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WHAT IS THE OBJECT OF IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN'S HISTORY?

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Abstract

This article focuses on the question of the relation between the subject of *The Modern World-System* by Immanuel Wallerstein and the theoretical object of world-system analysis as a multidisciplinary approach that he proposed for history and the social sciences. The importance of this approach as well as its theoretical deficiencies are shown by examining two unanswered critiques of the first volume of *The Modern World-System* — one coming from Robert Brenner and the second from Fernand Braudel.

Key words: Wallerstein, world-system analysis, social history, macrohistory, capitalism

THE WALLERSTEIN PROJECT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 1970'S "NON-DEBATES"

The question regarding the subject of history, that Immanuel Wallerstein has been writing for over forty years now, is not especially surprising or unjustified, since his *opus magnum*, the four-volume work entitled *The Modern World-System (TMWS)* to which we are constantly referred to when reading his lesser writings, is a historiographical work.¹ At the same time, this question takes on a real sense and meaning because the main objective of this monumental work is not only to present the history of European expansion in the modern era but also to propose a certain theory of mechanisms relating to social change, which undermines the basic epistemological assumptions of modern social sciences. Moreover, Wallerstein himself is not a historian but rather a sociologist. What is also significant, is the fact

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¹ The first volume of *The Modern World-System* appeared in 1974 and the forward of the fourth volume, published three years ago indicates two more volumes to come (see I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV*, University of California Press, London 2011, p. xvii).

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that *TMWS*, being a classic historiographical work, in which we find tales ordered chronologically, according to dated events, periodisation propositions, analysis of the fluctuations in the prices of grain, but also of the importance of selected wars and diplomatic treaties, a total of a 250-page-long bibliography consisting mostly of highly technical texts of economic historians — irrespective of the intentions of its author, was, at one point, supposed to play the role of The Book of a mass social movements that “alterglobalism” seemed to be. The fact that such a Weberian, as much as Marxian, conflict between history and theory is the motive of all of Wallerstein’s intellectual efforts becomes evident in the introduction to the first volume of his *TMWS*, in which he clarifies the reasons, which propelled him to undertake such an ambitious project. If he was correct in thinking that the one true unit of analysis is the social system, and alongside, the fact that he “probably only had one instance of this unit in the modern era — the modern world-system” then, he asks, “could I do anything more than write its history?”² In the next sentence, he states: “I was not interested in writing its history, nor did I begin to have the empirical knowledge necessary for such a task (And by its very nature, few individuals ever could).”³ Over the next several pages, Wallerstein touches upon a whole series of issues that can be identified as basic questions asked by philosophy of history (“Can there exist laws regarding what is unique and random?”, “Under what circumstances can a historical event be regarded as an example or evidence of a postulated mechanism of historical change?”, “What may the requirement of objectivity in the study of history mean, if the past is always *ours* and can only be presented as it actually *is*, and not how it actually *was*?” and so on) and later leaves us with the story of a capitalist world-economy, which for 400 years and across four volumes occurs alternately in the realm of abstraction and concreteness.

Fernard Braudel, after reading the first volume of Wallerstein’s work, which made a great impression on him, said — from the position of a specialist — that “the battle this sociologist and expert on Africa is waging against history is far from finished”⁴. And indeed, the major part of Wallerstein’s scientific output has become an attempt to create and popularise a

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2 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, Academic Press, New York, 1974, p. 7.

3 *Ibidem*.

4 F. Braudel, *Civilisation and Capitalism 15th–18th Century*, trans. Siân Reynolds, Collins: London 1984, vol. III, p. 70.

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new research program whose objective is to revolutionise or rather to *un-think* the social sciences in such a way so to turn them into one global, uni-disciplinary and holistic historical science.⁵ In the context of such formulated epistemological field, theory could not be developed without practising history and vice versa, since the only possible unit of analysis would be what Wallerstein calls “a historical system as a complex system”⁶. Such a work as *TMWS* would no longer seem unusual because of balancing between ideographical and nomothetical effort and jumping to easily from explanations in terms of necessary laws to invoking accidental circumstances — instead it would be a prime example of a new scientific approach.

However, is “the historical system as a complex system” presented as the only methodologically appropriate unit of analysis actually an concept that is internally structured enough to provide the theoretical object for any science, and to determine its field of investigation? Isn't this notion rather just a name for a basic problem of the relationship between historiography and the social sciences or any theory — the problem of irreducible multi-dimensionality and totality of any particular “complex whole”, “social formation” or “society?” Note that in the cited assertion, Braudel, being as equally a great advocate of cooperation between the social sciences as Wallerstein, underscores, or even reproaches his academic affiliation. This would indicate that the measure of value of the methodological concepts of the creator of the world-systems analysis would be how good a historian he has become. The question of the status of the object of history written by Wallerstein, about what is it that is happening as “the modern world-system”, cannot be resolved only at the level of criticism of the epistemological assumptions of the social sciences. The catchphrase “world-systems analysis”, and in fact, the people and institutions that Wallerstein managed to gather around it, often seem to serve him as an alibi, allowing to transform the theoretical ambiguity of his proposition from weaknesses into a challenge to the social sciences.⁷ The words, which were spoken hesitatingly

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5 I. Wallerstein, *The End of The World as We Know It. Social Science for the Twenty-First Century*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1999, pp. 195–197.

6 I. Wallerstein, “Historical Systems as Complex Systems”, in: I. Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science. The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, Temple University Press: Philadelphia 2001, pp. 229–236.

7 The academic success of the world-systems analysis is undeniable. Under its banner many leading sociologists and economist (i.a. Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, André Gunder Frank, Beverly Silver i Christopher Chase-Dunn) have gathered and organized a solid institutional base in two thriving centers operating today in the United States (The Fernand

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and on his own behalf in the abovementioned introduction to the first volume of his *TMWS* are repeated, forty years later, in impersonal narrative as a dry description of the objective event in the history of science. I do not want, in any case, to say that this event and the associated challenges facing social theory are fictitious, but it is precisely because of their genuine importance that I would like to consider Wallerstein's primary motivations, that are the subject matter of history described in his *TMWS*.

Through these discussions, I intend to follow the path of Giovanni Arrighi, one of the most prominent cofounders of the world-system analysis. In particular, he brought attention to the fact that the birth of this new research perspective, which he also explicitly identifies with the publication of *TMWS I*, was accompanied by two *non-debates*.⁸ This neologism is intended to mean discussions which are not undertaken in order to protect emerging research programs from the risk of premature death, threatening them from the hands of the critics that argue from the positions already well-established and rooted in the scientific tradition. "Non-debate" is an initially useful phenomenon, but when the new perspective is already open and secured, avoiding a dialogue becomes harmful because it prevents further clarification of the specifics of the object, that could be seen from this perspective. According to Arrighi, Wallerstein ignored two fundamental (yet different) criticisms to *TMWS I* from the second half of the 1970s. The first, from the Marxist perspective, was formulated by Robert Brenner and echoed in a shorter and vaguer text by Theda Skocpol.⁹ The second, more "cordial" and conciliatory criticism was put forward by Braudel. Both discuss the subject of the history written by Wallerstein rather than his actual meta-theoretical contemplations regarding the status and task of the world-system analysis. Had he wanted to respond to these criticisms, he would have had to accept them and ultimately, this is why he kept silent. At least this is how I understand the phenomenon of "academic politics", which Arrighi, in my opinion, brilliantly recognises, calling it "non-debate".

Braudel Center for the Study of Economics, Historical Systems and at the Binghamton University, New York and The Institute for Research on World-System at the University of California, Riverside) and two regularly appearing journals (*Journal of World-Systems Research* and *Review. A Journal of The Fernand Braudel Center*).

⁸ See G. Arrighi, "Capitalism and the Modern World-System: Rethinking the Non-Debates of the 1970's", *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, vol. 21, nr 1, 1998, pp. 113–129.

⁹ T. Skocpol, "Wallerstein's World Capitalist System: a Theoretical and Historical Critique", *American Journal of Sociology*, nr 82, 1977, pp. 1075–1095.

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Due to this vast subject matter, I intend to focus on the meaning of the discussion, which Wallerstein *did not* undertake in relation to the arguments of Brenner. The queries put forth by Braudel against *TMWS* will be mentioned briefly as indicators of the further direction and development of my conclusions, which will be based on an analysis of the first two above-mentioned criticisms.

THE CRITICISM OF ROBERT BRENNER: *THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM I*

Brenner's long and multithreaded article entitled *The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism* first appeared in the summer of 1977.¹⁰ It is one of the first and earliest reactions to the Wallerstein's announcement of his position, which occurred between 1974 and 1976 with the publication of the first volume of *TMWS*, as well as several shorter texts clarifying and strengthening the theses of this book. The fact that Brenner formulated his critique in such a moment is particularly significant because the allegations that he put forward did not pertain to the "world-system analysis" because, as I have already mentioned, nothing of the sort had at that time existed, at least not as it exists today — as an announced theory, institutionalised and recognised despite all the ambiguity as to its essence. It is this factor which, in my opinion, makes Brenner's criticism especially valuable. As a goal for himself, he set not simply to read and assess Wallerstein's mentioned works but also to indicate the intellectual community joining this author with some contemporary researchers and to determine the place that this intellectual current occupies in relation to the two classic authors of theory of capitalism — Adam Smith and Karl Marx. Thus, Brenner's article is an attempt to diagnose Wallerstein's theoretical situation made before he himself put forward such a diagnosis by announcing himself as one of the representatives of the new research program and writing much about its origins, perspectives, challenges, opponents and even limitations. Those circumstances could, at the same time, have been the cause of Brenner's greatest drawbacks when reading *TMWS* — not realising that this work was a proposal for a new "research perspective," Brenner did not even try to adopt it. So, he did not ask himself the

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10 R. Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: a Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism", *New Left Review*, nr 104, 1977, pp. 25–92.

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question about what is visible from it, that is, asking for — which is my subject — the object of the history written by Wallerstein.

Moving on to the reconstruction of the main points of Brenner's criticism, one must notice that Wallerstein often confirmed the validity of its initial, substantial and organising argument against his thesis which is the recognition of the fundamental unity in the standpoints of Wallerstein, André Gunder Frank and Paul Sweezy in terms of assumed premises and the methods used.¹¹ The actual controversy concerns not the accuracy of Brenner's reading of the first volume of *TMWS*, but the assessment of these premises and methods. Brenner formulated this assessment by demonstrating that these premises are the same "individualistic-mechanist" presuppositions on which the model of economic progress formulated by Smith in the first book of *The Wealth of Nations* was based on¹². The effect of their acceptance is that Wallerstein, like Smith, identifies the capitalist system with trade-based division of labour, searches for the origins of this system in "specific historical commercial/transport breakthroughs"¹³ and reduces its later development and internal dynamics to the market mechanisms. This comparison of Wallerstein to Smith appears to automatically indicate a strong contrast between the author of *TMWS* and Marx. This, in fact, is Brenner's intention. According to him, Wallerstein, similarly to Sweezy and Frank, did not digest the lessons of Marx's critique of classical political economy which led them to "displace social relation of production i.e. class relations from the centre of their analyses of economic development and underdevelopment"¹⁴ where it should rightly be found due to its "determining in the last instance" function. A quick and direct transition to these Brenner's assertions allows for a too easy verdict that his criticism "only make sense within orthodox, productionist and England-centered Marxism"¹⁵ (Wallerstein) or that it is "based on a highly selective reading of *Das Kapital* in which there is no room for Marx's more world-system theorizations" (Arrighi).¹⁶ Such opinions are largely true, but do not

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 11 This primarily regards Sweezy's position in the context of Dobb's *development of capitalism studies* (see M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1972).

12 *Ibidem*, p. 27.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 40.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 27.

15 I. Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction*, Duke University Press: Durham and London 2004, p. 92, see also p. 103.

16 G. Arrighi, *Capitalism and the Modern World-System: Rethinking the Non-Debates of the 1970s*, p. 120.

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reflect the essence of Brenner's diagnosis, which asserted — in accordance with the title of his article - Wallerstein's "neoSmithianism" and not his "antiMarxism". This is why I intend to concentrate on reconstructing and discussing the significance of the analogy which Brenner saw between the model of capitalist world-economy in *TMWS I* and the model of market economy in *The Wealth of Nations*.

At the most superficial level of the external shape of these models, this analogy is striking and truly difficult to omit. For Smith, social wealth was a function of the degree of the division of labour that is of a specialisation achieved by separating production functions and assigning them to separate manufacturers. In the classic formulation from the first book of *The Wealth of Nations*, this meant the separation of farming from industry and the corresponding separation of the countryside from the city. On the same principle, the power of Wallerstein's capitalistic world-economy model, appearing on the one hand in resistance to attempts at transforming it into a world-empire and on the other in expansionism, is a function of the definitional characteristic of the "social historical system" which is the "great axial division of labour."¹⁷ In peripheral regions in the 16th century as Wallerstein describes them — aimed in the direction of monoculture and supplying raw materials and basic foods — one can easily recognise "the countryside of Europe". And if not a city of the western world, what then should this densely populated centre be in which "agriculture to be sure remained the activity of the majority of the population" but "the trend was *toward* variety and specialization" in production and "towns flourished, industries were born, the merchants became a significant economic and political force"¹⁸?

The essential relationship between Smith and Wallerstein's position and thereby the "crucial objection" which Brenner puts forward to the concept of the latter is, however, less direct and concerns the immanent dynamic of the discussed models, that is the way in which both authors try to explain the principle of the development of capitalism. In both instances, it can be conceptualised only as "an expression of the development of the world division of labour."¹⁹ According to Smith, individualisation of production

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 17 See for example I. Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction*, p. 17 or "A World-System Perspective on the Social Sciences", *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 27, no 3, 1976, p. 345.

18 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, p. 102.

19 R. Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development*, p. 56.

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(separating previously combined production tasks) causes an economic development resulting from the growth in productivity as a “natural” consequence of producers’ focus on only one type of manufacturing operation. The level of this beneficial specialisation is crucially associated with the level of development of trade, in accordance with the famous formula that “a division of labour is limited by the extent of the market”²⁰ that is, strictly speaking, the size of area and population linked up by trade relations. Trade is not only the condition and historical stimulus for economic development, but also a factor supporting it. Thanks to the trade relations, new and improved industrial products, which are the result of specialisation, reach the countryside, encouraging the increase of agricultural production, which in turn further stimulates urban supply, etc. Brenner concludes that “once established, these connections of exchange set in motion, so to speak, the model of development, via the division of labour — so that for Smith both the origins and developmental pattern of capitalist production are rooted in the *same process*.”²¹

Wallerstein equally ties together the beginnings of the specific dynamics of the modern world-system with market exchange, but not with its establishment or rebirth as such but rather with a kind of releasing of trade relations. The modern world-system is firstly defined negatively as a world-system, that is as a “great system of the axial division of labour”, which was not dominated by the imperial political structure. “It is the social achievement of the modern world, if you will — writes Wallerstein — to have invented the technology that makes possible to increase the flow of the surplus from the lower strata to the upper strata, from the periphery to the center, from the majority to the minority, by eliminating the «waste» of too cumbersome a political superstructure.”²² The economic advantage of the capitalist world-economy appears to be so due to the fact that it is the purest of all hitherto systems of labour division. Similarly to Smith, in the model proposed by Wallerstein trade in itself — which in this case means: liberated from the suffocating oppression of an empire — brings forth a more efficient organisation of production, achieved by increasing regional specialisation. This specialisation — perhaps Wallerstein’s most controversial concept, which needs to be addressed separately — consists essentially

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20 A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, P. F. Colliner & Son: New York 1902, p. 60.21 R. Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development*, p. 38.22 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, pp. 15–16.

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of diversification of techniques to labour control (slavery, feudal serfdom, wage labour, etc.) in relation to the type of production processes realised within the framework of the global division of labour. Such an organisation of the world's economy in turn brings a system of unequally strong nations which maintain and consolidate the shape of the capitalist world-economy, ensuring the flow of surplus value from peripheral countries to the central countries. This in turn results in the accelerated accumulation of capital in the latter countries which allows for further development of trade and their advantages in it, *inter alia*, by geographical expansion which also means expanding the boundaries of the world-system.

The previously mentioned “crucial objection” of Brenner to this interpretation of the principle of capitalist development is that it does not take and *is not able to take* into account one of essential features of this development, which is the “accumulation through innovation” or, to put it simply, a continuous pursuit of technological progress. Contrary to what Smith claims, such a systematic revolutionisation of the forces of production cannot be explained by trade and labour division alone. The market exchange and the associated production for profit and competition — as Brenner repeats after the first volume of *Das Kapital* — forces innovation only under conditions of free wage labour. Only when the labour power is deprived of the means of production and subsistence, as well as when it is not subjected to any direct domination (such as experienced in the case of slavery or feudal serfdom), is there a necessity of producing at the exact limits of “socially necessary labour time” in order to survive in the market and the need to shorten that time to ensure your continued survival. This last tendency — the tendency to increase, what Marx defined as the “relative surplus value,” — is precisely a systemic, built-in striving to raise the productivity by means of technological progress. This aspect of capitalism, key for Brenner, can be thus explained only through focusing on analysis of social relations of production. Whereas Wallerstein starting his analysis from a trade-based division of labour, ends with the concept of capitalist development which is “in essence quantitative” and “revolving around: (1) the growth in size of the system through (spatial) expansion; (2) the rearrangement of the factors of production through regional specialization to achieve greater efficiency; (3) the transfer of surplus”²³ to the centre.

 23 R. Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development*, p. 31.

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I believe that these three points constitute an exact and comprehensive systematisation of the processes that make up the history described in *TMWS*. But is this bad? Aren't these three types of processes actually specific to the functioning of this historical system which "expanded" from 16th century Europe? As such, do they not deserve an explanation? On the other hand, it is a fact that the changes at the level of productive forces play an insignificant role in history written by Wallerstein and, if they are taken into account, it is as *deus ex machina*. And what's more, if one looks more closely at the evolution of Wallerstein's views between the first and third volume of *TMWS*, one can infer the strong impression that initially he did not expect his model to be unable to account for technical progress. Starting his work, he announced that its third part "shall deal with the conversion of the world-economy into a global enterprise, made possible by the technological transformation of modern industrialism."²⁴ Meanwhile, the third volume, published fourteen years later, discusses the "second era of great expansion" (which perfectly agrees with Brenner's interpretation) and opens with a chapter partially devoted to proving the thesis that the concept of the industrial revolution is a myth which has grown (alongside other analyses focusing on the growth rate) from the "ideology of national economic development as the primordial collective task."²⁵ The argument presented there strongly appeals to me in this part in which it intends to show that the known, textbook "concept of «industrial revolution» and its almost inevitable correlate, that of the «first industrial revolution» of Great Britain, is profoundly misleading."²⁶ I am, however, not convinced that the statement that the *true* revolution was the invention of firearms, the compass and the printing press²⁷, associated precisely with the establishment of the capitalist world-economy in the 16th century, solves the problem of the importance of technological progress. "The cumulative, self-sustaining change in the form of the endless search for accumulation, which is the leitmotiv of [this] world-economy" as Wallerstein describes it in his work, is not, contrary to his suggestion, the same as "spontaneous development" through "revolutionising the technical process of labour" which

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24 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, p. 10.

25 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III*, Academic Press: San Diego 1989, pp. 4, see also pp. 3–33 and p. 53.

26 *Ibidem*, p.33.

27 *Ibidem*.

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Marx managed to capture and explain with his concept of “relative surplus value”²⁸. And the reason for that is exactly the one indicated by Brenner — the subject of Wallerstein’s history is not a “mode of production”. On the contrary, his history relates in a very open way to “the great systems of labour division” which means it happens entirely in the sphere of exchange. All three types of processes forming the history of the “modern world-system” concern the sphere of circulation: its expansion, internal flows and changes in their direction.

Therefore, is Wallerstein actually a circulationist? In the measure in which this clumsy term, which Brenner himself never uses, functions as an objection it does not apply simply to choosing the genesis and dynamic of modern global markets for the main object of analysis. Rather, it refers to the specific concept of the mutual interactions between the relations of exchange and the relations of production, i.e. class relations. Indeed, it is precisely at this point that Wallerstein’s concept causes major doubts.

Here, one must return to the effects of specialisation related to the division of labour on the centre-periphery axis. Similarly to Smith, it must result in improvements to the production process. But exactly what kind of improvements? Repeatedly mentioned in *TMWS*, the surprising, but in fact inevitable answer turns out to be the claim that these improvements are taking place not at the level of productive forces but at the level of local production relations. “Why — asks Wallerstein — do different modes of organizing labour (slavery, «feudalism», wage labour, self-employment) occur at the same point in time within the world-economy? Because each mode of labour control is best suited for particular types of production.”²⁹ Thus, we are actually dealing with a conditioning of class structure by the demands of the global market, or, in other words, with the determining of the shape of the sphere of production by which Marx calls “the sphere of circulation or of exchange of commodities”.

In connection with this Wallersteinian theory of history, among many concerns that his position awakes, the most interesting one seems to be the one concerning the origins of the capitalist system. It seems to be assumed here, that with the development of trade and the incorporation of the region into the global division of labour, the ruling class simply selects the mode of organisation of work (i.e. the relations of production) that

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28 See K. Marx, *Capital*, Penguin/NLR Edition: London 1976, vol. 1, p. 645.

29 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, p. 87.

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maximises profits on the market. The adoption of this suspicious assumption entails admitting that these elites were, in a sense, already capitalist in potency that is not only able to respond to market-induced incentives, but also guided by market motives. It is in this sense that Brenner states that Wallerstein's model is based on the same "individualist-mechanist" presuppositions, which underlay Smith's model:

For the Adam Smith of *The Wealth of Nations*, Book 1, the world *before capitalism* is composed of potential individual profit maximizers, ready to expand production, as a result of their own egoistic motivations (...). In contrast, for Wallerstein, the world before capitalism is composed of individual exploiters in various (somewhat vague) relations to the exploited, but ready to specialize in the method of exploitation most suitable for their production on the world market. This, indeed, is the European world he thinks must have existed in the later fifteenth century. It is, in short, essentially Smith's world of atomistic egos (...). It is no wonder that Wallerstein refers to the 'world-system' of the sixteenth century as a 'one-class' system, for it is only the capitalists (themselves created by the world market) and their motivations which in his account really matter for the historical development of capitalism.³⁰

These are very serious and quite accurate allegations. While the "modern world-system" when once set in motion functions very smoothly, its origins are described in *TMWS* rather vaguely. The starting point - feudal Europe - as neither a world-economy nor a world-empire is necessarily outside of a developed research perspective³¹. The story therefore begins with the disintegration of a quite formless formation ("social mode or organization that was what has come to be called feudalism"³²), the so-called "crisis of feudalism". Wallerstein explains this historical phenomenon as "representing the conjunction of secular trends" which actually means a simple enumeration of all the processes most frequently mentioned by historians (economic recession, the decline of the secular trend, worsening of climatic conditions).³³ Then, he describes the invention of "new form of surplus appropriation, a capitalist world-economy" as the only solution to this crisis — "without it Europe's situation could well have collapsed into relative

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30 R. Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development...*, p. 82.

31 „Feudal Europe was a «civilization», but not a world-system”, declares finally Wallerstein (I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, p. 18).

32 *Ibidem*, p. 17.

33 *Ibidem*, p. 37.

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constant anarchy and further contraction.”³⁴ Capitalism in this concept is therefore as much the effect of historical changes as a measure selected in order to overcome the difficulties associated with these changes.

SOCIAL RELATIONS OF CIRCULATION?

Brenner's criticism of Wallerstein's "neosmithism" or 'circulationism' — I repeat here the conclusion of Arrighi's reflection on this "non-debate"³⁵ — therefore focuses on two points. Firstly, he argues that it is impossible to explain the processes in which social classes and in fact any wider socio-economic structures emerge by reducing them to the position occupied on the centre-periphery axis, that is to the structures of global market. Secondly, he indicates how unsatisfying — based on voluntaristic, individualist-mechanist assumptions - the explanation of the 16th-century transformation of world-economy into the *capitalist* world-economy formulated in *TMWS* is (at the time of cyclical depression feudal lords decide to transform themselves into capitalist "farmers"). It is not my purpose here to settle the extent to which these two drawbacks are disqualifying. I intend to, as promised, treat them as the price paid by Wallerstein for the opportunity to write *TMWS*, i.e. for the opening the world-systemic perspective. So, I intend to conclude by referring to each of these two problems in order to make some observations about the nature of the subject of history that he has written.

Let us first focus on the issue of reducing the social relations of production to centre-periphery relations which organise the global sphere of circulation. In this case, the stake of Wallerstein's considerations seem relatively obvious and is quite clearly explicated by himself. He repeatedly expressed the conviction that there is a need to reformulate the concept of class struggle, which, like "all other forms of social struggle can be understood and evaluated only within the world-system taken as a whole."³⁶ The basic premise of this postulate is the observation that the relations of production are always local while capitalism is or becomes global. What is global in capitalism is the market. Hence the attempt to conceptualize of class struggle in a scale of the world-system as a whole seems to require the development of a theory of so-

 34 *Ibidem*, pp. 37–38.

 35 G. Arrighi, *Capitalism and the Modern World-System: Rethinking the Non-Debates of the 1970s*, p. 120.

 36 I. Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction*, p. 20.

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cial relations of circulation. I believe that this is how one can read the attempt to capture the “modern world-economy”, which is *TMWS*.

The third chapter of the third volume of this work is a perfect example of this kind of history of social relations of circulation. It focuses on “the incorporation of vast new zones” (India, the Ottoman Empire, Russia and West Africa) into the capitalist world-economy between 1750 and 1850. This whole process is described as a genesis of “local production units capable of responding in some sense to the ever-changing market conditions of a world-economy” which in order to become such, must meet a number of conditions (size, availability of labour and political circumstances) established at the outset as a result of “enquiry into the nature of the structures of economic decision making”³⁷. It is therefore a study of the impact of the global market on the social systems “connected” to it, which begins with the synchronous analysis of the intended final state in which the already incorporated system functions as an exemplary capitalist entrepreneur, i.e. is guided by market incentives, and seeks to maximise profit.

In this way, Wallerstein undoubtedly walks on thin ice. As Skocpol observed, he frequently explains the dynamics of the system in the same categories as liberal economists although — at least that’s what he declares — he inverts their basic theorems.³⁸ At the same time, he seems to ignore Marx’s fundamental assertion about the sphere of capitalist exchange as a kingdom of mere appearances, “which furnishes the «Free-trader Vulgaris» with his views and ideas, and with the standard by which he judges a society based on capital and wages”³⁹ and where “a definite social relation between men, assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things”⁴⁰. Ultimately, however, the famous “commodity mark” is also the most real delusion and brings such consequences. Hence, the real need for a theory and history of social relations of circulation which is — in my interpretation — visible in the work of Wallerstein.

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37 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III*, pp. 130–131. See also entire Chapter 3.

38 “Now the curious thing here is that, despite the fact that Wallerstein seems to be placing a great deal of stress on the class structures of the major zones of world capitalism, actually (as far as I can see) he is explaining the fundamental economic dynamics of the system in terms of exactly the variables usually stressed by liberal economists, while ignoring the basic Marxist insight that the social relations of production and surplus appropriation are the sociological key to the functioning and development of any economic system.” T. Skocpol, *Wallerstein’s World Capitalist System: a Theoretical and Historical Critique*, p. 1079.

39 K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I. p. 204.

40 *Ibidem*, p. 92.

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HOW TO ASK ABOUT "HOW?" CAPITALISM?

The second problem — the weakness of the proposed in *TMWS* explanation of the transition from the pre-capitalist historical system of mediaeval Europe (however it may be called or defined) to the capitalist system — is more delicate and touches upon Wallerstein's deepest motives in maximally historicising his theory. In one of his later books, he describes his intentions, talking about how in the early 1980s he was asked to write “a short book about capitalism”:

I answered that I will write it under the condition that I will be able to call it “*historical* capitalism.” This adjective was crucial for me because I wanted to show that there is no sense in defining in our minds what capitalism is and then looking around in order to check if capitalism exists. We should rather focus on how this system actually worked.⁴¹

When thinking about capitalism as a method or a mode of operation one cannot, at the same time, analyse it as a “historical system” which could be defined by describing its essential characteristics and structure, thus differentiating it from other formations, such as the feudal. The subject ceases to be the “what” of capitalism and becomes the “how”. Of course, the question at which point did the capitalist mode of operation become dominant and characteristic for the entire social machine remains binding. When putting the question of the origins of the modern world-system in such terms one indeed does presuppose, however, a pre-existence of capitalism in the form of capitalist practices and motivations. Determining their basic patterns, which can necessarily be found only in the regularities of the historical becoming-of-capitalism, turns out to be the primary task.

Perhaps this is why Wallerstein, in a rather bizarre comment on Brenner's criticism of his work, states that he gave an indirect but concrete answers to it in the second volume of *TMWS* through his discovery of the necessary sequence of acquiring and losing hegemony in the capitalist world that he identified in the history of 17th-century Dutch economic dominance. The fact that it leads from the advantage in production, through the supremacy in trade to the domination of a financial nature, and the

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41 I. Wallerstein, *The Uncertainties of Knowledge*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2004, pp. 96–97.

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decline of the power proceeds in exactly the same order⁴² is for Wallerstein the prove that “contrary to Brenner’s version of Marxism, there were never various forms of capitalism — commercial, industrial, financial — but that these terms refer to alternative forms of profiteering by capitalists, depending on the cyclical shifts in the world-economy”⁴³. The problem here is that Brenner’s criticism is at no point based on the conviction (otherwise probably cherished by him) that it is necessary to differentiate the mentioned stages and forms of capitalism. It is possible that Wallerstein meant that Brenner’s “orthodox Marxist” concentration on the definition of the capitalist mode of production in its necessary quest for accuracy (wage labour, the factory system, the 19th-century, England, etc.) fails to recognise and describe this kind of regularities in the functioning of “historical capitalism.”

It is worth noting that Wallerstein, in defending his way of thinking rather than his specific claims, against the attacks of Brenner, repeats one of Braudel’s fundamental theories. This great historian also claimed that “we should avoid the over-simplified image often presented of capitalism passing through various stages of growth, from trade to finance to industry — with the «mature» industrial phase seen as the only «true» capitalism” because, in fact, “from the point of view of the general history the essential characteristic of capitalism seems to be its unlimited flexibility, its capacity for change and *adaptation* [...], its capacity to slip at a moment’s notice from one form or sector to another”⁴⁴. This is important since Braudel’s re-

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42 “The pattern of hegemony seems marvelously simple. Marked superiority in agro-industrial productive efficiency leads to dominance of the spheres of commercial distribution of world trade, with correlative profits accruing both from being the entrepôt of much of world trade and from controlling the «invisibles» — transport, communications, and insurance. Commercial primacy leads in turn to control of the financial sectors of banking (exchange, deposit, and credits) and of investment (direct or portfolio). [...] the *loss* of advantage seems to be in the same order (from productive to commercial to financial), and also largely successive.” I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II*, Academic Press, New York 1980, p. 38–39; see the whole chapter.

Different notions of “hegemony” are very important also for Amin (S. Amin, *Beyond U.S. Hegemony: Assessing the Prospects for a Multipolar World*, Zed Books, London 2006) and Arrighi. The latter notes that “twilight Powers such as the USA, from around 1970, triggered a wave of research on the flowering and falling down of the next ‘hegemony’ and confirms this fact by replacing the names of the twelve authors of Wallerstein. Then proceed to develop his concept of the “three historical hegemonies of capitalism”. G. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, pp. 28.

43 I. Wallerstein, *The Uncertainties of Knowledge*, p. 95.

44 F. Braudel, *Civilisation and Capitalism 15th–18th Century*, vol. II, p. 433.

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search in a much more open and direct way, than those run by Wallerstein, focused on capitalism as a specific mode of operation. In his work we do not find even one word about the crisis of feudalism or the transition from feudalism and capitalism, that is about issues which after all were central to the approach proposed in *TMWS* and constituted its greatest weakness.

The objections raised by Braudel against the concepts formulated in this book were the essence of the second of the “non-debates” of the 1970s, and according to Arrighi they refer to the problems revealed by the first “non-debate” with Brenner. This objections revolved around the fact that Braudel has not seen any convincing reason to place the origins of capitalism in the 16th century.⁴⁵ For him, the problem in general does not apply to the transition from feudalism to capitalism but the transition from local, distributed and relatively weak activity of capitalist forces to their concentration, domination and globalisation. The appropriate question would therefore be: how capitalism, already existing in what Marx called ‘inter-mundia’, in crevices and on the links between large social systems, that is capitalism as it appeared in 13th-century Italian cities (and perhaps also in ancient Phoenicia, Carthage etc.) surrendered the modern territorial states to its logic and used them to spread throughout the world? Wallerstein openly accepts this style of thinking in his later works, for example where he compares capitalism to a virus that was “present in all major historical systems (civilisations)”, but only in the “Western world, for a specific set of reasons that where momentary (conjunctural, or accidental), the antitoxins were less available or less efficacious, and the virus spread rapidly, and then proved itself to be invulnerable to later attempts at reversing its effects.”⁴⁶

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45 “I am therefore inclined to see the European world-economy as having taken shape very early on; I do not share Immanuel Wallerstein’s fascination with the sixteenth century” (F. Braudel, *ibidem*, vol. III, p. 57).

46 I. Wallerstein, *The End of the world as we know it*, pp. 181–182. See also pp. 128–129, where Wallerstein replies to the question “Why was feudalism replaced by capitalism?” that “capitalist entrepreneurial strata had long existed in Western Europe as in many other parts of the world,” and in the sixteenth century “capitalist forces did not suddenly become stronger or more legitimate in the eyes of most people. In any case, it have never been primarily the degree of strength of capitalist forces that had been the decisive factor but the strength of social opposition to capitalism. Suddenly, the institutions that sustained this social opposition had become quite weak. And the inability to reestablish them or create similar structures by renewing the ruling strata via external conquest gave a momentary (and probably unprecedented) opening to such capitalist forces, which swiftly entered the breach and consolidated themselves.”

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If such a prospect, sought and implicitly postulated, is explicitly absent in *TMWS*, which entangles Wallerstein in the contradictions pointed by Brenner, it is because the conceptual apparatus funding the world-systems analysis cannot clearly express its theoretical object. It is impossible to ask for a virus, that is for an operating program initially not allocated in any organism, in obsolete terms borrowed from systems theory. Wallerstein's historiography, and even more so Braudel's, presupposes and requires a completely new ontology which is not an ontology of monadic structures that should be named, described and set side by side or one after the other. The object of the classical Marxist theory of history (historical materialism), which is the "mode of production", was developed in the course of Marx's critique of political economy and not borrowed from the empirical experience of the historical richness and complexity of the modern era. The subject of history able to capture the history of capitalism as a transhistorical mode of operation may perhaps be found as a result of a critique of economic history. It cannot in any case be replaced by Wallerstein's concept of the "social historical system" which is in fact only a name for the idle contradiction between the abstract model, being the result of the work of the researcher, and the concreteness of history, which as "living", "unique" and "rich" will always slip away from him.

translated by Paweł Markiewicz

Summary

Because the central claim of world-systems analysis is to establish a unidisciplinary, holistic historical social science, it is not surprising that the emergence of this research programme is inseparable from the influence of a historical book — Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System*, Vol. I (1974). In this situation it seems that the evaluation of the notion of "historical systems as complex systems" that Wallerstein proposes as a definition of the theoretical object of world-system analysis is inseparable from the evaluation of the concept of "capitalist modern world-system" — the subject of the history that Wallerstein writes. In order to do that I reconstruct two critiques of *The Modern-World System*, Vol. I, formulated in the 1970s by Robert Brenner and by Fernand Braudel. Brenner has argued that Wallerstein tries to explain social processes by their reduction to spatial

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localisation on the core-periphery axis. Braudel has shown that if we accept Wallerstein's assumptions — as Braudel himself did — there is now reason to place the rise of capitalism in 16th-century Europe. As I argue, Wallerstein's failure to respond to these critiques results from the fact that his way of thinking about capitalism as about a historically concrete mode of functioning cannot be clearly formulated within the conceptual apparatus of world-systems analysis that he himself proposed.