



JOURNAL OF WORLD-SYSTEMS RESEARCH

ISSN: 1076-156X | Vol. # 21 No. 2 | <http://dx.doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2015.14> |
jwsr.org

Spaces, Trajectories, Maps:

Towards a World-Systems Biography of Immanuel Wallerstein

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Abstract

World-systems analysis, although itself a macrohistorical perspective, eminently allows for writing individual biographies because these are structurally conditioned and historically contingent trajectories developing in specific time and space. The biographical genre seems particularly useful in intellectual popularization and in exploring how macro-level concepts behave in observed empirical situations. This article offers and demonstrates specific recommendations and methodological warnings in application to the personal trajectory of Immanuel Wallerstein, the founder of world-systems analysis as an intellectual movement.

Keywords: macrohistory, biography, 1968, Cold War, Third World, Immanuel Wallerstein



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In general, there are three modes of making an argument in the arenas of formal knowledge. Arguably the oldest is an erudite manipulation of texts. Right away we could claim on our side the angriest of classics: *People make their own lives, but not necessarily under circumstances of their choosing*. These famous (and differently translated) words from Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* might serve as an epigraph to all world-systems biographies.

Another way of proving an argument is abstract modeling. Along with advances in observational technologies this is what generates the hefty prestige of natural disciplines and their self-confident professional ideology of high-consensus, rapid-discovery modern science (Collins 1994). Perhaps the humanities and social sciences as a whole might never acquire the same rapid-discovery dynamics because of major obstacles presented by their professional and, even more so, political ideologies that cause seemingly endless rounds of re-interpretations. Nevertheless it seems reasonably predictable that in coming generations, world-systems analysis could move closer to rapid-discovery science, at least in its more technical aspects related to archeology and the comparative study of world-systems, the econometrics of commodity chains, or the mapping of world creativity networks and processes as pioneered by Franco Moretti (1996) and Pascal Casanova (2007).

Textual erudition and abstract modeling, virtually an antinomy in the light of professional ideologies espoused by the humanities and natural sciences, are both quintessentially elitist demonstrations of intellectual prowess. Therefore both should be pursued by world-systems analysts in their battles to institutionalize their perspective within academia. We can do abstract modeling usefully and more realistically; and we can legitimately boast the intellectual lineage that includes Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, Nikolai Kondratieff, and Fernand Braudel. Yet a truly formidable intellectual strategy would not only combine scholarly classicism with avantgardism; it should also provide for broadly accessible popularizations. This is what Arthur Stinchcombe (1999) called the "populist" side of social science that helps earn our living in universities by recruiting undergraduate students and appealing to large audiences.

Which brings us to a third mode of making compelling arguments. It is through the tracing of trajectories. In world-systems analysis we are mostly dealing with trajectories, although not of any kind. After all, much of experimental laboratory design aims at altering the trajectories of studied objects in a controlled and repeated manner. This is arguably not what we can do. Our kinds of trajectories are shaped too "naturally" by the many-sided complex interactions among various people and their environments. Terence Hopkins used to deliver this point in his seminars at Binghamton by half-jokingly insisting that world-systems analysis is an environmental science, and therefore our closest kindred spirit must be epidemiology because it traces mutating microbes back to their origins across biological macro-environments. Immanuel Wallerstein, as we know, draws his metaphors of systemic transitions from the "chaos theories"

of Ilya Prigogine (Williams 2013). The biochemical insights about the origins of life also deeply inform the work of John Padgett (Padgett and Powell 2012). For many reasons including its pedagogical value, my own preference might be the magnificent essays of Stephen Jay Gould (1996) tracing the contingently emerging “punctuated equilibria” across developments in the “copious bush of life” as well as in human ideas about natural history.

The analogies between world-systems analysis and environmental sciences point to their shared origin in the theoretical breakthroughs of the late 1960s and the 1970s, or what Wallerstein likes to label with the symbolic date of 1968. This matters not merely in the legitimation of intellectual shifts introduced by a world-systems perspective. It also helps us to grasp better what were those shifts away from a nineteenth-century paradigm of evolving stages and why fundamental perspectives were questioned simultaneously across different areas of knowledge (Lee 2012). All this would become very necessary, as I am going to argue a bit later, if one is to write, for instance, a world-systems biography of Immanuel Wallerstein himself.

What genre could be more effective in scholarly popularization than biography? Visit any (still surviving) bookstore to marvel at how fat and numerous are the biographical volumes among the non-fiction bestsellers. Yet these might be not the examples for us to follow because conventional biographies dwell on precisely what world-systems analysis is against: attributing all explanations to the shallow level of events and personal wills. Fernand Braudel’s *Mediterranean* is our original world-systems biography. Look closely at its cover and we notice Giorgio Vasari’s epic and rather horrifying fresco depicting the Battle of Lepanto. Who are those Ottoman and Spanish fighters shooting and falling into perilous waters, desperately unable to shed their armors? We might know only a few names (of course, Miguel Cervantes among them). Braudel’s masterpiece, however, meticulously reconstructs their collective origins and trajectories bringing them—ever very slowly, across the large semi-inhabited expanses of the Mediterranean, as Braudel highlights at the length of his pages—into the final violent act at Lepanto.

Here we encounter our warning number one: World-systems biographies are likely to become book length. Take encouragement in the words of the pioneering world historian William McNeill: We are people of books, not articles. And also heed McNeill’s grumpy advice: Do not neglect to remove scaffolding and reveal the façade once your building is built. Our theoretical debates, specific empirical findings, and technical matters pertaining to methodology should stay relegated to the internal journals and conferences of our sections within professional associations such as PEWS. We should obtain reach and range by writing books for larger external audiences where we cannot be too technical and at the same time we must not hide our key assumptions. In the practice of writing, however, this is never going to be easy. Unlike the authors of conventional biographies who become casually elliptical when referring to historical

“background,” we have too many things to lay out because background is in fact the stage and structural processes that set up the action and actors.

A big example of both possibilities and pitfalls of world-systems biography is Stephen Kotkin’s *Stalin* (2014). So far only the first volume of the planned three has come out—and it already stands at nearly 950 pages including two hundred pages of endnotes. Stephen Kotkin boldly invades a very busy terrain. A couple dozen popular biographies of the Soviet revolutionary emperor have appeared in recent years, while more specialist works based on newly available archives count in the hundreds. Kotkin, however, announces a defiantly different approach. Rather than conventionally looking for clues to Stalin’s future personality in his childhood and youth (which Kotkin finds fairly unexceptional) or exploring the darker sides of the Russian revolutionary underground and its ideologies that presumably led to later atrocities, Kotkin consciously ignores his main protagonist in the first chapters. Like so many of his contemporaries, the young, poor, and mostly self-educated ethnic Georgian from the periphery of the Russian empire was swept up by the excitement of the 1905 revolution. In 1909, after the tumult and demoralizing revolutionary defeat, Russian secret police finally caught the Georgian activist and exiled him in a remote Siberian village. Hardly anything of note would happen at this nadir in Stalin’s life until 1917, except that he did not die young from disease and despair like so many exiled revolutionaries. Nothing at the time predicted that in just a few years Stalin would be suddenly re-energized by another revolution and transformed along with the explosively and at first quite chaotically growing Bolshevik regime into its workaholic supreme political operator.

Conventional biographies would skip over Stalin’s uneventful years; but surely the years 1909–16 were uneventful only at his individual level. Stephen Kotkin convincingly exposes the grave dilemmas of Russian empire which takes him some length. He sees the key problems not in the polyglot and exploitative character of empire—which contemporary imperial rivals were not? The main problem facing Russia was “modernization” which Kotkin trenchantly defines as military-industrial geopolitics. Either one gets the engineers and steel mills that produce modern weapons, or those who have them will come uninvited. Korea and Japan might have looked similar at around 1800; but in the 1900s one of them becomes an imperial metropole and the other its colony. The differential is mainly in the class politics that either generate an effective developmentalist regime or, as in the Russian empire of the irresolute retrograde Nicholas II, become obstacles to developmentalist mobilization. This is what Giovanni Arrighi (1990) called semiperipheral dilemmas. Stephen Kotkin, however, makes two mistakes. He does not proclaim clearly enough that his is not a conventional biography of Stalin. (The original manuscript had a less bland title, *Stalin’s World*.) The reviewers tended to dismiss as tedious and tangential what would seem to us the most important chapters in Kotkin’s book. In the later chapters, Kotkin

assumes the persona of diligent historian and vastly overburdens the text with empirical minutiae, extensive quotations, and references. This is when it probably becomes tedious and tangential.

Then let us not pretend to wear the halo of humility or the cloaks of a boring savant. Indeed, world-systems research tends towards epic proportions. Yet an epic can come as *Iliad*, a rather static collective conflict arguably rooted in the prestigious political economy of archaic chiefdoms, or as *Odyssey* where the lone protagonist is taken across his world(s). The latter would be like the research strategy of “marked particles” whose trajectories through the system help to map complex structural landscapes. A world-systems biography of Ibn Battuta, anyone?

But our protagonists need not be global hitchhikers or visionaries. Admittedly, my own source of revelations—Musa/Yuri Shanibov, aka “Bourdieu’s secret admirer”—hardly ever moved from his native North Caucasus. Nevertheless Shanibov first struck me as a highly evocative personage, not in small measure precisely because he always stayed so provincial—forcing us to consider provincialism as analytical problem and potentially a factor in political miscalculations. Moreover Shanibov spent his life in largely the same neighborhood where Mikhail Gorbachev had also spent his formative years. It is the action of people like Shanibov and Gorbachev, two earnest Soviet believers from the same place and generation, which ended up imploding the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the USSR is quite a dramatic puzzle to explain. Within social structures erected through time and space, Shanibov and Gorbachev came to be positioned so their actions could affect in surprisingly major ways the final trajectory of the already teetering Soviet Union. At a macrohistorical level we are best served by the theoretical tools of world-systems analysis. They help us to understand the geopolitical and socio-economic consequences of the Bolsheviks, an antisystemic movement capturing a large multi-ethnic state in the semiperiphery of the capitalist world-economy. At the time, the world-economy was undergoing its own hegemonic transition through a series of world wars. The Bolsheviks, or rather their Stalinist inheritors, emerged from the murderous purges of the 1930s and then marched the peoples of the Soviet Union to a tremendous victory in military-industrial confrontation with Nazi Germany, the revanchist failing hegemon (Tooze 2007). The outcome positioned the USSR as a superpower after 1945 (Zubok 2007).

But where could a communist superpower go next, given that it had triumphed in a still capitalist world-economy, consolidated and mightily boosted after 1945 by American hegemony? It was a long-standing analytical prediction of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), himself following in the footsteps of Isaac Deutscher (1953), that the later generation of Soviet leaders would try to move their state closer to a capitalist core, converting in the process their geopolitical weight and ideological threat into honorable admission to the capitalist club. Alas, this logical and heterodox prediction (which surely earned Wallerstein a ban from Soviet

censors) did not come to pass. The fragments of the former Soviet bloc did in fact move closer to America—but to the harsher realities of South America (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein 1992). Explaining this bitter paradox took me into the institutional complexities of the Soviet state and its elites, including the national republics and giant industrial ministries. Here one had to use, albeit selectively, the insights of western Sovietology. The more useful approach, however, turned out to be the institutional and class analysis of developmental states which its main author Peter Evans (1995) created without any regard to Soviet bloc countries. The USSR showed many signs of Evans' triple pressures for the self-dismantling of developmentalist regimes: the tendency of industrial bosses to privatize their domains into oligarchic conglomerates; the growing assertiveness of workers once their ranks could no longer be diluted with new rural entrants; and the democratizing urges of middle-class specialists whose importance and numbers had multiplied in the course of accelerated industrialization. Still, this was not enough to explain the over-enthusiastic and ultimately misguided worldviews and politics of people like Musa Shanibov and Mikhail Gorbachev. Why could they not follow the pragmatically pro-capitalist path long charted for them by Isaac Deutcher and Immanuel Wallerstein? Here I was helped by the concepts of Pierre Bourdieu, who had excelled in penetrating beyond ideological misrepresentations and misrecognitions in his own France, not in the exotic (to him, not me) Eastern Europe. As you can see, constructing world-systems biographies forces one to become a theoretical polymath. Such world-systems research might not stay confined to its own conceptual apparatus. Admittedly this also causes a great many self-doubts in the process of writing. But it is doable and worthwhile.

In order to add useful and perhaps inspirational substance I would now like to outline where we stand in the further development of world-systems analysis. For this purpose let us sketch what might need to go into constructing a world-systems biography of Immanuel Wallerstein, the far-ranging and prolific pioneer of our enterprise. He wrote and spoke in interviews a lot about the origins of his views and the battlefronts opened by world-systems analysis. These are important documents but they are also unavoidably political statements that must be interpreted in their historical context. Put differently, we have to add world-systemic dimensions to the words and actions of Immanuel Wallerstein.

It is not a frivolous coincidence that the founders of world-systems analysis originated in the upper classes of capitalism, like Terence Hopkins, Giovanni Arrighi, and, in part, Wallerstein himself; or, like Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin, in a very cosmopolitan and Bohemian professional milieu. Those familiar with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of intellectuals (inordinately hostile as Bourdieu defensively bragged of his peasant village roots) might suggest that personal origins in the declining fractions of the bourgeoisie are particularly conducive to the conversion of accumulated family capital into prestigious occupations (Bourdieu 2008). Incidentally, the

best concise definition of forms of capital was given by Wallerstein—as the ways of storing success in social connections, insider knowledge, prestige, or, for that matter, in money as investment capital—but since this was said to me in 1994 in a casual conversation that Immanuel Wallerstein had since forgotten, I must refer to myself as the source. But here the explanation in terms of capital conversions seems to me at best very insufficient. What matters more is that all our pioneering figures are either Americans or they had studied or worked in American academia after 1945—otherwise, I suspect, they could have become philosophers like Michel Foucault. I am going to use two quotations—both half-jokes—from personal conversations to indicate how family backgrounds might really matter. Giovanni Arrighi once quipped that for him capitalism had never been a theoretical abstraction but rather the topic of dinner conversations at the family table. The founders of world-systems analysis could thus see the whole from above—and they could discern it with rare clarity. To continue from my conversation with Wallerstein which he forgot, to my surprise that social capital could be defined so easily, Immanuel smiled in his moustache: In Paris they speak in discourses; here in New York we do business!

Al Bergesen (2000) got it right by focusing our attention on the high hegemonic platform where Wallerstein and Hopkins first elaborated their ideas: America at its peak in 1945–1968. After the depredations and catastrophes prior to 1945, the world was moving in some very optimistic directions—and, it seemed, it could move even better and faster with the help of advanced knowledge and political will. This was a truly hegemonic moment in modern history which Hopkins and Wallerstein had experienced at its most central point. They were in the ultra-cosmopolitan New York and, on top of that, at the intellectual commanding heights of Columbia University’s global liberalism during the time when the Ivy League seemed stuck in aristocratic decline and the radical reputation of Berkeley had not yet risen.

Immediately our world-systemic landscape must be extended from the heights of hegemonic America to the energies and political projects emerging across the Third World (Prashad 2007; Westad 2005). The young Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein all went to Africa amidst pre-independence ferment. This is where they experienced their early conversions. In the proud admission of Terence Hopkins, “Dependency theory came from Latin America; world-systems analysis had its origins in Africa.” Seconded by Giovanni Arrighi: “In Africa it was easier to overcome many illusions; from there we could see the centers of the world better.” When Wallerstein acknowledges Frantz Fanon as a life-transforming influence, we must take this seriously.

Before 1968, Wallerstein was on an ascendant trajectory and likely moving into the forefront of American intellectual politics at the time when modernization was its hegemonic project (Gilman 2004). I suggest that we draw on the sociology of the networks of intellectual creativity and change, a lifelong research project of Randall Collins (1998). Wallerstein and his

friends, on the one side, were shaped by their extensive contacts among Third World radical intellectuals. But on the other side, Wallerstein and Hopkins were students and junior colleagues of Karl Polanyi, C. Wright Mills, Margaret Mead, Daniel Bell, and Seymour Martin Lipset. During their formative years at Columbia, Wallerstein and Hopkins were also peers, rivals, and opponents of figures like Zbigniew Brzezinski, Samuel Huntington, and Henry Kissinger (Suri 2007). Inside these networks (yes, world-systems biography can use interviews) one hears the suggestion that if Wallerstein was going to become US Secretary of State, he should have made only slightly different choices at Columbia before 1968.

So far, the trajectory of Immanuel Wallerstein might look impressive, yet it remains fairly unexceptional and easy to explain. The young Columbia professor was on his way to becoming a leading light in liberal New York circles or a high-brow contributor to radical venues such as *Partisan Review* or *New Left Review*. Instead, in 1974 he released the first volume of *The Modern World-System* (2011a), a large work, with even more volumes promised, which had originally been intended as a short essay. The circumstances of its writing might conform to the classical dictum of the Chinese court historiographer Sima Qian that the greatest works are produced by authors forced into exile. But the conflict and resulting charge of “emotional energy” (to use a more contemporary term) driving Wallerstein out of Columbia would hardly explain what makes Volume One such a revolutionary breakthrough in social science. We are facing a great difficulty here.

Randall Collins (1985), once again, offers a helpful theoretical clarification. In the immediate post-1945 period, the accumulation of professional historical knowledge over virtually every part of the world created conditions for grand summaries. (For a second, consider what Max Weber in his time, let alone Karl Marx, could read about China or Africa?) The potential was first successfully realized by William McNeill and Fernand Braudel, which is what made them “mega-historians.” Processes of knowledge accumulation were gaining speed because the expansion of universities offered many more new research positions. Importantly, new research centers were appearing across the Third World where social science was also acquiring the vector of critical radicalism. From here, it might not be too difficult to explain the rapid discrediting of modernization theory. What could be more difficult is to explain why and how patterns of intellectual contention simultaneously emerged in unrelated disciplines such as “chaos theory” and evolutionary biology, as recent studies show these debates followed analogous logics (Sterelny 2007; York and Clark 2011).

The greatest difficulty awaits us in explaining the world revolution of 1968. Many commentators, especially in retrospect, did not find it a revolution at all. Charles Tilly omits any discussion of 1968 in his detailed analytical catalogue of revolutions (1992), for evidently revolutionaries who did not patrol the streets for more than a couple of months were not his kind

of revolutionaries. Immanuel Wallerstein insists that, to the contrary, 1968 marked the second most important revolution in the modern world-system after 1848. Both revolutionary waves, though political failures in their immediate results, shattered the previously reigning world-systemic geoculture and opened the way to the institutionalization of new anti-systemic movements. In the recently published Volume Four of *The Modern World-System* (2011b), Wallerstein provides a detailed and enlightening analysis of nineteenth-century political struggles and geocultural transformations. He shows how modern liberal states in the core of the world-system resulted from long-running efforts to contain and institutionalize the internal social contradictions of contemporary capitalism. In Wallerstein's exposition, then, 1848 indeed acquires hugely transformative and far-reaching effects. But what could be the causes and effects of 1968, the world event that turned Immanuel Wallerstein into an ideological rebel in both political and intellectual arenas, who then translated his protest into world-systems analysis?

Here I limit myself to just two observations, although big ones. The revolutions of 1848 and 1968 are related to world-systemic hegemonic cycles. The common romantic assumption about revolutions is that they open new eras. In fact, they might be better viewed as aftershocks arriving after hegemonic waves of re-ordering the world-system have already crested. The late 18th century American and French revolutions could be viewed as the radical aftershocks of the Dutch hegemonic cycle, which had introduced the 17th century trends of rationally designing and building new capitalist institutions of absolutist states, commerce, armies, ideology, and science. The British hegemonic cycle internalized the production costs of capitalism through the industrial revolution (Arrighi 2010). Within a few decades, these British achievements caused the rise not just of industrial class conflict but also nationalism, increasingly the defensive-developmental reaction of the semiperiphery to the rise of British industrial imperialism. American hegemony then internalized the transaction costs of capitalist business and its social consequences, at least in core countries, which resulted in the enormous growth of corporate and governmental bureaucracies. The world revolution of 1968, in both the West and in communist Eastern Europe, thus seemed more a Weberian revolution than a Marxian one. It was about rolling back the formalisms imposed by bureaucratization and asserting the rights of status groups: not only various minorities but perhaps, in the main, the status group suddenly known as youth. 1968 never acquired a positive institutionalization because the organizational forms corresponding to its aspirations could not be found within the range of possibilities in the present world-system. By default, a negative de-institutionalization came to pass in the decades since 1968: the collapse of Old Left institutions and the flight of capital out of national jurisdictions and into the abode of globalization (Wallerstein, Collins, Mann, Calhoun, and Derluigian 2013).

In this macrohistorical context we can better appreciate the scale of Wallerstein's intellectual achievement and envision what might yet come from it. World-systems analysis

emerged from a moment of tremendously optimistic transformation when American hegemony had already crested. Departing from the tumultuous intellectual achievements and debates of the sixties, Wallerstein performed a Copernican move. As Wallerstein himself has always insisted, world-system analysis is not theory. It is a change in perspective about the evolution of the modern world. What previously appeared as lags in time, between advanced and backward social formations, could instead be seen as differentiated positions in space, between core and periphery.

Pause with me to think about what we have inherited and what remains to be done. In his time, Copernicus did not accomplish much beyond changing the perspective, which famously eliminated the place for “epicycles” and other devices obscuring the real panorama of the Solar system. It took Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, and several generations of astronomers armed with Galileo’s telescopes to accumulate and order a mass of new data. It then took Isaac Newton to explain mathematically the formal regularities of celestial motion. And it took scores of teachers and popularizers to turn all this into common knowledge for the new epoch.

Immanuel Wallerstein is a very astute theorist and prolific writer. He created a generous legacy for us to work with, to expand, and to critically reevaluate. Still, there is much more to be done theoretically and empirically regarding the distant past, the present, and especially the moving frontier of our near future. We are now an intellectual movement with fairly strong institutions and recently gaining more young adherents. This is because world-systems analysis is interesting, intellectually refreshing, and stunningly realistic. It is primarily about mapping historical spaces and trajectories. This can and should be done in a combination of different scales, from big and structural to the individual. After all, no global trend can have reality unless observed in local interactions. Likewise, local situations, in all their contingent variety, must add up to something much bigger. We can and should be technical in gathering new data and ruthlessly elitist in academic debates. At the same time, we cannot escape popularization, and here world-systems biography could become a useful versatile form. What we cannot afford to be is boring.

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