

## A CRITIQUE OF WORLD SYSTEM THEORY\*

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*Abstract* Contemporary social science needs to formulate a world sociology, and with regard to this problematic, world system theory occupies an important place. At an earlier stage world system theory has been criticised for overemphasising the world market while neglecting forces and relations of production. The present critique focuses on conceptual dimensions of world system theory and on the relationship between its conceptual structure and the way it theorises social change and action. World system theory is a theory of the world system without a system theory. Its actual conceptual units are 'social systems', one of which is the 'modern world system'. The assumptions which define these need to be examined as well as how they are thought to relate to one another and how one changes into another. This is one of the fundamental conceptual problems of world system theory. It shares this difficulty in conceptualising structure change with other 'structural' approaches, such as structural history of the *Annales* school. In world system theory this is combined with neo-Marxist dependency theory and an, in other respects, conventional Marxism, replicating several of the deficiencies of these approaches – the centrism of dependency thinking and the materialism and determinism of conventional Marxism. To address the question of structure change, in particular how the 'modern world system' can be transformed to a successor social system, world system theory revives the Marxist theory of the crisis of capitalism, i.e. one of the weakest theorems of Marxist thought.

The game we watch has no spectators, specialised or otherwise; only participants.

(T.K. Hopkins 1980)

In our time of global interdependence of increasing density, there is more than ever a need for a *global* perspective on social development. World system theory presents itself as a leading contender for such a perspective and as such it occupies a prominent place on the theoretical horizon of social science. It is also easily the most pretentious theory in sociology today. On both these grounds it warrants close scrutiny. The essential argument of world system theory is briefly that in the sixteenth century a capitalist world economy developed which can be described as a world system. World system theory is concerned with interpreting this system in its spatial structures (core, semi-periphery and periphery, in which core areas are high productivity zones) and temporal dynamics (cycles and trends, rise and future demise). The following is a theoretical critique concerned with the basic claims of world system theory, its systems format and the disjuncture between its system framework and action rhetoric.

No doubt one of the remarkable features of world system theory (WST) is its amazing voracity. First, it has claimed the entire world:

There are today no socialist systems in the world-economy any more than there are feudal systems because there is only *one* world-system. It is a world-economy and it is by definition capitalist in form.

(Emphasis in original; Wallerstein 1979: 35)

Along with this it has incorporated all economies, states, classes and status groups, and households that make up world society, all of which are

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deemed subject to the dynamics of the 'world system'. Since the capitalist world economy has incorporated the last of the 'external areas' since ca. 1900 and since, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, there is only one world system, it follows that this is a closed system. Not satisfied with encompassing all of contemporary history, this perspective also seeks to gobble up past history. A recent article by Immanuel Wallerstein argues that nations and states have been created by the world economy and not the other way round. 'It has been the world-system then and not the separate "societies" that have been "developing"' (ibid. 1986: 11). Already all of history had been mapped out as a succession of systems: 'There have been thus far in the history of the world three different kinds of social systems: reciprocal minisystems, redistributive world-empires, and the capitalist world-economy' (ibid. 1984: 147). Having encompassed all of space and all of time, WST is presently about to expand 'vertically' as well, to encompass the dimension of culture and civilisation:

Today there is only one social system and therefore only one mode of production extant, the capitalist world-economy. Does this mean that there is then only one civilization? ... On the one hand, something we might call 'capitalist civilization' clearly dominates the thinking and action of rulers and ruled, oppressors and oppressed.

Capitalist civilisation, it is pointed out, has 'not yet obliterated (other) civilizations', but has transformed and circumscribed them (ibid.: 165, 168). So it may be that here for now the door is still ajar. Otherwise in the face of this voracious system, this conceptual juggernaut, one may well wonder: is there a way out of here?

### *Social systems*

The sociological theorist who is exclusively committed to the exploration of a total system with its utmost abstractions runs the risk that, as with modern décor, the furniture of his mind will be bare and uncomfortable.

(Robert K. Merton 1967)

To understand the structure and scope of WST, it is to its conceptual building blocks that one must turn. In the indexes to Wallerstein's books, however, one looks in vain for any reference to 'system', and from the outset it is clear that we are dealing here with an untheorised use of 'system'. It is a systems rhetoric, a generalised *esprit de système*, rather than a systems theory that is the basis of this work; the theoretical antecedents of this systems rhetoric are discussed below, here it is the 'social system', the actual conceptual units of WST, that are discussed. It turns out that the definitions for *social system* and *world* are co-equivalent:

We take the defining characteristic of a social system to be the existence within it of a division of labor, such that the various sectors or areas within are dependent upon economic exchange with others for the smooth and continuous provisioning of the needs of the area.

(Wallerstein 1975: 5)

... a definite 'world', a spatio-temporal whole, whose spatial scope is coextensive with the elementary division among its constituent regions or parts and whose

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temporal scope extends for as long as the elementary division of labor continually reproduces the 'world' as a social whole.

(Hopkins and Wallerstein 1977: 112; cf. Wallerstein 1979: 156)

Moreover, the concept of *mode of production* is used synonymously with social system, such that different social systems are equivalent with different modes of production.

No reasons are given why the existence of a division of labour over an area should be considered to give rise to a social system. Why a *system*? And why a *social system*? It would be more obvious to speak of an economic system; and given certain conditions, a political system, a social system, etc. As Ramkrishna Mukherjee remarked, 'a system will have to consider itself in the context of other systems; otherwise the concept of system would have no meaning' (1980: 316). In this work, however, it is only different kinds of social systems that are considered; and with their definitions they yield the following schema:

- reciprocal minisystems: one economy, one policy, one culture;
- redistributive world-empires: one economy, one polity, many cultures;
- capitalist world-economy: one economy, multiple states, multiple cultures;
- socialist world-government: (future possibility). (Wallerstein 1984: 147-58)

That all these social systems have in common 'one economy' follows from the basic definition: they are all based on the existence of an elementary division of labour. This is precisely the crux of WST. Is it realistic to consider areas which engage in economic exchange of necessary commodities as having 'one economy' and as constituting a 'social system'? Economic interdependence carries consequences, of course, but it is obvious as well that it can go together with enormous diversity; hence to speak of 'one economy' and a 'social system' introduces an element of arbitrariness from the outset which stretches the normal usage of terms. To refer to these 'social systems' as four different 'modes of production' again stretches the usage of the term (forces of production and relations of production, according to Marx), first because it is defined in terms of the sphere of exchange and not the sphere of production, and second because it excludes the relations of production. A few brief remarks about the conceptualisation of these social systems are in order.

With regard to *reciprocal minisystems*, Wallerstein's term for traditional or small-scale societies, why should these be considered to have one economy c.q. one mode of production? It has been pointed out already (Foster-Carter 1978) that this bypasses the entire debate on the articulation of modes of production initiated by French Marxist anthropologists. To speak of 'one economy' in this context without addressing this question is a theoretical regression, while to speak of 'one policy' is an obvious simplification. Another form of exchange in small-scale societies is, in conjunction with the incest taboo, the exchange of women, which is essential for the biological reproduction of society. This matrimonial exchange gives rise to a kinship network which would be more appropriately called a 'social system', regardless of whether there would also be economic exchange (Murdock 1965); so here is a concept of 'social system',

and a strategic one, not based on economic interdependence, which underlines the arbitrariness of the conceptualisation followed here.

The *modern world system*, the central concept in WST, is founded on the distinction between empire and world economy. These are both 'world-systems'; both denote an economically interdependent area. It has been noted already that 'social system', according to the definition used, is coextensive with 'world', so that 'world-system' is a tautology. *World-empires* are described as being the dominant format until the sixteenth century and as systems 'in which there is a single political system over most of the area' (Wallerstein 1974: 11), which have a 'unified political system' (ibid. 1979: 156)<sup>1</sup>, in contrast with a *world-economy* where 'such a single political system does not exist over all, or virtually all, of the space'. Again the terminology is vague. What is a 'single political system'? Was the Roman Empire with its formal rule in the West and informal rule in the Eastern part a 'single political system'? At any rate, the contrast between empire and world economy appears to be both simplistic and overstated. On the one hand, the political homogeneity of empires is overstated ('unified political system'). Historically, empires may be located on a continuum in terms of their political organisation extending from political homogeneity to political diversity, bounded by a threshold of tribute payment as the minimum definition of empire. The empire of Alexander, the Arab empire, the Mongol empire are among the instances of political control in the sense of tribute payment in combination with diversity of local political systems. Again, in parentheses, the assumption of one mode of production for empires is another simplification<sup>2</sup>. On the other, the political heterogeneity of the capitalist world economy is overstated. Are there not patterns of political domination, pressures toward political conformity which have accompanied, or preceded, the extension of capitalism? What else is the basis of the phenomenon called 'imperialism'? Characteristically, imperialism has no place in WST and is rarely referred to in Wallerstein's books; instead the far more restrictive concept of hegemony is used. The capitalist world economy is defined by the *absence* of a 'single political system'. Since a 'single political system' in the sense of a 'unified political system' is not tenable for empires, in view of their possible political heterogeneity, what is meant, presumably, is a single political *centre* (metropolis) which maintains control according to different political systems or methods. In that case, what we are dealing with is the difference between unipolarity and multipolarity in the international balance of power. This, however, does not add up to a distinction in principle between empire and world economy, because situations of both unipolarity and multipolarity in international power have occurred during imperial times (instances of multipolarity are, e.g. Athens and Sparta in the Aegean region, Rome and Carthage in the Mediterranean) as well as since the capitalist era (an instance of unipolarity is the British Empire for several decades after 1815). Wallerstein's overstatement of the contrast between empire and world economy results in effect in defining political power out of the conceptualisation of the world economy, which is defined by an *absence*; imperial episodes and dimensions in the capitalist world economy are subsequently reintroduced

under another name, 'hegemony'<sup>3</sup>. At any rate, the terminology used appears to be far too rudimentary to warrant the assumption of a singular 'modern world system' since the sixteenth century.

In later discussions the question is compounded further. In a 1984 essay world-empires are said to be characterised by 'cyclical change' and the 'circulation of elites', as described by Pareto. 'This cyclical pattern seemed unending until the sixteenth century, when a particular conjuncture of pressures combined with certain technological advances to permit the creation of the capitalist world-economy' (Wallerstein 1984: 152). This clouds the issue with two long-surpassed views – the conservative theory of the circulation of elites, as if elites were not also evolving, and the concept of cyclical change; both antiquated ideas which belong to modernisation mythology and suggest that prior to the modern era there was 'no change' (e.g. Nisbet 1969).

It is this conceptualisation which leads Wallerstein to present the sixteenth century as a great watershed in human history and the genesis of a new social system. In the words of Braudel:

I do not share Immanuel Wallerstein's fascination with the sixteenth century. Is the problem that perplexes him not in the end the same one that was raised by Marx? Let me quote again the famous sentence 'The life history of capital begins in the sixteenth century'.

(Braudel 1986: 57)<sup>4</sup>

European capitalism, according to Braudel, began in thirteenth century Italy. For Wallerstein, the emphasis on the sixteenth century serves the same end as the overstatement of the difference between empire and world economy: it serves to establish the singularity of the 'modern world system', which is the substance of WST.

This brings us to the question of the relationship *between* social systems. While Wallerstein has been credited with having formulated a 'paradigm of the transformation to modern capitalism' (Appleby 1975: 1324), even a cursory examination of WST shows that a theory of *transition* from one social system or mode of production to another is a logical impossibility in the terms of this theory. The capitalist world economy, according to Wallerstein, arose in the 'long sixteenth century' (ca. 1450-1650); this would imply that during this period feudalism and capitalism existed side by side and gradually one mode or system became dominant over the other. According to Wallerstein, however, this is not possible:

it is *not* the case that two forms of social organization, capitalist and feudal, existed side by side, or could ever so exist. The world-economy has one form or the other. Once it is capitalist, relationships that bear certain formal resemblances to feudal relationships are necessarily redefined in terms of the governing principles of a capitalist system.

(Wallerstein 1974: 92)

In support of this thesis Wallerstein quotes Henri Stahl who argues that in any historical epoch the most advanced countries impose the law of the epoch; which is merely a paraphrase of Marx's dictum about 'The country that is more developed industrially only shows to the less developed the image of its own future', and a view that is outdated as being unilinear. It follows that what is envisaged here, rather than a transition, is a kind of

break or rupture between systems. The same problem exists with respect to the process of 'incorporation' into the capitalist world economy of an 'external area', a process which, according to Wallerstein, takes at least fifty years to be completed: again the only plausible way in which this can be conceptualised is through a transitional coexistence of multiple modes of production (cf. Foster-Carter 1978). In relation to the transition from capitalism to socialism, which according to Wallerstein is already taking place, this problem presents itself once more; again the most plausible conceptualisation is one according to which, for instance following Marx's organic imagery, 'the new grows in the womb of the old'. But since, according to Wallerstein, there is but a *single* world system and 'socialist systems do not exist in the contemporary world', it is not clear how this transition can be conceptualised within the logic of WST. This calls to mind the problem raised by Trotsky's insistence that the transition to socialism could take place only on a *world* scale, hence his opposition to 'socialism in one country'. Yet the conceptualisation of such a world transition, in a world made up of nation-states, is impossible short of, in Peter Worsley's term, 'some kind of global orgasm' (1984: 313). In the present context the issue follows from the question of the unit of analysis, which Wallerstein insists must be the world. *The modern world-system* departed from the premise that 'the correct unit of analysis was the world-system' and that 'one could only speak of social change in social systems' (Wallerstein 1974: 7). If the first statement may be valid, depending on the type of question one is asking, the second does not follow by any account. The weakness of this theorisation is its one-sidedness as regards relationships between the parts and the whole: the parts are not granted autonomy and the whole (the world system c.q. world market) predominates as a totalising principle. At every juncture in WST, with regard to historical questions as well as contemporary issues, this problem presents itself.

Thus the development of the 'second serfdom' in Eastern Europe can be accounted for, according to Wallerstein, by the growth of the Baltic trade, that is, by a world market dynamic. This has been disputed by several historians; thus Verl Hunt has related the second serfdom not to the export trade and 'plantation capitalism' but to processes taking place from the eleventh century onward related to land/labour ratios which led to arrangements to bind peasants to the estates, and to the balance of arms and military pressures from the West which encouraged feudal centralisation and manorialisation (Hunt 1978). As Robert Brenner has pointed out, the prioritisation of the world market means the neglect of local class structures and class struggles; he reproached the 'neo-Smithian Marxists', meaning André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein:

They fail to take into account either the way in which class structures, once established, will in fact determine the course of economic development or underdevelopment over an entire epoch, or the way in which these class structures themselves emerge: as the outcome of class struggles whose results are incomprehensible in terms merely of market forces.

(Brenner 1982 [1977]: 55)

WST is concerned with capitalism in its stage of 'conquest of the world market'; it is also a study of capitalism under a particular nomenclature, that

of 'system'. What we find under this umbrella of globalised systems Marxism is a very uneven theory. Wallerstein has adopted several neo-Marxist theses of dependency theory, notably the emphasis on the sphere of exchange, the notion that free wage labour is not a necessary constituent of capitalism, and the centre-periphery model. As such WST is a retro-active elaboration of dependency theory concerned with the historical explanation of underdevelopment. The implication of this widening of the definition of capitalism, such that forms of coerced labour such as slavery, serfdom, debt peonage can be considered part of capitalist production relations, has already come up in the debate between Laclau and Frank; Laclau concluded, 'he (Frank) has defined capitalism so loosely that he is unable legitimately to derive any concrete consequences from it about anything' (Laclau 1977 [1971]: 27; cf. Wallerstein 1974: 126; Laclau *ibid.*: 42-50). Likewise, with Wallerstein capitalism has become a concept so wide that it encompasses adjacent production relations, so that it is possible for WST to bypass the question of articulation of modes of production; hence the picture can be presented of a 'capitalist world system' extending from the sixteenth century onward as a seamless logic in space and time.

In other respects, WST is remarkably orthodox: in its adherence to the base-superstructure matrix and to Marx's crisis theory (discussed below), WST follows a mode of Marxism that is singularly unreformed. Base-superstructure reasoning leads to the argument that 'the political superstructure of the capitalist world-economy is an interstate system' (Wallerstein 1984: 14; cf. *ibid.*: 46). Indeed, according to Wallerstein, WST has a 'basically materialist bias' (Wallerstein and Mosely 1978: 284). As for dialectics, we are informed that 'the link between "politics" and "economics" operates in two opposite directions' (Wallerstein 1984: 6). All of this is an open door to the criticism of economic determinism. The title of a 1984 collection of essays, *The Politics of World-Economy*, reaffirms this; it may be read as a programme: the politics of the world economy, i.e. the world economy is the 'base' and 'its' politics are a superstructure. A related criticism is that of reductionism, made, among others, by Theda Skocpol. With her, the interstate system is far from being a simple superstructure of the capitalist world economy:

The international states system as a transnational structure of military competition was not originally created by capitalism. Throughout modern world history, it represents an analytically autonomous level of transnational reality – *interdependent* in its structure and dynamics with world capitalism, but not reducible to it.

(Skocpol 1979: 22)

In WST, patterns of division of labour are supposed to give rise to: social systems, a 'world', world systems, modes of production, and in the case of world capitalism, national formations and the interstate system besides. Divisions of labour give rise to 'social systems' via exchange relations and so all of these are only different ways of conceptualising what are in essence sets of exchange relations. *Exchange* then is the real subject matter of this perspective; accordingly different social systems are defined by their rules of exchange: reciprocity (mini-systems), redistribution (world-empires) and profit maximisation (world

economy). While the geographical extension of the exchange of necessary commodities circumscribes the 'world', the rules of exchange (the 'grammar' of exchange) are taken to define the social system. Since these systems are really divisions of labour c.q. exchange relations under different names, this is what all system-change will resolve itself into. Ultimately the 'system' can be and contain no more than what it is defined to be in the first place. Since the world market is the alpha and omega of the 'modern world system', it follows that changes in the system are ultimately interpreted as changes in the world market or in world market positions. As Petras and Selden (1981) have pointed out, this is precisely what WST is about: class struggle, social revolution and changes in state power are reduced to efforts to change position in the world market. WST is so construed as to exclude and flatten out any other mode and level of interpretation. Another way to interpret this systematised world market reductionism is by looking into the affinity of WST with generalised systems thinking and globalism and with the *Annales* school of history.

#### *Systems framework and action rhetoric*

Among the inspirations of the French *Annales* school of history is François Simiand's use of statistics, especially long series of prices and wages, to document '*mouvements de longue période*', or '*longue durée*'. In the 1920s Kondratieff, Leontieff, Kuznets all sought to document long-term economic changes (long waves) and Simiand attempted to establish causal connections between long-term economic growth fluctuations and social-political developments, merging a positivist '*histoire quantitative*' with social history. When in the 1950s in France the concept of *structure* experienced an explosive growth, both as a noun and an adjective, in historiography this took the form of a '*histoire structurale*' and '*histoire des structures*'. In the work of Fernand Braudel this was accompanied by a conceptualisation of historical *times*: the episodic corresponding to traditional history, the conjunctural corresponding to social history, the '*longue durée*' corresponding to geographical history, and the occasionally mentioned '*très longue durée*' corresponding to the 'social mathematics' discussed by Lévi-Strauss; in this conceptualisation the *longue durée* is thought of as an infrastructure of conjunctural history (Braudel 1980 [1969]).

This approach, while indubitably an improvement upon traditional history and its preoccupation with 'great men' and episodic events, has been criticised in several quarters, notably by historians in the tradition of German critical social history, for its unreflective use of the category of structure, a tendency toward an ontologisation of 'structures', and toward objectivation of the *longue durée* as an infrastructure. This results, as Dieter Groh argues, in a dehumanisation of history, a history made not by people but by structures. It is argued that 'structural history' is suitable only for the study of stable periods and that indeed it shies back from social revolutions, that is times when structures are transcended, as before an invisible wall. In this respect, Groh notes, *Annales* history resembles Parsons' structural functionalism in

post-war American sociology (1973: 82-7). An uncritical use of 'structures' in historiography combines well with political conservatism<sup>5</sup>.

This sheds some light on the intellectual character of WST which, in its approach to history, owes much – in method as well as conceptual outlook – to Braudel and the *Annales* school. 'Systems' play as large a part in WST as do 'structures' in Braudel's historiography and are as uncritically used. There is as wide a gap between system and (social and political) action in WST as there is between structure and structure-change in Braudel's perspective. Thus, via a detour, the similarity between WST and structural functionalism presents itself: instead of directly adopting the intellectual heritage of structural functionalism in American sociology, WST follows in the footsteps of an intellectual tradition with a similar conservative stamp – French structural history – which applies this kind of approach to modern history. The theoretical end-result is much like Talcott Parsons' *The Social System*, except that it is not a theory of *society* but of the *world*. This 'world', however, is conceived as abstractly as Parsons' 'society'. The conceptualisation of this 'world' in WST is reminiscent of Braudel's world (as in the 'Mediterranean world') in the sense of being conceived as an integrated whole, but where Braudel's approach is grounded in geography, Wallerstein's is informed by economics, specifically neo-classical theory of the international division of labour.

Other still more obvious antecedents of WST are *globalism* and *systems thinking* which enjoyed a simultaneous rise in the intellectual climate of the post-war United States, the former in conjunction with the United States' rise to global hegemony, the latter in the wake of cybernetics and the need for a systemic social science which could provide the rationale for societal control and management in a technological-managerial society. Domestically, this need was met by the emergence of structural functionalism as a social theory; a similar need existed with regard to international relations. 'The need for a science of international relations was felt strongly by United States policy makers, faced with a situation in which the United States for the first time had to fulfil a world role' (George 1987: 207). In this ambience the notion of *world system* was current already long before there was a WST. In the words of president Harry Truman in 1947: 'The whole world should adopt the American system. The American system can survive in America only if it becomes a world system' (Ambrose 1971: 19). We find globalism and systems thinking combined, for instance, in the work of Zbigniew Brzezinski (1970) where this forms part of a technological-managerial approach to world affairs, and generally in the 'scientific' school of international relations. In the wake of the United States' defeat in Vietnam this approach to international relations experienced an intellectual crisis, just as structural functionalism was in crisis in the wake of the eruption of domestic social conflict in the United States in the sixties; both have been interpreted as expressions of a 'crisis of consciousness of technological-managerial society in the United States' (George 1987: 211)<sup>6</sup>. In response to this crisis of social theory, action theory and conflict sociology emerged and Marxism made its entry into American academe; WST, with infusions of dependency theory and Marxism, emerged out of this malaise as an alternative perspective on

global relations. WST, however, is still conceived within the intellectual orbit of the very theoretical precepts which precipitated this crisis: systems thinking, globalism, and structural functionalism, the latter to the extent that structural history is its theoretical quasi-equivalent in WST. This is evident already from its basic nomenclature as *world system* perspective, and besides it is apparent in two interrelated theoretical problems in WST: its adherence to an untheorised, hence uncritical, systems thinking and the incapacity to adequately conceptualise social conflict and emancipation. On a general level these problems can be summed up, in the terms put forth by Habermas (1979, 1974), as a lack of synthesis between system and action dimensions of theory.

It has been noted that the structural history of the *Annales* school provides no basis for an emancipatory social science (Groh 1973: 86-8); the same observation of course has been made about structural functionalism (e.g. Gouldner 1971); and it applies again to WST. Given the format of system cosmology, emancipatory forces and tendencies can be conceived of only as '*anti-systemic movements*'. Yet these are, necessarily in a closed system, a property of the functioning of the system itself: because there is nothing outside the system, they are *intra-systemic*, an expression of the system's 'contradictions', which themselves are system-features. While Wallerstein recognises 'a secular upward trend of the overall strength of antisystemic movements in the capitalist world-economy over the past 150 years', he sees their importance only 'in terms of the changes they bring about in the world-system as a whole' (1984: 108-9). Given the premise that 'one could only speak of social change in social systems', changes in the world of WST come down to shifting positions *in* the system. According to the theory, these shifts are of no consequence as long as the system itself does not change; it does not really matter either whether Brazil or Britain occupy a particular world market niche, whether particular countries rise or decline in the system: 'since the system as whole creates pressures to maintain a certain mix of core, semiperipheral, and peripheral activities' (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1977: 129). The reification of 'the system' here is evident and so is the in-built assumption of equilibrium. Given the axiom of systems holism, it seems that there remains only one historical subject in this world view: the world system. Because WST – as was the case with Parsons' structural functionalism (Warnke 1974: 53-65; cf. Gouldner 1973; Luhman 1982) – is built upon a systems thinking which itself is not thought through, is unreflected and therefore unsharp, it suffers from the most elementary deficiencies of systems thinking: reification and the assumptions of equilibrium and a closed system (Greven 1974). On the same grounds it would be difficult, if not impossible, to integrate the system and action dimensions of theory: because there is no system *theory* but rather a system rhetoric, which for being untheorised only exercises a greater theoretical constraint.

The world of Wallerstein is entirely located within an economic universe in which every phenomenon, situation or dynamic is interpreted in terms of its relationship to market relations c.q. accumulation processes. 'Interstate relations ... in part express and in part circumscribe and structure the world-scale accumulation/production processes' (Hopkins and Wallerstein

1981: 246). The role of the state is described as intervention in the market (Wallerstein 1979: 291); classes and status groups operate likewise: 'groups pursue their economic interests within a single world market while seeking to distort this market for their benefit by organizing to exert influence on a state' (ibid.: 25). What is the Russian Revolution in this context? 'A classic technique of mercantilist semi-withdrawal from the world-economy' (ibid.: 31). Likewise culture, consciousness and ideology in Wallerstein's perspective leave no trace other than their bearing in terms of the articulation of economic interests<sup>7</sup>. To enter this oeuvre then is to cross the threshold of the book-keeper's world. It is by means of advanced book-keeping of the dynamics of the capitalist world economy – i.e. by computing long waves, logistics, computing the world-scale distribution of income down to the household level, mapping out commodity chains and their changes over time, etc. – that attempts are made to make the WST model fit global realities. It is thus that WST resolves itself into an economic geography concerned with documenting *Ascent and Decline in the World System* (Friedman 1982), a quantitative history under the unlikely cover of a systems Marxism. A key problem in this approach is the failure to recognise and theorise the autonomy of (sub)systems, in terms of spheres, levels and dimensions of social existence; accordingly it is impossible to introduce dynamics and action into this system in a coherent fashion. Replicating nineteenth century materialism, transforming it to the equivalent of a flat utilitarianism and, in the process, casually ignoring major developments in social theory and social consciousness, adds to the reductionist limitations of this perspective. Nevertheless, the world of WST is also a world bounded by an apocalyptic horizon.

Wallerstein's later essays, starting from 'The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System' (1979: Ch. 1), are similar in structure. They discuss conjunctural developments against the backdrop of the succession of social systems in the *longue durée*; the tension between these levels of historical time and levels of analysis is what establishes the problematic of these essays. It may be compared to a discussion of movements in the solar system in the context of a clearly mapped out cosmology, except what is not said is that this cosmology has been derived from schematic generalisations about the solar system, which have subsequently changed status from empirical generalisations to laws to cosmological axioms, and are then applied back to the solar system in an involuted game of mirrors. The thematic of many of these essays revolves around the prediction of future system-change. Wallerstein has revived the nineteenth century thesis of the 'inexorable progress toward socialism' and the future predictions of WST consist of the transposition of the orthodox Marxist scenario of breakdown onto a global scale. According to Marx's scenario, the demise of capitalism is expected to come about on account of (1) the inherent contradictions of capitalism, (2) materialising through its cycles c.q. periodic crises, and through its trends, viz. (3) the tendency of the rate of profit to decline, and (4) class polarisation – pauperisation, on the one hand, and accumulation, on the other, and through (5) revolutionary class struggle. In its initial formulation, this was expected to play itself out primarily in a European

setting; in WST it has become a global scenario. In the terms of Wallerstein's restatement: (1) 'The causes of the crisis are internal to the system, the result of the contradictions built into the process' (ibid. 1984: 23). (2) Instead of the business cycle of Marx's time, now it is the Kondratieff cycle of 40 to 55 years which is deemed the effective cycle. According to this cyclical rhythm, a worldwide economic upturn is anticipated in the 1990s (ibid.: 111), but then after the next downturn: 'The system will not be able to survive the light of day'. Indeed, 'What we shall probably see in the next fifty years is the last great expansion of the world-economy' (ibid. 1979: 129). (3) The tendency of the rate of profit to decline is dropped from the scenario, without it being mentioned or its omission explained. (4) 'Indeed, Marx's original insight that the operation of the capitalist system created two clear and polarised classes is in fact affirmed and not disconfirmed by the evidence' (ibid. 1984: 101). Yet, we also find the opposite diagnosis: instead of world-scale polarisation, there has been a 'rise of the middle classes', a shift in the distribution of surplus from 'the top to the intermediate strata', and this is deemed to be 'politically destabilizing' (ibid. 1979: 163). This process is also described as 'the *janissarization* of the ruling classes' (ibid.: 279). Elsewhere, however, we find the semi-periphery being accorded a politically *stabilizing* role for the world system as a whole, because as a 'third category' it prevents two camps from arising (ibid.: 22-3). Not only are these assessments contradictory, they are also confounded on a more fundamental level in that the unit of analysis (classes, strata, nations) remains unclear and is switched ambiguously from one to another. (5) As regards class struggle, an increase in the overall strength of 'antisystemic movements' is acknowledged, but it is also pointed out that these, when successful, may achieve a stabilisation of the world system rather than its breakdown; hence on this decisive point Wallerstein's position is inconclusive.

When reviewing this globalisation of the crisis theory, we find fundamental ambiguities concerning the units and levels of analysis – can theses about 'classes' be transferred to 'nations' (cf. Connell 1984), can scenarios for industrial Europe be extrapolated to the world scene and for that matter, can scenarios for nineteenth century capitalism be applied to twenty-first century capitalism? These are issues which cannot be evaded in any kind of attempt to revive the breakdown scenario, but somehow they are in Wallerstein's writings. Wallerstein's restatement of crisis theory produces self-contradictory and inconclusive statements, so that actually the whole future scenario hangs on a single consideration: an anticipated global economic downturn. There have been several such downturns already which have not produced the '*grosse Zusammenbruch*', so here one would expect a compelling discussion of why this is held to be different after, presumably, 2030 to 2045; where such a discussion is initiated at all, it remains incoherent, inconclusive and of a level that bears no relation to the magnitude of the predictive claims. We do find the breakdown scenario reaffirmed repeatedly with a degree of certitude which is strangely at odds with the inconclusive and contradictory considerations presented by Wallerstein himself; most of the later essays end on the same note of grand political rhetoric:

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We are living in the historical world transition from capitalism to socialism. It will undoubtedly take a good 100-150 years yet to complete it, and of course the outcome is not inevitable ... (with the end of capitalism) the slow construction of a relatively free and egalitarian world may at last begin.

(Wallerstein 1984: 111)

The mode of production that will emerge as the dynamic of the successor historical system will be egalitarian, will enhance human freedom, only if we so construct it.

(ibid.: 144)

The crisis is objective and ongoing. But its resolution will be the outcome of our collective human intervention and is not preordained.

(ibid. 1982: 54)

This is illogical because it is a rhetoric of transition – without a theory of transition, a rhetoric of political choice – in a framework of economic determinism. How is the objectivist theory of crisis to be rhymed with the appeal to ‘collective intervention’? If the outcome is ‘not preordained’, then on what grounds is (the nature of) the crisis predictable? It is the thorough one-dimensionality of WST which enables it to posit the existence of a ‘world system’, to claim the ability to map its ‘patterns of development’ and to predict a future system-change; yet when it comes to the future, an appeal is made to political dimensions upon the elimination of which the coherence of the theory was premised. ‘The political corollaries of his theory’, noted Hamza Alavi, ‘are subversive of the aspirations of all national liberation movements in the Third World. Only a simultaneous global revolution, argues Wallerstein, can save the world proletariat’ (1986: 90). Instead of a revolution we have a ‘transition’, for a transition we have a ‘crisis’, and instead of class struggle we have ‘antisystemic movements’. All the capacity to effect social change that is so emphatically denied the social movements in WST, is reclaimed for a remote future, in the wake of a global crisis which is anticipated on objective grounds. This is incongruous also in that WST manages to be at its most orthodox precisely there where Marxist theory is most in doubt. In a time of political retrenchment and ideological disarray, this neo-reductionist restatement of nineteenth century expectations may have a comforting, reassuring quality – things make sense after all, even if the present crisis of capitalism does not produce its final demise, the next one surely will. Perhaps WST must be interpreted as a manifestation of materialist fundamentalism. There is no place in this perspective for political strategy because its ground has been eradicated from the systems-discourse: ‘one could only speak of social change in social systems’. In one essay, Wallerstein invokes a special category of time *kairos* (‘right time’), in order to re-establish a foundation for his dimension of political choice (1979: 270-1). Had the existence of the backdoor been acknowledged in the first place then the façade could never have looked the way it does.

This critique of WST has indicated some of the earlier criticisms which have been made, the key point of which is its weakness as being merely a circulation model; but here these have not been taken as a point of departure because these criticisms are well-established by now (without having had much of an effect on reformulations of WST). Here the emphasis has been placed on a different, conceptually in some respects more fundamental, level: on WST as a *system*

theory, on the theory of *social systems* as the underpinning of the concept of a 'modern world system'. As a system theory WST is singularly undeveloped, riddled with illogical axioms and counterproductive assumptions, as if an airplane cast in pig-iron. Because of its 'system-totalitarianism', its prioritisation of the 'world system' as determined by the core countries c.q. the hegemonic country, and as such, as a centre-periphery model, WST is by implication a 'centrist' framework of explanation, a top-down model of global relations – with a little advice on the need for climbing the ladder. Because of its one-dimensionality, its materialist premise, it is unable to conceptualise the relationships between dimensions – the very question cannot even arise. As a *world system theory*, it is an economic geography which seeks to pass for history. WST is a world market reductionism with an apocalypse for redemption, a crisis for a way out of a system which it has first created as a closed system.

### Notes

1. This notion of a contrast between empire and capitalism originates with Max Weber: '*Der geschlossene nationale Staat also ist es, der dem Kapitalismus die Chancen des Fortbestehens gewährleistet; solange er nicht einem Weltreich Platz macht, wird also auch der Kapitalismus dauern*' (1923: 289; Tromp 1985).

2. E.g. what of the African empires of Songhay, Ghana and others which, according to Coquery-Vidrovitch (1977), were based on the control of long-distance commerce and coexisted with local subsistence agriculture? This is another situation which must be conceptualised in terms of the articulation of modes of production.

3. 'The three instances of hegemony in the history of the capitalist world-economy' (Wallerstein 1984).

4. Cf. Marx: 'The modern history of capital dates from the creation in the sixteenth century of a world-embracing commerce and a world-embracing market' (1967 [1867]).

5. "Marx is wrong", he (Braudel) said in a recent interview. "Man does not make history, history makes man". This conservatism, together with Braudel's passion for fascinating little facts sometimes verging on trivia, helps explain his success in the United States' (Fitchett 1985).

6. For a critique of globalism, see Petras and Brill (1985).

7. In a critique of *The Modern World-System*, Alain Guerreau writes, '*Un second défaut de cet ouvrage réside dans son économisme strict: tout est conçu en fonction du marché, à la rigueur de la production; les structures et les péripéties politiques en découlent, et tout le reste est aléatoire*' (1980: 106). The emphasis on the market to the neglect of production has been partly remedied in later work; the tendency toward economism has remained. For another assessment, which sees more consideration for culture development in WST, even though it continues to be perceived 'as an ideological impediment', see Robertson and Lechner (1985).

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