A World-System Perspective on the Social Sciences

Immanuel Wallerstein


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0007-1315%28197609%2927%3A3%3C343%3AAWPOTS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

*The British Journal of Sociology* is published by The London School of Economics and Political Science. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/ionschool.html.

*The British Journal of Sociology*
©1976 The London School of Economics and Political Science

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2003 JSTOR
A world-system perspective on the social sciences

It is in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth that the organizational structures of the sciences of man which we use today became fixed. In 1800 the categories (or ‘disciplines’) which today are standard—history, economics, sociology, anthropology, political science—did not for the most part exist as concepts, and certainly were not the basis of sharply differentiated groups of teachers and researchers. The somewhat tortuous process by which certain combinations of concerns and concepts took particular forms resulted in major ‘methodological’ debates, which we sometimes still hear about under the rubric, ‘philosophy of history’. Among the debates, one of the most influential was that between so-called nomothetic and idiographic knowledge, between the possibility and impossibility of generalizations about human behaviour; between the universalizers and the particularizers.

The universalizers spoke of themselves as ‘scientists’. They tended to argue that human behaviour was a natural phenomenon like any other, and could therefore be studied on the same basis as any other natural phenomenon, using the same rules of logic (‘the scientific method’) and capable eventually of yielding precise results comparable to those achieved in the natural sciences. The particularists, in contrast, often termed themselves ‘humanists’. They tended to argue that human life, being thinking life, could not be viewed in the same way as other natural phenomenon, for one of two reasons. Either it was because, said some, humans have souls and are therefore resistant to arbitrary uniformities, or it was because, said others, the human researcher inevitably distorted the human subject of analysis in the very process of observing him and therefore the generalizations would never be valid.

Like all such grand debates there is just so much that can be said on the subject, and it has largely been said. This does not mean that the debate is over or forgotten but simply that the divisions have been institutionalized and thereby contained. Grosso modo, the universalizers were assigned the departments of economics, sociology, and political science, and the particularizers the departments of history and anthropology. Obviously, given the high capriciousness of the organizational dividing lines, there were dissidents in each ‘disciplinary’ structure (such as political ‘theorists’ in political science, and linguists in anthropology). But no matter! Spheres of influence had been demarcated, and the status quo enshrined.
This crude picture has to be qualified by taking into account regional variation. My description works best for the Anglo-American core of the world-system. The Germans chafed at British definitions of social knowledge and gave birth to an uncertain cross-breed, *Staatswissenschaft*. Some French chafed at the failure of other Frenchmen to chafe, which led to the birth of the *Annales* school. And the Western European working classes chafed at the system in general, and nourished outside the academy a critical perspective, Marxism, which challenged the universality of the 'universals'.

Underlying the dominant institutionalization of the great methodological split, universalizer versus particularizer, there turned out to be, as there usually is, a hidden but very important consensus, the concept of the individual society as the basic unit of analysis. Everyone seemed to agree that the world was composed of multiple 'societies'. They disagreed about whether it was the case that all societies pursued *similar* paths down the road of history (albeit at differing rates) or that each society went its own historic way. They disagreed whether society in question took the form of a 'state' or a 'nation' or a 'people', but in any case it was some politico-cultural unit.

The period after World War II saw in this field, as in so many others, the culmination of these intellectual tendencies in the elaboration of a perspective we may call 'developmentalism', which for most of its devotees went hand in hand with 'behaviorism'. This perspective assumed that all states were engaged in 'developing' (which for many meant 'becoming nations'), that their progress along this path could be measured quantitatively and synchronically, and that on the basis of knowledge derived from such measurements, governments could in fact hasten the process, which was a highly commendable thing to do. Since these states were proceeding down parallel paths, *all* states were intrinsically capable of achieving the desired results. The only serious intellectual question was why many resisted doing so.

This viewpoint swept the scholarly world—not only of the hegemonic power, the United States, and its allies, old Europe, but also of its chief antagonist, the U.S.S.R. The theories of what governmental actions would promote development, and what social forces impeded it varied widely, but the plausibility of 'development' as a matrix of analysis reigned supreme until the mid-1960s, when it foundered on one economic reality and two political developments.

The economic reality was that, despite all the theories, and all the presumed effort (aid, technical assistance, human investment), the so-called 'gap' between the 'developed' and the 'developing' countries was growing bigger, not smaller.

The two political developments were in fact ultimately a reflection of this economic reality. One was the emergence of national liberation movements throughout the world which engaged in armed struggle with more or less success—Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba. Their struggle had
a resonance within the United States and Western Europe—among students, professors, and the ‘Third World within’—which in fact shook the up-to-then facile dominance of the developmentalists in the academy.

But this same political upheaval affected the Communist countries as well, where a long series of interrelated crises—the XXth Party Congress of the C.P.S.U., the ‘upheavals’ in Eastern Europe, the split between the Chinese and the Russians, the cultural revolution, the rise of ‘Euro-communism’—similarly has undermined the internal credibility of the Stalinist version of developmentalism, the crude sequence through which each state was destined to ‘pass’.

When a theory no longer seems to serve an adequate social function, scholars usually begin to question its intellectual credentials. As ‘developmentalism’ seemed less and less to explain the social reality through which we are living, various authors criticized one or another of its premises, groping towards an alternative framework of explanation, which I shall call a ‘world-system perspective’.

The key difference between a developmentalist and a world-system perspective is in the point of departure, the unit of analysis. A developmentalist perspective assumes that the unit within which social action principally occurs is a politico-cultural unit—the state, or nation, or people—and seeks to explain differences between these units, including why their economies are different. A world-system perspective assumes, by contrast, that social action takes place in an entity within which there is an ongoing division of labour, and seeks to discover empirically whether such an entity is or is not unified politically or culturally, asking theoretically what are the consequences of the existence or non-existence of such unity.

By throwing overboard the presupposition that there is a ‘society’ we are forced to look at the alternative possibilities of organizing the material world. We in fact rapidly discover that there are a limited number of possibilities, which we may call varying ‘modes of production’, meaning by that something very close to what the phrase seems on the surface to convey: the way in which decisions are made about dividing up productive tasks, about quantities of goods to be produced and labour-time to be invested, about quantities of goods to be consumed or accumulated, about the distribution of the goods produced.

One mode, historically the earliest, we may call the reciprocal-lineage mode. It is based on limited and elementary specialization of tasks in which the products are reciprocally exchanged among producers. In this mode the chief productive resource is human labour and therefore the chief guarantee of sub-group survival the control of reproduction (via the control of women and their offspring). Production over a certain level is politically unsettling by enabling younger persons to escape the control of elders and therefore inequalities though real are limited.
Empirically, it is the case (and I think it could be established that theoretically it must be the case) that such systems are small in physical scope, and that the economic boundaries are largely identical with political and cultural boundaries. Mini-systems seem a reasonable name. I believe it is the case that such mini-systems are not only small in physical scope but short-lived historically (meaning a life of say six generations or so). This short life can be accounted for in various ways: the dangers for such a technologically primitive group of physical extinction (through warfare or natural calamity); the possibility of conquest; fission of the group as the result of slow growth in accumulated stock; reorganization of the division of labour resulting from physical flight and consequent ecological adjustment.

If this is an accurate description, the world has known countless such groups over historical time and has virtually no historical records of how they functioned. Some ethnologists claim to have recorded such groups, but for the most part I am sceptical that the units studied were truly autonomous systems, since one of the preconditions of most such study has in fact been imperial control of the area studied by a larger political entity which in turn existed within a far wider division of labour.

Our empirical knowledge is largely limited to larger divisions of labour which I shall term world-systems, using the word ‘world’ to signify larger space and longer time than mini-systems, and operationally to mean an arena, or division of labour, within which more than one ‘cultural’ grouping exists, but which may or may not be politically unified.

There have in fact, up to now, been two basic forms of world-systems. Since in one form the prototype is the unified political system, we shall call this type the ‘world-empire’, by contrast with the other type which is precisely defined by the continuing absence of such political unity, the ‘world-economy’.

The ‘world-empire’ has many variations in terms of the political superstructure and the cultural consequences. A large part of Weber’s *Economy and Society* is a morphology of these variations. But the mode of production is common to these variant forms. It is a mode of production which creates enough of an agricultural surplus (based therefore on a more advanced technology than the reciprocal-lineage mode) sufficient to maintain both the artisans who produce non-agricultural goods and, in the widest sense, an ‘administrative’ stratum. Whereas the agricultural and artisanal producers in some sense ‘exchange’ goods, either reciprocally or in local markets, goods are transferred from producers to ‘administrators’ by a forced appropriation, ‘tribute’, which is centralized by someone or some institution—how remote this institution is from the producer is one of the major variables of the differing forms—and thereupon ‘redistributed’ to the ‘administrative bureaucracy’.

The principal difference in this mode of production from the reci-
proclal-lineage mode was the fact that a class which did not produce 'goods' was supported (and indeed supported well). But there was a major similarity common to both pre-modern forms. In neither mode of production was maximal production desirable or desired. The reason is clear. Since the channel upward of the surplus appropriation in the redistributive-tributary form was the same 'bureaucracy' to whom the top of the structure 'redistributed' this surplus, too large a surplus created a strong temptation for 'pre-emption' of this surplus on the way upward. This of course constantly happened. But it meant that the ruling groups were always caught in the contradiction of wanting more, but not 'too much'.

The consequences were manifold. Technological advance was not desirable per se. It no doubt occurred, but it was probably less the desire to expand production than the need, when it occurred, to stem a decline in real production that served as its spur. Secondly, the contradictory needs of the ruling groups (more, but not too much) were communicated to the direct producers in terms of socially-fixed as opposed to socially-open quotas of appropriation. That is not to say that these quotas never changed. They changed constantly, but discontinuously, and the myth of the constant rate was a central ideological motif of the social structure.

In this mode of production, inequalities were enormous in comparison to the reciprocal-lineage mode, but there were some inbuilt limits. The ruling groups might have the power of life and death by the sword over the direct producers, but they were normally concerned to prevent starvation, since the 'fixed' income of the ruling groups was dependent on a 'fixed' level of appropriation from a 'fixed' estimated total production. Starvation might occur despite the efforts of the local ruling groups but seldom amidst their indifference.

Empirically it is the case (and again I think it could be established that theoretically it must be the case) that such systems were larger in physical size than the reciprocal-lineage forms (and occasionally very large, as for example the Roman Empire at its height). Within the economic division of labour, multiple 'cultures' flourished—parallel groups of agricultural producers, 'world'-wide trading groups, endogamous trans-local 'administrative' groups. But the keynote of this mode of production was the political unity of the economy, whether this 'unity' involved extreme administrative decentralization (the 'feudal' form) or relatively high centralization (an 'empire' proper).

Such 'world-empires' have existed ever since the Neolithic Revolution, and right up to very recent times. The number was large, but not 'countless'. The life of such systems varied according to their size, their isolation, their ecological base, and so forth. But the pattern of such systems was a cyclical one—expansion of size and hence total surplus-appropriation to the point where the bureaucratic costs of appropriating the surplus outweighed the surplus that could, in
socio-political terms, be effectively appropriated, at which point decline and retraction set in.

The cycle of expansion and contraction involved the perpetual incorporation and releasing of ‘units’ which, when outside the ‘world-empire’, formed reciprocal-lineage mini-systems, but which when incorporated within it, formed merely one more situs out of which tribute was drawn and whose socio-economic autonomy was thereby eliminated. Thus these two modes of production co-existed on the earth for thousands of years.

‘Civilization’ is a term which is often used to mean the patterns of ‘high culture’ developed by the ruling and ‘administrative’ strata in such ‘world-empires’. And since there was a certain ‘revival’ of the forms of a particular culture each time a new world-empire was created in the same geographic zone, we can also use the concept ‘civilization’ to connote those cultural forms that are common to successive world-empires in the same zone. (China is the model-case of a long series of such successive world-empires.)

Since the needs of world-empires were facilitated by ‘rationality’ in administration, the development of ‘records’ was normal and we have considerable ‘documentation’ from which to reconstruct the workings of such systems, which we may thus ‘observe’ across historical time (or rather reconstruct in terms of our contemporary needs).

The ‘world-economy’ is a fundamentally different kind of social system from a ‘world-empire’ and a fortiori from a mini-system—both in formal structure and as a mode of production. As a formal structure, a world-economy is defined as a single division of labour within which are located multiple cultures—hence it is a world-system like the world-empire—but which has no overarching political structure. Without a political structure to redistribute the appropriated surplus, the surplus can only be redistributed via the ‘market’, however frequently states located within the world-economy intervene to distort the market. Hence the mode of production is capitalist.

A capitalist mode is one in which production is for exchange; that is, it is determined by its profitability on a market, a market in which each buyer wishes to buy cheap (and therefore that which is, in the long run, most efficiently produced and marketed) but in which each seller wishes to sell dear (and therefore is concerned that the efficiencies of others are not permitted to reduce his sales.) Thus the individual as buyer rewards efficiency and as seller uses his political power to thwart it.

The basic contradiction that informs capitalism as a social system results from the simultaneous desirability of freedom for the buyer and its undesirability for the seller—freedom of labour, freedom of the flow of the factors of production, freedom of the market. The combination of freedom and unfreedom that results is the defining characteristic of a capitalist world-economy. This ambivalence about freedom pervades its politics, its culture, its social relations.
Whereas the quantities of production in a redistributive-tributary mode were more or less socially 'fixed', precisely the opposite is true of a capitalist mode. There is no social limit to profit, only the limit of the market: of competitive sellers and inadequate numbers of buyers. An individual producer produces not a fixed amount but as much as he can, and anything that can aid him to produce more, and more efficiently—science and technology—is welcome. But once produced, it must be sold, or no profit is realized. And once profit is realized, the less that is consumed immediately, the more future profit will be possible.

But as everyone proceeds this way—the 'anarchy of production'—there will soon come a point where additional production offers not profit but loss. Hence there are cycles here too—not the political cycles of the world-empires but the economic cycles of the world-economies. There are to be sure profound inequalities of distribution too, and probably greater inequalities than in world-empires (although liberal social science has always argued the opposite). The reason has to do with the greater wealth to be maldistributed (as a result of technological advance) and the technique by which the maldistribution is enforced.

In a redistributive system, the primary weapon of the powerful is the sword. Thus death to the political resistant, but minimal life for the acquiescent producer is the basic law of political life. But in a capitalist mode, with economic cycles, the life of the producer can be more unprofitable as consumer of surplus than profitable as producer of surplus. Thus the politico-military machinery can frequently best serve to maximize profit by permitting starvation, both literally and figuratively.

Historically, world-economies were very fragile institutions whose life-spans were probably less than a century and hence had little opportunity to become an ongoing, capital-expanding system. They lacked the political structures to prevent withdrawal of regions from the system and hence the world-economies that emerged from time to time often disintegrated. Or, if they did not, it was because a member state expanded to fill the boundaries of the division of labour, the world-economy thus being transformed into a world-empire, and the beginnings of a capitalist mode rapidly reverting to a redistributive-tributary mode of production.

What is remarkable then about the modern world is the emergence of a capitalist world-economy that survived. Indeed it did more than survive: it has flourished, expanded to cover the entire earth (and thereby eliminated all remaining mini-systems and world-empires), and brought about a technological and ecological 'explosion' in the use of natural resources.

There are three separate intellectual questions that may be asked about this modern world-system. The first is the explanation of its genesis: how is it that the sixteenth-century European world-economy survived, unlike previous such systems. The second question is how such
a system, once consolidated, operates. The third is what are the basic secular trends of a capitalist system, and therefore what will account for its eventual decline as a social system.

Each of these three questions is a long and complex one and cannot be answered briefly with any degree of satisfaction. Since, however, I have attempted longer answers to these questions elsewhere, I will merely outline my position of these three issues here in the most summary of fashions.

The genesis is to be located in the process of ‘decline’ of a particular redistributive world-system, that of feudal Europe, which seems to have ‘exhausted its potential’ in its great socio-economic spurt of 1100–1250. In the ‘crisis’ of contraction of the following two centuries, the real income of the ruling strata seemed to take a real fall. One reason was the rising real wages of the producers, the result of demographic disasters. A second was the destruction that occurred because of widespread peasant revolts (consequence of the previous exaggerated level of exploitation) and the internecine warfare of the ruling strata (consequence of their long-term proportional expansion, reaching the conjuncture of economic decline). The prospect was collapse.

Had there been a world-empire on the edges capable of conquering the core of the system (the old ‘dorsal spine’ of Europe), or had feudal Europe itself been more centralized, there might have been a more traditional political reorganization of ‘empire’. But there wasn’t. Instead there was a sort of creative leap of imagination on the part of the ruling strata. It involved trying an alternative mode of surplus-appropriation, that of the market, to see whether it might serve to restore the declining real income of the ruling groups. This involved geographical expansion, spatial economic specialization, the rise of the ‘absolutist’ state—in short, the creation of a capitalist world-economy.

The genesis of capitalism was not in the triumph of a new group, the urban burghers, over the landed feudal nobility. Rather it should be seen as the reconversion of seignior into capitalist producer, an essential continuity of the ruling families. Furthermore, it worked magnificently, as any look backward from say 1800 at 1450 can show. The ‘crisis of seigniorial revenues’ was no more. The crisis was now located in the revenues of the producers. The ‘poor’ had been created as a major social category.

The operation of the system, once established, revolved around two basic dichotomies. One was the dichotomy of class, bourgeois versus proletarian, in which control by ruling groups operated primarily not through lineage rights (as in the mini-systems) nor through weapons of force (as in the world-empires), but through access to decisions about the nature and quantity of the production of goods (via property rights, accumulated capital, control over technology, etc.)

The other basic dichotomy was the spatial hierarchy of economic
specialization, core versus periphery, in which there was an appropriation of surplus from the producers of low-wage (but high supervision), low-profit, low-capital intensive goods by the producers of high-wage (but low supervision), high-profit, high-capital intensive, so-called 'unequal exchange'.

The genius, if you will, of the capitalist system, is the interweaving of these two channels of exploitation which overlap but are not identical and create the cultural and political complexities (and obscurities) of the system. Among other things, it has made it possible to respond to the politico-economic pressures of cyclical economic crises by re-arranging spatial hierarchies without significantly impairing class hierarchies.

The mechanism by which the capitalist system ultimately resolves its recurrent cyclical down-turns is expansion: outward spatially, and internally in terms of the 'freeing' of the market—remember the basic ambivalence about the free market, good for the buyer and bad for the seller—via the steady proletarianization of semi-proletarian labour and the steady commercialization of semi-market-oriented land.

Both of these processes have logical limits. In the case of geographical expansion, these limits were largely reached by the beginning of the twentieth century. In the case of internal expansion, there is still much room. The world is probably halfway, more or less, in the process of freeing the factors of production. But here too the world eventually approaches an asymptote, at which point the possibility of resolving economic crises will largely disappear, and thereby we will enter into a true crisis of the system as such.

Linked to these structural limits are the curves of political repression. A system of unequal distribution (all known systems hitherto) is only possible by repression, which is a function of the relation of two curves, the ability and willingness of the upper strata to repress, the ability and willingness of the lower strata to rebel.

But over historical time, within the capitalist world-economy, the first curve is continually going down in strength and the second curve is continually rising. The reason is simple. The 'cost' of repression is the partial redistribution of the surplus to the repressors, who are in fact the intermediate strata. The process is called 'co-optation'. But each co-optation is less 'worthwhile' than the previous one, since it involves further deductions from a declining percentage of the surplus controlled by the top strata, in order to buy off once again the intermediate strata. (One does not 'buy off' lower strata. The whole point is to exploit them, whence comes the money with which one 'buys off' others, that is, shares the spoils.)

Let us be clear what we are saying. Even if the world-wide appropriation of the producers has remained about as high in recent decades as in earlier periods of the capitalist world-economy, the distribution of this surplus has begun to shift from the top to the intermediate strata.
This is politically crucial. The so-called ‘rise of the middle classes’ is often seen as politically stabilizing, because it is alleged this is depriving the lower strata of their leadership. I see it quite differently. It is politically destabilizing because it is depriving the top strata of a prize high enough to be worth struggling for. This is the ‘failure of nerve’ that is setting in.

Conversely, the lower strata are in fact becoming ever better organized, not despite but because of the ‘rise of the middle classes’. This rise has in fact made it ever clearer that the interests of the producers are not tied to the needs and demands of the intermediate strata (as expressed historically in reform movements and ethno-national demands for spatial reorganization of the distribution of profits).

However the continuing technological advances of the capitalist economy are creating possibilities of political organization of direct producers unknown in previous eras. Furthermore, in rebellion, success leads to success in the sense of revealing its potentials.

To resume this simple and simplified picture, the transition from a capitalist world-economy to a socialist world-government in which we are living and which will take a long time to complete, is theoretically the consequence of two secular trends: the potential exhaustion of the limits of structural expansion which is required to maintain the economic viability of the capitalist system; the closing of the gap between the two political curves of the will to fight of the ruling groups and the direct producers on a world level.

What is crippling about a developmentalist perspective is the fact that these large-scale historical processes are not even discussable, if one uses the politico-cultural entity (the ‘state’) as the unit of analysis. It is only by recognizing that it is world-systems we must study that we can begin to locate the data of modern history, both those that are ‘universal’ and those that are ‘particular’, within the process of the social structures the world has seen over historical time.

It is only then, too, that we can begin to be ‘scientific’ about a central natural phenomenon, the human group, and ‘humane’ in opting for the possible choices that will in fact enable us, all of us, to reach our potentials and create our worlds within our limits.

Immanuel Wallerstein
State University of New York at Binghamton