extent that this problem encourages theorists to specify the conditions under which the semi-periphery evolves, as well as the conditions under which it is less likely to evolve, a more general theory of world-systems can be developed. This is the kind of

theorizing that would add to Wallerstein's conceptual legacy, and efforts to provide this theory are clearly evident among contemporary world-systems analysts.

Infusion of Ideology into Analysis. Wallerstein's work reveals an ideological bias of a Marxist, although it was not as evident in his work compared to many others. Still, ideology always biases analyses toward what a scholar thinks *should occur*, often at the expense of ignoring conditions that would predict the contrary. This bias has led to a view that the world-system is evolving toward world-level socialism as the contradictions inherent in capitalism work themselves out at the inter-societal system level. Is this likely? I think not, because the scale of such a world-system would be untenable, with eight billion people to be governed by a world-level polity and common cultural ideology. Positing a utopian end of history is not the way to develop a useful explanatory theory of history.

A formal theory of inter-societal dynamics would be safe to predict that world-level "anything"—whether capitalism or socialism, or any other ultimate "end of history state"—is not likely. Indeed, I predict in the theory that I developed with Anthony Roberts (2023) that geo-economics is not, in the next century, going to be the driving force of this system; rather, geopolitical dynamics will increasingly drive inter-societal relations, as is perhaps evident by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and by the growing tensions with China along many fronts. Thus, ideology always puts on blinders; and while it can be difficult to keep it out of analysis, it is essential that theorists avoid the obfuscation that comes with ideology dressed up as explanatory theory. To his credit, Wallerstein appears to have been willing to let "the data determine," future outcomes that are likely in the world-system. Such became, in my reading of his works, more evident as he completed new volumes (and articles) on the history of capitalism.

Descriptive vs. Explanatory Explanations. Most history is highly descriptive, assembling data and describing sequences of events over time. In the case of explaining the rise of modern capitalism, most analyses are descriptive, and "explanation" revolves around getting the historical events right. There is often theoretical analysis involved, such as the assumption that the Marxian analysis of why capitalism will collapse and give way to socialism, which provides a view of the forces driving evolution. The effort to extend Marxian analysis to the world-system level has been a prominent path by which a theory that can be formalized might be part of an explanation of further world-system dynamics.¹⁰ Yet, because this theory is so embedded in an ideology of what *should* occur, predictions can be problematic. Alternatively, extrapolation of historical trends is rarely a very good predictor of the future. Thus, it is simply better to have theoretical models and principles about generic social processes that are devoid of ideology and not built from speculative extrapolations of historical trends. Most world-system analyses, however, has been imbued with

¹⁰ Yet, as noted at the beginning, it would have been better if world-systems theories had started with some clear theories, especially that of Richard Emerson (1962) that offered more explanatory power than dependency theory.

ideology and engaged in extrapolations; still, some of the top scholars in world-systems analysis have sought to formulate abstract models and theories (e.g., Frank 1966, 1967, 1969, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c; Chase-Dunn 1997, 2008, 2014; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Turchin 2006, 2013; Turchin and Nefedov 2009; Turchin et al., 2013, 2018, 2021). These formalizations of theory can be a much better basis for making predictions about the future, although some of these too are limited by commitment to a particular theory. Still, for world-system analysis to realize its full potential, the key to doing so is to isolate (a.) the properties of all inter-societal systems, (b.) the forces inherent in these properties, and (c.) the interactions among these forces. When done well, emphasis on these rather than extrapolations of history or commitments to an end of history scenario, will move world-systems theory forward as a scientific approach to understanding fundamental properties of the social universe—inter-societal relations—that have existed in all times and places in human evolutionary history.

Over-emphasis on Geo-Economics versus Geo-Politics. Wallerstein's analysis was devoted mostly to the evolution of the capitalist geo-economic system, with the assumption that this system would drive inter-societal evolution more than geo-politics. Capitalism was able to evolve, of course, with the collapse of hegemonic geo-political systems such as the Roman Empire. Only in the power vacuum created by break up of large geo-political systems could capitalism evolve, as was illustrated by the Hanseatic League across northern Europe. There was a presumption among many world-systems analysts that with the spread of world capitalism, the contradictions in this system as outlined by Marx would eventually lead to its collapse and replacement by new forms of polity.

I was always skeptical of this because geo-politics is not, as often implied by world-systems analysts, in decline even as capitalist and dynamic markets appear to connect most of the world. The wars of just the twentieth century should have made it obvious that geo-politics was not in decline; and as the nations of the world increasingly came into economic competition, it was obvious that geo-politics would reassert itself, as it is doing quite rapidly today. Indeed, while some have argued that there is a world capitalist class that cuts across national states and is even liberated from them (e.g., Robinson 1998, 2001, 2004; Robinson and Harris 2000), this position ignores the fact that, in the modern world, even the richest capitalist cannot avoid maintaining a high-technology coercive force, even as economic competition was increasing political tensions among regions and states in the world-system. Thus, geo-economics cannot trump geo-politics in the long run because capitalism within and between societies generates tensions that can, in the end, only be resolved by the consolidation and centralization of power, not at the world level but at the nation-state level, often joined into alliances with other nation-states. China and the United States are on a collision course that will lead to geo-political conflict. And as Russia exerts itself in Eastern Europe, warfare is inevitably leading to the revitalization of the NATO alliances. And, tensions exist everywhere in the world—the Middle East, the global South, throughout Asia and Africa. It is inconceivable, then, that these tensions will lead to a global polity. Instead, I would predict what is evident right now: emerging alliances among national societies forming a multipolarity geo-political system. And moreover, I would predict based on theory (see Turner and

Roberts 2023) that geo-politics will soon be a more dynamic force than geo-economics. Indeed, geo-economic competition will be the fuel that drives geo-politics; and once geo-political alliances take hold, they will increasingly dominate the nature of exchanges of resources in markets and the forms and profiles of an increasing number of regional geo-economic systems standing in tension with each other.

World capitalism and perhaps other hybrid economic formations will be driven as much by geo-politics as by geo-economics, and the ultimate outcome is probably not predictable because sociology and the social sciences more generally have not focused on this re-emergence of geo-politics as a driving force of a geo-economic system built around profit-seeking actors in competition along many fronts. And history cannot be much of a guide because there has never been as much economic integration at the global level, nor has there been divisions of powerful states that are in competition on a truly global level. Thus, over-emphasis on geo-economics and on the power of markets to integrate the world has led to a lack of focus on the revival of world-level geo-political dynamics.

As a result, sociology lacks adequate theoretical models to deal with this new reality, even as it has been obvious that geo-political tensions have been increasing over the last 100 years¹¹. Warfare has been constant, and as big economic blocks of societies (e.g., the European Union) and the integration of very large societies like China (after the last dynasty), these become coupled with economic development of the global South, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and even parts of Africa. These developments assure that there will be economic conflicts leading to political conflicts and, hence, to new types of world-systems formations built around conflict among blocks of societies allied with powerful competing states, and with the Chinese block in conflict with the North American-European block and with potential blocks built up by Russia, the global South, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Indeed, it is conceivable that the world-system built up and so ably documented by world-systems analysis over the last 50 years will be fractured into two or three contending blocks of actors competing economically and mobilized to engage in warfare to protect economic interests. This is a very different vision than that portrayed by most world-systems analysts. We find ourselves in this confusing place because world-systems theorizing has *not been sufficiently theoretical*, in the scientific sense that I advocate.¹²

Under-emphasis on Geo-cultural Dynamics. There can be no doubt that the rise of capitalism and the growth of the capitalist world-system has led to some cultural convergence among societies (as the now abandoned “modernization model” of the 1950s predicted). Still, it is equally obvious that cultures across societies remain unique, despite the pull of capitalist social relations. Indeed,

¹¹ Randall Collins’s (1981, 1995, 1999) model outlining the collapse of the Soviet geo-political formation was a significant step toward an even more general model.

¹² My own modest efforts to make world-systems analysis more theoretical (e.g., Turner 1998, 2010, 2017, 2019; Turner and Roberts 2023) are inadequate to explain what is now occurring and what will be only more polarized by ecological crises that are inevitable. It is time, I believe, for world-systems theory to seek out theoretical explanations that rise above Marxian dialectics and historical descriptions.

even economic capitalism reveals wide variations, if one compares current China, Singapore, India, United States, Europe, the Middle East, South America, and the regions of Africa. When specific institutional systems within societies are examined—such as polity, religion, kinship, education, science, medicine, and so forth—important differences become apparent. Thus, values and ideologies embedded in institutional domains, normative systems in corporate units, patterns of legitimating stratification, and many other cultural systems attached to structures organizing populations are different, despite some convergence with the spread of capitalist modes of production and world-level markets. And, given the coming crisis in the world-system driven by the rise of geo-political conflict, cultural convergence may not continue, as so many have presumed.

Wallerstein (e.g., 1990, 1991) in his later works seems to have recognized this fact along with other scholar who have advocated the analysis of world culture (e.g., Meyer and Jepperson 2000). But I would argue for more study of the dynamics that sustain cultural differences rather than what make cultures converge. And I think it useful to see how much cultural convergence or differentiation affects the types of inter-societal systems that evolve, not just in the past or now, but in the very uncertain future of all societies on Earth. Thus, it is not just economics, not just politics but also culture that are dynamic forces in the contemporary world-system, with culture being the least studied and with geo-politics being under-emphasized by the over-emphasis on geo-economics.

The Legacy of Immanuel Wallerstein

Relatively few sociologists have changed the nature of sociological analysis over the last 200 years. Immanuel Wallerstein is one such scholar who stands out for his ability to accomplish what earlier efforts had failed to do: capture the imagination of the entire field of sociology and other fields in the social sciences. This is an enormous achievement and is the most important aspect of his legacy. What he inspired—large numbers of scholars¹³ working on understanding the nature of inter-societal dynamics—is a legacy that will endure, even if the specifics of Wallerstein's approach need to be re-conceptualized. The key to his contribution was to consolidate efforts at understanding that all aspects of what occurs in any society are influenced by the nature of the relations that societies have with each other. Others over the history of sociology have made the same effort, but Wallerstein's scheme was the one that created an entirely new field which led some of the most distinguished scholars of the last 50 years to engage in both empirical and theoretical work that added to, and corrected, some of the gaps in Wallerstein's approach. Many of the ideas that Wallerstein championed will endure, but some will not because of the accumulated scholarship in world-systems analysis. But what is very clear is that, without Wallerstein's conceptualization of world-systems dynamics, this area of research and theorizing would not have

¹³ Including me, who for several decades have followed but not written much on world-system dynamics. Yet, finally near the end of my career, Wallerstein and others inspired me to try at a more general theoretical statement (Turner and Roberts 2023).

attracted so many talented scholars, nor would sociology be in a place where *theorizing* world-systems dynamics would be the next obvious step for the field to take. There are enormously useful empirical analyses using many different methodologies that can stand alongside Wallerstein's work and add further to the diverse empirical bases which will allow for further theorizing (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1989; Arrighi 1994, 2001, 2007; Chase-Dunn 1997, 2008, 2014; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Turchin 2006, 2013, 2016), with a special note on the willingness to do empirical work on preliterate societies (e.g., Earle 1989, 1991, 2002; Earle and Ericson 1997; Chase-Dunn and Mann 1998). And, lest we forget the earlier work of dependence theorists (e.g., Frank 1966, 1967, 1969, 1976, 1979a, 1979b), it is important to emphasize that this perspective posited an explanatory theory that provided inspiration for others to begin developing explicit theories alongside Wallerstein's conceptualization.

Wallerstein, as the predominant scholar in world-systems research for several decades, brought this line of analysis to its present position, which I hope will involve using the accumulated data and, going forward, will also involve the development of more general theories of inter-societal dynamics. The current data from historical and quantitative analyses of past and present world-systems, all inspired by Wallerstein, now make formulating abstract theoretical principles and outlining formal models of inter-societal dynamics possible, while at the same time not only explaining the past but also holding out the promise of accurate predictions of world-system dynamics in the future. Wallerstein's prediction of the future in his last works is, by my reading, more equivocal, as would be any other scholar's predictions for the simple reason that world-systems analysis has not been sufficiently theoretical.

This last phrase may seem to be an outrageous statement given how many in the field see themselves as theorists and have proposed specific models and developed theoretical principles. But these have generally been rather narrow theories; what is needed is a reassessment of *the fundamental properties of all inter-societal systems*—large and small, ancient, contemporary, and into the future. Then, the dynamics creating these properties and determining their relations with each other can begin to be theorized and modeled, using the large amount of data on world-systems that have been collected as a useful preliminary check of the plausibility of theoretical arguments. At the same time, scholars should try to distance themselves from their conception of what the world-system *should become* in the future from what is *actually likely to occur*, as predicted by value-neutral theories. The heavily implicit ideological bent of most world-systems theorizing gets in the way, I think, of unleashing theoretical efforts that can explain the dynamics of all inter-societal systems in all places and times. And when this state of knowledge is reached, sociology will be able to predict the future with much greater accuracy than is presently possible. Reaching this point may require changing the epistemology guiding much world-systems analysis and thus seeming abandoning much of Wallerstein's legacy. This legacy resides not just in what he accomplished conceptually but in inspiring several generations of sociologists to pursue understanding inter-societal dynamics in multiple ways. Now is the time to begin to formulate *a more general theory*.

I have followed world-systems theorizing and empirical work for fifty-plus years, always as an outsider who did not in any way consider himself a world-systems scholar. I still do not think that I am, but after 40 years of standing on the sidelines and reading scholars whom I respect, I decided to take a first tentative step toward what I am advocating. I was smart enough to recruit a younger scholar and former student (Anthony Roberts) of my colleague, Christopher Chase-Dunn, to work with me to make sure that, as an outsider, I did not make some serious errors. World-systems analysis does not, of course, have to go this theoretical route, but it will not realize its potential until it does, and to realize this full potential, it is time drop much of the ideological baggage has been implicit in most world-systems analysis. My book with Anthony Roberts, *Inter-Societal Dynamics: Toward a General Theory*, represents my best effort to begin this more explicit theoretical journey. Despite the many critics of formal scientific theory, world-systems analysis does not currently realize the full potential of what Wallerstein and others have set into motion over the last fifty years.

Disclosure Statement: Any conflicts of interest are reported in the acknowledgments section of the article’s text. Otherwise, authors have indicated that they have no conflict of interests upon submission of the article to the journal.

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