



Remembering Immanuel Wallerstein

Christopher Chase-Dunn

University of California-Riverside

chriscd@ucr.edu

Jackie Smith

University of Pittsburgh

jgsmith@pitt.edu

Patrick Manning

University of Pittsburgh

pmanning@pitt.edu

Andrej Grubačić

California Institute of Integral Studies

agrubacic@ciis.edu

Abstract

Immanuel Wallerstein, one of the leading founders and promoters of world-systems analysis, died on August 31, 2019. Given the importance of his scholarship to the Journal of World-Systems Research, we plan to publish in future issues research articles based on conferences and symposia that are now being planned to honor Wallerstein's work and legacy. In this essay, JWSR founding editor, Christopher Chase-Dunn, is joined by current editor Jackie Smith, World Historical Information section editor, Patrick Manning, and incoming editor-in-chief, Andrej Grubačić, offering reflections on some of Wallerstein's contributions to both scholarship and practice.



Articles in vol. 21(2) and later of this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System, University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Immanuel Wallerstein was an intrepid protagonist of human equality and an innovative and influential social scientist who led a scholarly movement to build a coherent framework for understanding the emergence and development of global capitalism. He was also an influential activist in the World Social Forum project, and a leader in the movement for global justice.

The world-system perspective emerged during the World Revolution of 1968, when progressive social scientists contemplated the meaning of Latin American dependency theory for Africa and Asia. The events of 1968 angered him and transformed his trajectory. His activism at Columbia during 1968 is reflected in his two-volume book with Paul Starr, *University Crisis Reader: Confrontation and Counterattack*. Immanuel Wallerstein worked with Terence Hopkins, Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and Giovanni Arrighi to develop overlapping versions of the world-system perspective.¹

The central idea in world-systems analysis was that the modern global system has an evolving hierarchy based on institutionalized exploitation. This implied that the *whole system* was the proper unit of analysis, not national societies, and that development and underdevelopment had been structured by the long history of global power relations, shaped over centuries. The modern world-system is a self-contained entity based on a geographically differentiated division of labor and bound together by the world market and the international system of national states. For Immanuel, capitalism had become predominant in Europe and its dependencies during the long 16th century, and it had expanded and deepened in waves to become the global system of today. The “core states” were those able to capture the most profitable economic activities, and they exploited the semiperipheral and peripheral regions by means of colonialism and later through neocolonial institutions, such as foreign investment, financial globalization, and trade.

The original world-system analysts all focused on global inequalities, but their terminologies were somewhat different. Amin talked about center and periphery. Frank said “metropole” and “satellite.” Wallerstein proposed a three-tiered structure with an intermediate *semiperiphery* between the core and the periphery, and he used the term *core* to suggest a multicentric region containing a group of states rather than the term *center*, which implies a hierarchy with a single peak. The focus on the non-core (periphery and semiperiphery) was called Third Worldism in 1968. Current terminology refers to the Global North (the core) and the Global South (periphery and semiperiphery). But the world-system scholars did not just focus on the non-core. They saw it as an important component of the whole system as an arena of struggle that produced recurrent challenges to the power centers.

¹ The Journal of World-Systems Research published a festschrift in honor of Immanuel Wallerstein in 2000 (Vo. 6, Issue 2): http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/public/journals/1/Full_Issue_PDFs/jwsr-v6n2.pdf. Readers can find in this collection a wide-ranging overview of the varied influences and implications of Wallerstein’s research and theoretical work.

Those powers that were best able to deal with these challenges were winners in the contest for hegemony in the system. The competition for global power within the core was shaped by powerful social movements and state challengers from the non-core. Wallerstein worked with Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank, and Terence Hopkins to produce an analysis of global struggle that focused on the idea of “world revolutions.” The first generation of world-system scholars is now gone. Gunder Frank passed in 2005, Janet Abu-Lughod in 2013;² Walter Goldfrank in 2017, Giovanni Arrighi in 2009,³ and Anibal Quijano, Teotonio dos Santos and Samir Amin in 2018.⁴

Inspired by the ideas of Immanuel Wallerstein, the *Journal of World-Systems Research* was founded in February of 1995 to serve as a venue for the publication and dissemination of quality research and theorization about world-systems present and past.⁵ It was one of the very first Open Access scholarly journals, freely available to readers with access to the internet living anywhere in the world. The journal thus, quite appropriately, reflects a commitment to both the scholarly work of analyzing and advancing understandings of the world-system and to the *political project* of defending people’s access to the increasingly threatened global knowledge commons. For one cannot read the work or the biography of Immanuel Wallerstein without hearing his call *both* for rigorous efforts to improve how we think about the world in which we live *and* for practical action to translate the lessons from our analyses into action aimed at transforming this indisputably unjust system.

In their [obituary](#) published in the American Sociological Association’s *Footnotes*, Charles Lemert and Katharine Wallerstein point out that Wallerstein’s early career and thinking was profoundly impacted by his friendship with Frantz Fanon, whose thinking remained among the most important influences on Wallerstein’s work. And he spent the last decades of his life working with activists who led the World Social Forum Process, making numerous long-distance trips to meet with Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos in Chiapas and to join other global meetings of movement leaders working to develop strategies for anti-capitalist movement-building. Grubacic learned of his important relationship with the Kurdish Freedom movement during a

² The *Journal of World-Systems Research* published essays by Immanuel Wallerstein, Saskia Sassen, and Barry Gills honoring Janet Abu-Lughod’s contributions to world-systems analysis in the Summer/Fall 2014 issue, <https://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/article/view/547>.

³ Robert Denmark provided a review essay of Arrighi’s *Adam Smith in Beijing* that considered how he thought Gunder Frank would have responded to the book, in a “[World System History](#).”

⁴ In 2019 contributors from the second, third and fourth generations of world-system scholars discussed Samir Amin’s proposal for a 5th International (see Gills, Barry & Christopher Chase-Dunn 2019 “In search of unity: a new politics of solidarity and action for confronting the crisis of global capitalism” *Globalizations*, 16:7, 967-972, DOI: [10.1080/14747731.2019.1655889](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1655889)).

⁵ See C. Chase-Dunn, “The rise of JWSR” <https://irows.ucr.edu/papers/irows119/irows119.htm>.

recent trip to the Kurdish democratic federation in Syria (Rojava), where activists noted that Immanuel's work—together with Murray Bookchin and Fernand Braudel—was one of the “three greatest influences on the democratic, women-led social revolution” taking place in the region. Wallerstein's last contribution to the *Journal of World-Systems Research*, “[Antisystemic Movements, Yesterday and Today](#)” bears traces of these two bookends of his career, and provides grist for new thinking about contemporary struggles for world-system transformation.

Although there were several other contributors, Immanuel Wallerstein was the major founder and promoter of the world-system perspective. He worked tirelessly to create spaces that supported world-systems analysis, including a long series of annual spring conferences that began in 1975 and continue today. With Terence Hopkins, Wallerstein founded the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations at [Binghamton University, State University of New York](#) in September 1976. The Braudel Center published *Review*, a journal of the Fernand Braudel Center from Summer 1977 until the Fall of 2015. The Political Economy of the World-System (PEWS) section of the American Sociological Association was founded in 1980.⁶

Building on these important institutions, members of the American Sociological Association's Section on Political Economy of the World-System are organizing a PEWS inter-university consortium dedicated to research and education that applies and develops the world-system perspective on political economy, development and transnational and interpolity relations.⁷ Wallerstein's career reveals his understanding that building an intellectual tradition doesn't just require work of careful and rigorous scholarship and publishing, but it also requires work by all of us to create and support institutions that enable work by emerging scholars and and that nurture international dialogue and collaboration. The *Journal of World-Systems Research* is one such institution, and we are proud to be part of the work of building a vehicle that helps carry on Wallerstein's legacy.

The world historical structures of knowledge production were another crucial line of thinking throughout Wallerstein's work, and he proposed a “undisciplinary” alternative to the organization of knowledge instituted by liberal modernity. His warnings about the increasing irrelevancy of the traditional organization of the academy and the need to “unthink” social science has found resonance with scholars and social movements alike. His ideas helped to “undiscipline” movement-produced knowledge in Chiapas, where the main Zapatista library is named after him.

⁶ A list of the ASA PEWS Section officers is at <http://www.asapews.org/pastleadership.html>.

⁷ The main goals of the PEWS-IC is to facilitate cross-institutional and international collaboration on curricular, training, and research projects informed by world-system analysis and to make it easier for scholars who do not have like-minded local colleagues to work with others on research projects. PEWS-IC seeks to include relevant graduate programs, research institutions and individual scholars from around the world.

Immanuel outstanding work as a historical sociologist and an actively engaged public intellectual demonstrate that social theory is not only for academics. Indeed, his belief that we are living in a particularly critical moment of world history, where systemic crisis enhances the transformative agency of individuals, kept him engaged in political activism until the final months of his life. Wallerstein's work is being carried on in several institutional contexts by younger generations of world-system scholars and global justice activists. The struggle continues, and the *Journal of World-Systems Research* is in it for the long haul.

About the Authors: Christopher Chase-Dunn is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Director of the Institute for Research on World-Systems (IROWS) at the University of California, Riverside, USA. He is the founder and former editor of the *Journal of World-Systems Research*, and his published works include *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism* (with Terry Boswell), *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems* (with Thomas D. Hall), and *Social Change: Globalization from the Stone Age to the Present* (with Bruce Lerro). Jackie Smith is Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of World-Systems Research* (2011-2020). Her published works include: *Social Movements and World-System Transformation* (with Dawn Wiest); *Handbook of World Social Forum Activism* (with Scott Byrd, Ellen Reese, & Elizabeth Smythe), *Social Movements for Global Democracy*, and *Coalitions Across Borders* (with Joe Bandy). Patrick Manning is Andrew Mellon Professor of World History, Emeritus, and former director of the World History Center at the University of Pittsburgh. He is founding editor of the JWSR's section on World Historical Information and has published widely on the demography of slavery and the slave trade. Andrej Grubačić is Professor and Chair of Anthropology and Social Change at California Institute of Integral Studies-San Francisco. He will begin a term as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of World-Systems Research* later this year. He works with the social science departments at Rojava University and Mesopotamia Academy of Social Sciences. He is the author and co-author of several books, including *Don't Mourn, Balkanize: Essays After Yugoslavia* (2011), *The Staughton Lynd Reader*, and *Living at the Edges of Capitalism: Adventures in Exile and Mutual Aid*.