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Immanuel Wallerstein

Personal Reflections

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An emeritus Professor of Sociology from Stanford University, John's work generated the world society school, which has played a pivotal role in the transnational section of the American Sociological Association.

I overlapped with Immanuel Wallerstein teaching at Columbia College (Columbia University) for five years in the early-mid 1960s. At that time, he was seen as an Africanist, but also as a more general political sociologist—an even more macro and more left parallel to Martin Lipset. He was concerned, both analytically and in normative terms, with the global political order, and was deeply supportive of worldwide decolonization and the resultant independent states. Although he had a background linked to socialist thought, his economic framing of world society and history came later: his agenda was focused on world emancipation. His universalistic orientation to triumphing over colonialism, racism, and injustice in general had parallels in world federalist thought. His thinking about economic development was then more conventional—mixtures of domestic functional and conflict ideas, rather than notions of the “development of underdevelopment.”



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As an indication of his perspective, at a time when most of us were enthusiastic proponents of a world nuclear test ban treaty, Immanuel Wallerstein demurred. He was concerned that such a treaty would reinforce the political monopoly of the dominant powers. (Moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, I should note that he took principled stances on more minor matters. As undergraduate teachers, we needed to write many letters of recommendation. Extracting stamps from the weakly organized Columbia department and university was very difficult, and I gave up and went to the post office to buy them. Immanuel thought this improper and taught me how to stand up for principle in the matter.)

I left Columbia in 1966, and lost contact. But I noted that the student movement of 1968 hit Columbia very hard—in a famously fragmented university it was easy for the contending parties to adopt polarized positions, and some professors armed themselves in their offices. Immanuel Wallerstein had a broader perspective, understood the student movement in more global terms, and tried to facilitate communication. I think this led some of the more conservative (i.e., liberal) faculty members to see him as violating academic principles, and he was criticized for supporting students seen as politically problematic (including at least one who became a well-known sociologist in later years). I think the divisions lasted for a long time, and suppose they created difficulties for him.

In the early 1970s Immanuel Wallerstein spent some time at the Center for Advanced Study, working on his magnum opus. Down the hill at Stanford, several of us were working on empirical analyses of the newly emerging quantitative data on countries around the world. Our project was empirical, and theoretically informed but eclectic. We invited Immanuel Wallerstein to give a talk. He presented his developing perspective. Worked out (in part with Terence Hopkins), it encased his early foci on the global political order in a frame of the historical world economy and involved a shift from a predominantly political sociology to a distinctive version of “political economy.” Even at that time, before the publication of his first main volume in 1974, the outlines of his great project were very clear. Several of our doctoral students took great interest in his theoretical formulations—including Christopher Chase-Dunn, our Chair in this session, and a leading figure in the whole enterprise.

In later years, I saw Immanuel Wallerstein on several occasions, typically at meetings on issues around “globalization,” and we talked as old friends, but without much direct intellectual engagement.

Overall, Immanuel Wallerstein has had great and continuing influence over the development of macro-sociological thought. This is reinforced by several developments. First, more and more social scientific work is done from peripheral loci and perspectives, and his ideas have much elective affinity with these points of view.

Second, there is much and increasing attention to global stratification as great intersocietal differences become seen as inequalities, and great inequalities as injustices empowering mobilization and conflict. Theoretical ideas that see exploitative power and exchange as producing and underpinning a world society and its developments are very attractive. Almost everything in

the world can now be seen in relation to “colonialism” (including social science itself) and thus as fodder for a critical global perspective.

Third, world sociology and social science are and will be less dominated by American sociology with its obsessive focus on methodological individualism, local social organization, and methodological nationalism. Lines of argument that trace local and national processes to roots in great world forces gain attention as American liberalism becomes less central in world society and thought. Immanuel Wallerstein is recognized only in peripheral corners of American sociology and is seen as much more central elsewhere.

Fourth, as crises increasingly are seen as global, intellectual analyses and normative orientations that see social life as embedded in worldwide dramas (as in current analyses of populism) gain force. Apocalyptic or more benign models of a world society and economy—and ecology—become routine.

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