

# Immanuel Wallerstein

Person: Immanuel Wallerstein

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Description Immanuel Wallerstein is one of the most distinguished and influential professors of sociology in the world today. Born on 28 September 1930, he received his PhD in 1959 from Columbia University. Since then he has taught sociology at Columbia and McGill universities, and most recently holds the directorship of the Fernand Braudel Centre for the Study of Economics, Historical Systems and Civilizations at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

In his book *The Modern World-System* (1974), Wallerstein makes his most significant contribution to both sociology and globalization studies in the form of World-Systems theory. Unlike most other Marxist historical work that is concerned with analysing the development of capitalist economic inequalities, World-Systems theory does not concentrate on the relations between social classes or between the state and workers. Rather, it focuses on a large, borderless economic entity called the World-System. This ever-changing system is characterized by an unjust division of labour that produces unequal exchange relations between different geographical areas of the world. The World-System, then, is not maintained through consensual agreement, but rather through social forces that are in constant conflict, threatening to collapse the system.

Wallerstein argues that the modern capitalist world-economy is the current type of World-System. Rather than relying on political domination as did an earlier form of the system, this one operates on the basis of economic exploitation through an unjust global division of labour. The World-System comprises three main geographical areas: core, periphery, and semi-periphery. The core is the geographical region that dominates the world economy. It exploits the peripheral region, which provides raw materials and cheaply produced commodities to the core, while being forced to import expensive finished products from the core region. The semi-periphery is the remaining areas that are simultaneously exploited by the core and exploiting of the periphery.

As the World-System gradually expands across the global, it exerts a pressure on individual nations to become part of the world economy. Nations remain independent as states, as long as they integrate themselves into the "interstate" system. Otherwise they risk being taken over by states already incorporated into that political system. Once states become part of the World-System, they must employ various strategies, including the cultural denigration of "others," to protect their economies from outside influence.

Wallerstein argues that the capitalist world-economy has skewed economic development and increased social disparities between economic regions. Consequently, it needs to be the focus of global anti-system movements such as the World Social Forum and World Trade Organization protests in order to provide prosperity for everyone. This social justice agenda has resonated most strongly in the Third World due to its challenge to unequal development opportunities across nations.

A second of Wallerstein's key contributions to sociological and globalization research is methodological. He has played a vital role in reviving theoretically-informed historical research both within and outside his discipline. Many social scientists have turned away from the painstaking historical, interdisciplinary, and theory-driven work that was undertaken by the early pioneers of sociology. But Wallerstein has advocated that scholars re-develop a wide range of holistic, historically-oriented knowledge that integrates insights from economics, history, political science, and anthropology so they are better able to analyze and theorize large-scale social change over long periods of time.

World-Systems theory is not without its critics. Many Marxists have criticized its failure to emphasize relations between social classes. To them the key issue is not the core-periphery division of labour, but rather class relations within given societies. As a mediating position, some scholars have suggested that core-periphery relations are not only unequal exchange relations, but also global class relations that denote power-dependence relationships.

Other critics have noted the Eurocentric nature of Wallerstein's work. By positing that a world-system emerged 500 years ago in Europe, he envisions Europe as the privileged site of global development, and attributes to the "West" a historical destiny (i.e., continual advances in science, technology, industrialism), which it bequeaths to the "Rest." In contrast, critics argue that a global world-system is 5000 years old, meaning that it is pre-modern, pre-European, and not distinctly capitalist. Due to its Eurocentrism, Wallerstein's theory is sometimes understood as part of the global system of power and material interests of which he is critical.

Suggested  
Reading:

**Bergesen, Albert.** 1984. The critique of World-System theory: Class relations or division of labour?. In *Sociological Theory — 1984*. ed. Randal Collins, 365-72. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Wallerstein, Immanuel.** 1974. *The modern world system: Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century*. New York: Academic Press.

**Wallerstein, Immanuel.** 1980. *The modern world-system II: Mercantilism and the consolidation of the European world-economy, 1600-1750*. New York: Academic Press.

**Wallerstein, Immanuel.** 1989. *The modern world-system III: The second era of great expansion of the capitalist world economy, 1730-1840*. New York: Academic Press.

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