



# Globalization and the sociology of Immanuel Wallerstein: A critical appraisal

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## Abstract

By the turn of the 21st century the concept of globalization had earned its place in the social sciences and debate turned more squarely to the theoretical significance of globalization. Yet not all scholars were happy with the notion of globalization. Some claim that is merely a new name for earlier theories and concepts. Among those who reject new paradigmatic thinking on the current age is Immanuel Wallerstein, the world-renowned sociologist and ‘father’ of the *world-system paradigm*. This article is intended as an appraisal of Wallerstein’s *œuvre* in the context of the debate on global transformations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and from the vantage point of the present author’s own critical globalization perspective. The first three parts summarize and assess Wallerstein’s theoretical system and his many contributions to macro, historical and comparative sociology, to development studies and international political economy. The fourth discusses Wallerstein’s assessment of the evolution of the world capitalist system in recent decades, including his views on the concept of globalization, and the fifth focuses on earlier and more recent critical appraisals of his work, including the present author’s own, in light of the recent transformations in world capitalism identified with globalization.

## Keywords

development, globalization, history of sociology, social change, sociological theory

Most would agree that if we are to understand the 21st-century social world we must come to grips with the concept of globalization. The term first became popularized in the 1980s. The 1990s saw raging debates on the usefulness of the concept for the social sciences and humanities. By the new century the concept had clearly earned its place and debate turned more squarely to the theoretical significance of globalization. Yet not all

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scholars are happy with the notion of globalization. Some claim that it is old wine poured into a new bottle, merely a new name for earlier theories and concepts. Certainly the world has experienced dramatic changes since Immanuel Wallerstein published in 1974 the first volume in his seminal trilogy, *The Modern World-System*. But not all believe that these changes signal any sort of qualitative transformation in the system of world capitalism that merits new theoretical claims.

Among those who reject new paradigmatic thinking on the current age is Immanuel Wallerstein, one of the most renowned sociologists and who is identified as the ‘father’ of the world-system paradigm. This article is intended as an appraisal of Wallerstein’s *œuvre* in the context of the debate on global transformations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. What is the explanatory purchase of this *oeuvre* to our understanding of contemporary 21st-century world affairs, specifically, to systemic level transformations coming into focus one decade into the new century? The first three parts summarize Wallstein’s theoretical system and his many contributions to macro, historical and comparative sociology, to development studies and international political economy, and assess these contributions from what I have termed a critical globalization perspective (Robinson, 2008). The fourth discusses Wallerstein’s assessment of evolution of the world capitalist system in recent decades, including his views on the concept of globalization, and the fifth section focuses on earlier and more recent critical appraisals of his work, including my own, in light of the recent transformations in world capitalism identified with globalization.

## Reinvigorating historical sociology

Some see the world-systems paradigm as a ‘precursor’ to globalization theories (Waters, 2001). World-system theory, however, started out not as a theory of globalization but of development. In the late 1950s, the field of development was dominated by the modernization school, which came under attack by dependency theories and other radical Third World approaches to international inequalities. By the late 1970s, world-system theory had become established as an alternative perspective from which to examine issues of development and world inequalities (see e.g. Roberts and Hite, 2000; So, 1990). Wallerstein’s colleague the late Giovanni Arrighi observed that ‘world-systems analysis as a distinctive sociological paradigm emerged at least 15 years before the use of globalization as a signifier that blazed across the headlines and exploded as a subject of academic research and publication’ (Arrighi, 2005: 33). The paradigm did indeed come of age in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet what is distinctive to world-systems theory is not that it has been around longer than more recent globalization studies. Rather, this paradigm – and certainly Wallerstein himself – tends to view globalization not as a recent phenomenon but as virtually synonymous with the birth and spread of world capitalism, circa 1500. Indeed, Wallerstein is credited for having reinvigorated historical sociology. If one of the hallmarks (and in my view, strengths) of the world-system paradigm is its deeply historical focus, it also represents the problematic nature of the paradigm if it is seen as a theory of globalization.

One of the key issues in the globalization debate, and one that cuts to one of the underlying ontological issues in globalization studies, is *when does globalization begin?* What is the time dimension of the process? How a theory answers this question will shape – even determine – what we understand when we speak of globalization, or if the term – and

the process of change in historical structures that the term is assumed to explicate – is worthwhile, or simply superfluous and misleading. We can identify three broad approaches to the temporal question of globalization – a process that dates back to the dawn of history, with a sudden recent acceleration; a process coterminous with the spread and development of capitalism over the past 500 years; and a recent phenomenon associated with social change of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The world-system paradigm clearly argues the second of these. In fact, a number of world-system theorists suggested in the 1990s that to talk of globalization was merely to reinvent the wheel (see later). Wallerstein himself does not see anything new in globalization. ‘The proponents of world-systems analysis’, states Wallerstein, have been talking about globalization since long before the word was invented – not, however, as something new but as something that has been basic to the modern world-system ever since it began in the sixteenth century’ (Wallerstein, 2004a: x). My own view, albeit briefly, is that the current period marks a qualitatively new epoch in the ongoing evolution of world capitalism, one that involves certain discontinuities and *qualitatively* novel dimensions that cannot be explained within the world-systems paradigm. If globalization simply means the only geographic extension of material and cultural exchanges then it has been going on for thousands of years, and if it means the spread and development of capitalism, including that which the capitalist system implies, then it has been going on for 500+ years. In my own conception, I reserve the term globalization to refer to the novel changes associated with the past few decades. These changes involve, to reiterate, qualitatively new dimensions that the world-system paradigm cannot account for given the imminence of its core concepts, as I discuss later, albeit briefly.

World-systems theory shares with several other approaches to globalization, most notably the global capitalism approach with which I myself am identified (Robinson, 2004a, 2007), a critique of capitalism as an expansionary system that has come to encompass the entire world over the past 500 years. These distinct theories share a common genealogy that traces back to Marx and his critique of capitalism, and in turn grew out of a long tradition in Marxist and radical analyses of world capitalism dating back to the writings of Lenin, Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg and other early 20th-century theorists of imperialism (see, inter alia, Brewer, 1991; Worsley, 1977). But accounts of world capitalism among radical academics and political actors began to diverge in the post-Second World War period. In particular, more traditionally oriented approaches followed Marx’s view that capitalism would develop the forces of production worldwide as it spread, while others saw the backwardness and underdevelopment of some regions of the world as the alter-ego of the advancement and development of others. A number of schools emerged that argued that it was the very nature and dynamics of world capitalism that resulted in global inequalities among countries and regions, bringing about the development of some and the underdevelopment of others. This view was first put forward by the structural school of Raul Prebisch and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by more radical and explicitly neo-Marxist dependency theorists – or the ‘dependentistas’ – of the 1960s and 1970s (Chilcote, 1984). At the same time, radical intellectuals and political leaders from other parts of the Third World were reaching similar conclusions, among them, Samir Amin and Walter Rodney, inspired in part by the Latin Americans (see e.g. Amin, 1974; Rodney, 1981; Worsley, 1977).

It was in this milieu that Wallerstein forged his distinctive world-system theory, as part of a broader intellectual exchange with Amin and others, including Andre Gunder Frank and Terrence Hopkins. Wallerstein had himself lived in France and Africa and began his career as an Africanist (on Wallerstein's intellectual biography, see Goldfrank, 2000). His first major work, *Africa: The Politics of Independence*, became an academic bestseller. But what launched the world-system paradigm was the publication in 1974 of the first volume of his magnum opus, *The Modern World-System*. The first volume, under the subtitle *Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, lays out the basic postulates of the theory. It was followed by a second volume in 1980, subtitled *Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy, 1600–1750*, and then a third volume in 1988, *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World Economy, 1730–1840s*. Wallerstein is a remarkably prolific writer and has produced dozens of books and hundreds of articles and essays. More recent works have continued to elaborate and refine the world-system paradigm, and to apply it to an array of contemporary and historical phenomena (see esp. Wallerstein, 2000c, a collection of essays spanning some 40 years; see also, inter alia, Wallerstein, 1979, 1998, 2004a). Other recent works have focused on matters of method, epistemology and ontology of social science, particularly with his call for a unification of the disciplines and of history into a historical social science (Wallerstein, 2001, 2004b).

If the radical literature on development was one major influence on Wallerstein's ideas, the second was the French Annales school that reached its zenith in the post-Second World War years, and in particular, the thought of its leading figures, Fernand Braudel. Braudel had sought to develop 'total' or 'global' history. By this he meant an approach to history that observes the totality of the field of social forces, so that history is all-embracing and emphasizes the interconnectedness of what conventional approaches consider to be distinct histories. But Braudel also means by 'global history' the synthesis of history and social sciences through an emphasis on the *longue durée* (the long term), what Braudel alternatively referred to as 'structural time' in human affairs. The *longue durée* is a historical process in which all change is slow, involving constant repetition and recurring cycles. It is only through the study of the long term that the totality, the deepest layers of social life, the 'subterranean history', and the continuing structures of historical reality are revealed.

Wallerstein has pushed further this fusion of history and social science, calling for a *historical social science* that would reunify history with sociology, the other social sciences and the humanities, and that would operate on a global scale. Two of the hallmarks of world-system approaches are the transdisciplinary nature of much research and the deeply historical perspective it brings to bear on research. In 1976, Wallerstein and several of his colleagues established the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilization at the State University of New York at Binghamton. According to the Center's founding statement:

[The Center] exists to engage in the analysis of large-scale social change over long periods of historical time. We operate on two assumptions. One is that there is no structure that is not historical. In order to understand a structure one must not only know its genesis and its context; one must also assume that its form and its substance are constantly evolving. The second

assumption is that no sequence of events in time is structureless, that is, fortuitous. Every event occurs within existing structures, and is affected by its constraints. Every event creates part of the context of future events. Of course, there are ruptures in structures which represent fundamental change. But such ruptures too are explicable in terms of the state of the structures. We therefore do not separate the study of historical sequence and the study of structural relationships.<sup>1</sup>

## The modern world-system

World-system theory as elaborated by Wallerstein starts with the proposition that the appropriate unit of analysis for macrosocial inquiry in the modern world is neither class, nor state/society, or country, but the larger historical system, in which these categories are located. The defining boundaries of a historical system are those within which the system and the people within it are regularly reproduced by means of some kind of ongoing division of labor. Central to the idea of a historical system is the division of labor – a core concept in the social sciences. The existence of a division of labor implies specialized work roles among individuals and groups along with the coordination or synchronization of these different roles, or labor activities. Hence, the division of labor naturally forms the outer boundaries of any social order in that it sets the boundaries for and social relations and interdependencies.

In human history, Wallerstein argues, there have been three known forms of historical systems: *mini-systems*, and world-systems of two kinds – *world-empires* and *world-economies*. Mini-systems largely correspond to the pre-agricultural era. They are self-contained systems that tend to be small in space and brief in time. They are generally subsistence economies, governed by the logic of reciprocity in exchange. Mini-systems were highly homogeneous in terms of cultural and governing structures and they split up when they became too large. World-systems do not exhibit this homogeneity. For Wallerstein, a world-system is an economic entity not circumscribed by political or cultural boundaries, and is a self-contained social system. World-empires were the dominant form of historical systems from the earliest civilizations until about 1500 AD. The defining characteristic is a single political center or structure encompassing an extensive division of labor and a wide range of cultural patterns. World-empires operated through the extraction of tribute, or surplus, from otherwise locally self-administered communities of producers that was passed upward to the center and redistributed to a network of officials. In turn, a world-economy involves vast, uneven chains of integrated production structures brought together through a complex division of labor and extensive commercial exchange. This may be true of a world-empire as well.

For Wallerstein, the boundaries of a world-system are formed by the extent and reach of a given social division of labor. For instance, the Roman Empire was a world-system, in that all of the lands and peoples encompassed within its realms participated in a single empire-wide division of labor, and were connected by specialized regional roles and economic contributions, and trading networks among them. In Wallerstein's own words, a world-system is a 'spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units, one that represents an integrated zone of activity and institutions which obey certain systemic rules' (Wallerstein, 2004a: 17). In turn, Wallerstein distinguished between

two types of world-systems. One is world-empires, in which there is a single political boundary. Hence the Roman world-system was a world-empire. In distinction, a world-economy is a world-system that has multiple political centers rather than a single political center or boundary. The peculiar strength of the modern or *capitalist* world-system is that it has not transformed into a world-empire, which would imply a single political system or center.

The capitalist world-economy that emerged from circa 1500 and on expanded to cover the entire globe, absorbing in the process all existing mini-systems and world-empires, establishing market and production networks that eventually brought all peoples around the world into its logic and into a single worldwide structure. Hence, by the late 19th century there was but one historical system that had come to encompass the entire globe, the *capitalist world-system*. It is in this sense that world-system theory can be seen as a theory of globalization even if its principal adherents reject the term globalization (see later).

As Wallerstein lays out in Volume I of *The Modern World-System*, the *modern* world-system as a *capitalist* world-system came into being during the 'long sixteenth century' of 1450–1640 out of the general crisis of European feudalism that began in the 14th century. 'Structures are those coral reefs of human relations which have a stable existence over relatively long periods of time', states Wallerstein. 'But structures too are born, develop, and die . . . the study of social change . . . should be restricted to the study of changes in those phenomena which are most durable' (1974: 3). He then goes on to proclaim two 'great watersheds in the history of man . . . the so-called Neolithic or agricultural revolution. The other great watershed is the creation of the modern world' (1974: 3).

Prior to the creation of this European-centered world-system there were a number of world-economies and world-empires around the planet, including the Mediterranean world-economy, the Indian Ocean–Red Sea complex, the Chinese region, the Central Asian land mass from Mongolia to Russia and the Baltic area, among others (Wallerstein, 1974: 17). But the European world-economy did away with these other world-economies and world-empires through its own expansion. Emerging capitalist elites (merchants, financiers, political elites) from Portugal, later Spain, Holland, England, France and elsewhere, expanded outward in pursuit of new economic opportunities. This expansion was made possible by the development of strong states in the 'core' of the emerging capitalist world-economy. In Western Europe, centralized monarchies replaced feudal fiefs, which were then replaced by modern nation-states. These states defended the interests of their elite classes and played a key role in constructing the structures of the modern world-system. They first colonized the Americas and economically incorporated Eastern Europe into a larger single Atlantic world-economy. With each expansion new regions were brought into the system. The system continued to expand, eventually incorporating the entire planet and becoming, between 1815 and 1917, a truly 'global enterprise'. This capitalist world-system is characterized by economic dominance of the planet, not by any single political or cultural system (but see later comments on Wallerstein's notion of geoculture and my commentary).

## Structures and processes of the modern world-system

A key structure of the capitalist world-system becomes the division of the world into three great regions, or hierarchically organized tiers. The first is the *core*, or the powerful

and developed centers of the system, original comprised of Western Europe and later expanded to include the United States and Japan. The second is the *periphery* – those regions that have been forcibly subordinated to the core through colonialism or other means, and in the formative years of the capitalist world-system would include Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. Third is the *semi-periphery*, comprised of those states and regions that were previously in the core and are moving down in this hierarchy, such as the Iberian countries following their 16th-century heyday, or those that were previously in the periphery and are moving up, such as Italy in earlier centuries, Russia following the Soviet revolution, or more recently, India, China, Brazil, South Africa and such ‘Asian Tigers’ as South Korea and Taiwan. ‘The ability of a particular state to remain in the core sector is not beyond challenge’, asserts Wallerstein. ‘The hounds are ever to the hares for the position of top dog. Indeed, it may well be that in this kind of system it is not structurally possible to avoid, over a long period of historical time, a circulation of the elites in the sense that the particular country that is dominant at a given time tends to be replaced in this role sooner or later by another country’ (1974: 350).

With this *trimodal* structure involving three distinct regions: *center* (or *core*), *periphery* and *semi-periphery*, Wallerstein is borrowing from, and expanding on, earlier theories of global political economy. The concept of core and periphery was first developed in the 1950s by Raul Prebisch, the director of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ELCA). Dependency theory posited a bimodal model of core, or metropolitan states that had historically conquered and colonized regions that became satellites, or peripheral areas of world capitalism. But with the addition of the semi-periphery in Wallerstein’s construct this bimodal structure becomes trimodal. The semi-periphery is seen as occupying an intermediate place between the core and the periphery. Within the division of labor, the core and the periphery are involved in an unequal exchange of high-wage products (e.g. manufactures) and low-wage products (e.g. raw materials). For its part, the semi-periphery stands in between in terms of its wage levels and the products it trades, and seeks to trade in both directions. But for Wallerstein the semi-periphery’s role goes beyond a distinct middle position in the international division of labor. It also plays a political role in the system, diverting pressures from the periphery in the same way that a middle class may defuse tensions between workers and capitalists:

The semiperiphery . . . is not an artifice of statistical cutting points, nor is it a residual category. The semiperiphery is a necessary structural element in a world-economy. These areas play a role parallel to that played, *mutatis mutandi*, by middle-trading groups in an empire. They are collection points of vital skills that are often politically unpopular. These middle areas (like middle groups in an empire) partially deflect the political pressures which groups primarily located in peripheral areas might otherwise direct against core states and the groups which operate within and through their state machineries. (1974: 349–50)

The world-system thus has an international division of labor distinguished by core, periphery and semi-periphery, each playing a functionally specific role within the system. But more specifically, Wallerstein terms this an *axial* division of labor. What he means by this is that core-like (e.g. high-wage, capital-intensity and skill level) and peripheral production processes (e.g. raw material production, low capital-intensity or

skill level) are bound together in the world-system and that peripheral production processes are concentrated in a geographic periphery and core production processes are concentrated in a geographic core. The theory's insistence that this axial division of labor must take a geographical/territorial expression has been critiqued by others coming from a globalization perspective (see later). What is crucial with regard to globalization theory is that in Wallerstein's construct the division of labor is necessarily geographical and international, so that different geographical regions and different countries occupy different positions within the world division of labor. In a world-system 'there is extensive division of labor. This division is not merely functional – that is, occupational – but geographical. That is to say, the range of economic tasks is not evenly distributed throughout the world-system' (1974: 349).

A core component of Wallerstein's theory is the generation and appropriation of surpluses throughout this system. Surpluses tend to move from peripheral and semi-peripheral to core regions, so that the natural functioning of the system – that is, world accumulation – results in the enrichment and development of the core and the impoverishment and underdevelopment of the periphery. Here we see how important the concept of the division of labor is to world-system theory. The peripheral regions are consigned to producing raw materials (agricultural goods and mined products) for the world economy while the core industrializes and produces manufactured goods. Thus an international division of labor and a world trade system is created that favors the core. Here we have a theory that provides an explanation for global inequalities and, as many have pointed out, a potent antidote to the modernization theories that proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s.

Another structure immanent to the world-system, according to Wallerstein, is different methods of labor control in different zones of this world-economy. Wage labor developed in the Northwest European 'core' of the system, while coerced forms of labor developed in 'peripheral' zones. In particular, slave labor and what Wallerstein calls 'coerced cash-crop labor' (a form of serfdom in which peasants are forced to produce for the world market) developed in the Americas and in Eastern Europe. Mixed forms of labor control developed in the 'semi-periphery', among them share-cropping and tenant farming. Because the notion of distinct modes of labor control, in particular wage labor in the core and coerced labor in the periphery, is so central to Wallerstein's thesis (see esp. 1974: 127) and is contrasted to contrary propositions in other globalization theories, it is worth quoting Wallerstein at some length on the matter:

. . . these occupational categories were not randomly distributed either geographically or ethnically within the burgeoning world-economy. After some false starts, the picture rapidly evolved of a slave class of African origins located in the Western Hemisphere, a 'serf' class divided into two segments: a major one in Eastern Europe and a smaller one of American Indians in the Western Hemisphere. The peasants of western and southern Europe were for the most part 'tenants.' The wage-workers were almost all west Europeans. . . . each mode of labor control is best suited for particular types of production. . . . The world-economy was based precisely on the assumption that there were in fact these three zones and that they did in fact have different modes of labor control. Were this not so, it would not have been possible to assure the kind of flow of the surplus which enabled the capitalist system to come into existence. (1974: 87)

As mentioned, a world-economy does not have a single political center as does a world-empire; hence the inter-state system becomes another immanent feature of the capitalist world-system. 'Political empires are a primitive means of economic domination', claims Wallerstein. 'It is the social achievement of the modern world, if you will, to have invented the technology that makes it 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' (1974: 15–16). If the world becomes divided into a three-tiered hierarchy of core–semi-periphery–periphery, in turn, the core states are themselves hierarchically organized around a 'hegemon'. This hegemon is a leading core state that exercises its political domination and control over the system and imposes rules and norms that bring it disproportionate benefits. There have been a succession of hegemonies in the history of the modern world-system, from Spain to the United Provinces of the Netherlands, later Great Britain, and then the United States in the 20th century (although Wallerstein does not consider Spain to have been a full-blown hegemon).

A constant theme in Wallerstein's more recent writings, and in literature from the world-system paradigm more generally, is the decline of US hegemony and a renewed world struggle for hegemonic succession (see e.g. Arrighi and Silver, 1999). Much conflict in modern world history is seen as wars among core powers over hegemonic status, or wars of conquest by the core over the periphery. Thus world-system theory offers an explanation for international conflict and for such themes as power and balance of forces in the international system. In a capitalist world-economy, states Wallerstein, 'core states . . . [are] intertwined in a state of constant economic and military tension, competing for the privilege to exploit (and weakening the state machineries of) peripheral areas, and permitting certain entities to play a specialized, intermediary role as semi-peripheral powers' (1974: 197). In this, Wallerstein is elaborating on the classical theory of imperialism, which saw the inter-state rivalries and conflicts among rich countries as a struggle for control over world markets and colonial sources of labor and raw materials, and in concurrence with a number of related strands in international relations theory.

Two other structural characteristics of the world-system are cyclical rhythms and secular trends in the world-economy as a whole. There are at least two types of cyclical rhythms. One is known as *Kondratieff cycles*, named after Russian economist Nikolai Kondratieff, who in the 1920s first wrote about these cycles, involving first expansion and then a contraction in the world-economy, lasting some 45–50 years. Beyond world-system theory, most political economists who study world capitalism have observed and studied these Kondratieff cycles, and most concur with Wallerstein's observation that the last A-phase (the period of expansion) began circa 1945 and ended circa 1972/3, and that the world entered a B-phase (period of contraction) in 1972/3 (see e.g. Mandel, 1978 [1972]). There is, however, considerable debate over how to interpret the period of stagnation that began in the early 1970s. We cannot visit this debate here other than to note that it is related to globalization insofar as a number of theorists see the economic turmoil of the late 20th century as related to the processes associated with globalization. Wallerstein has taken a particular position in this regard that I discuss later. The second set of cyclical rhythms is what world-systems theorists call 'logistics' cycles, which last approximately 250 years, first identified by Francois Simiand in the 1930s. Wallerstein has argued that

a logistics cycle that ran from 1450 to 1750 involved the birth and consolidation of the capitalist world-economy (1980, esp. Ch. 1). Meanwhile, some of the secular trends in the world-system are the geographic expansion of the system, increasing commodification, increasing industrialization and a Weberian bureaucratization.

There are a great many areas of particular research and a number of working concepts within the world-system paradigm. One of these is anti-systemic movements, which at certain moments have reached a critical mass that produces 'world revolutions' (e.g. 1789, 1848, 1917, 1968) (Arrighi et al., 1997), what in other theoretical discourses might be called counterhegemonic movements, oppositional forces, revolutionary movements and so forth. According to the Braudel Center:

We mean by antisystemic movements all those movements organized by persons who seek to transform the world-system in a more democratic, more egalitarian direction. This has included movements of the working classes, nationalist and/or ethnic movements, women's movements, and a variety of other kinds of movements. The concept is an inclusive one in terms of the social composition of the movements and their primary locus of concern, but it is an exclusive one as well, seeking to omit movements narrowly focussed on the ascending of the stratification ladder by some particular group.

Analyzing late 20th-century developments in the world-system, Wallerstein notes that the expansion of the world-economy since 1945 has probably been as great as for the entire period of 1500–1945, and that the political strength of anti-systemic forces increased dramatically during this period.

Finally, a concept worth mentioning because of its implications for globalization theory is geoculture, as I believe there are both differences and convergences in the interpretations of world-systems theory and the global capitalism approach to the matter of culture in the global or world-system. Again the Braudel Center:

We mean by geoculture the cultural framework of the world-system as a whole. The institutionalization of science and knowledge is a major component of the geoculture of the capitalist world-economy. We mean by civilizations those constructs of the present which are claims of a long and particular cultural heritage in a specific region of the world. The boundaries of the 'civilization' are often defined in relation to a religious and linguistic core. The tension between the singular geoculture of the capitalist world-economy and the multiple renewed civilizational claims is a central feature of the politics of the world-economy.

I don't give much weight to versions of globalization that impute explanatory – even causal – priority to the dramatic cultural changes worldwide associated with the process, and do not share the criticism that world-systems theory does not accord more causal priority to culture in the shaping of historic structures. However, the accelerated integration of peoples into global social structures and social life brought about by globalization implies a universal cultural transmission and by necessity involves a minimum quotient of shared symbols, adaptive strategies and meaning systems, if social life is to be possible at the global level. The question is, what are the social and class forces in the global system that have the power to diffuse and impose symbols and shape meaning systems. In this regard I do not see countries or regions imposing dominant cultures, as world-systems

theory does, but social groups as agents. ‘Cultural clashes’ in the global capitalism view reflect less that of competing geocultural regions than the impacts of global capitalist culture and manifold forms of resistance to it. The cultural impact of the new global capitalism is immense. The cultural icons of Coca Cola, Mickey Mouse, Big Macs, Nike, and so on, are symbolic of the real material domination of transnational corporations. Transnational production chains, by the nature of the activities involved and the networks of people drawn into them, facilitate widespread cultural change and promote a dominant global capitalist culture. To the extent that this global capitalist culture has emanated out from its original heartlands of capitalism – or from the core in the world-system lexicon – and continues to do so then there *is* a geocultural and ‘civilizational’ dimension to global capitalist cultural domination. But this global corporate culture, based on consumerism, individualism and competition, may well be more flexible and adaptable to distinct regional ‘geocultures’ to which Wallerstein refers (Robinson, 2004a; Sklair, 2000). Global capitalist cultural hegemony clearly plays an increasingly important role in maintaining the cohesion of the global capitalist order. This is particularly so given the greater cultural cohesion among national elites in the world setting, as their transnational identities overshadow their national ones. The culture and ideology of global capitalism – consumerism, individualism and competition – are less ‘western’ or ‘core’ than *global capitalist* patterns and are imposed as much from within by local contingents of the transnational capitalist class and transnationally oriented elites (see later) as from without by agents from other regions. Conversely, cultural symbols are created and appropriated by the oppressed and culture can and does subvert as much as it dominates. It is in this resistance that groups draw on historical geocultures and adapt them to entirely new circumstances, including rescripting and even mythologizing them.

The world-system paradigm has spawned a huge and continuously growing body of literature across the social sciences and humanities (for overviews, see Chase-Dunn, 1998; Hall, 1984). Given the numerous debates within the paradigm, the diverse and at times conflicting approaches and applications and the sheer scope of research self-identified as world-system scholarship, in recent years most world-system scholars have asserted that the approach is not a ‘theory’ per se but a framework of analysis, a methodology (see e.g. Goldfrank, 2000), or in Wallerstein’s own words, a ‘perspective’ (2004a). By the 21st century, the paradigm was increasingly referred to as ‘world-system analysis’ or the ‘world-system perspective’.

## **Wallerstein, the world-system and globalization**

Is the world-system approach a theory of globalization or an alternative theory of world society? The answer to this question would, in turn, depend on how we define the contested concept of globalization. If a bare-bones definition is intensified interconnections and interdependencies on a planetary scale and consciousness of them, then certainly world-system theory is a cohesive theory of globalization, organized around a 500+-year time scale corresponding to the rise of a capitalist world-economy in Europe and its spread around the world. On the other hand, however, it is not self-identified as a theory of globalization and is not a theory of the worldwide social changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Arrighi has noted, in direct reference to Wallerstein, that not all

world-system theorists agree on the affinity of even compatibility between their research program and the emerging globalization studies (2005: 33).

Wallerstein has himself been dismissive of the concept of globalization. 'The current buzz-word to describe the contemporary situation is "globalization". . . . Personally, I think it is meaningless as an analytic concept' (2000a: 28). Yet Wallerstein has referred to globalization in two distinct senses. In the first, it is an ideology of dominant groups in reference to the neoliberal political ideology of global free trade and capital accumulation unrestrained by states. Indeed, in this sense, Wallerstein is absolutely correct – it is indeed a blatant ideology evoked by ruling groups to justify capitalist globalization policies. At the same time, however, he has dismissed other social scientific conceptions of globalization as simply a new and superfluous term for the same historical processes that world-system theory has been expounding on since the 1970s:

The processes that are usually meant when we speak of globalization are not in fact new at all. They have existed for some 500 years. . . . One would think, reading most accounts, that 'globalization' is something that came into existence in the 1990's – perhaps only upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, perhaps a few years earlier. The 1990's are not however a significant time marker to use if one wants to analyze what is going on. Rather, we can most fruitfully look at the present situation in two other time frameworks, the one going from 1945 to today, and the one going from circa 1450 to today. (2000b: 250)

If for the world-system paradigm globalization is synonymous with the birth and spread of capitalism, then how capitalism is defined differs among distinct theories with major implications for our conception of globalization. Most world-system theorists follow Weber in this regard whereas other critical approaches to globalization apply Marx's definition. Weber saw capitalism as a market or *exchange relation* whereas Marx defined capitalism as a *production relation*. This distinction is important to the matter of globalization. In the Weberian definition, any production undertaken for exchange on the market for a profit is capitalist. By this definition, if serfs or slaves grow a crop which the lord or slaver markets, then this constitutes capitalism. Those that follow Marx's definition of capitalism as essentially a production relation between capital and labor would tend to argue that capitalism starting in the 16th century became the dominant mode of production worldwide and that this broader capitalist world economy became 'articulated' for much of the modern period to diverse other modes of production under the hegemony of the capitalist mode (Chilcote and Johnson, 1983; Foster-Carter, 1978). Thus slavery in the Americas was a slave mode, not capitalist, articulated in turn to a larger world capitalist system. And until the latter decades of the 20th century a good portion of the countryside in Latin America was feudal in character even though a portion of agricultural output was sold on the capitalist world market. And industry in Communist China or the former Soviet Union used to be organized through a non-capitalist statist system.

Observing these distinct conceptions of capitalism, Robert Brenner, in a famous critique of Wallerstein, refers to the world-system approach as 'neo-Smithian Marxism' (1977), by which he means a reliance on a definition of capitalism that implicitly derives from the doctrines of Adam Smith. For Smith, the essence of capitalism was the development of the division of labor and the consequent extension of exchanges among producers

involved in ever more specialized work. Such an understanding of capitalism based on this functional expansion and development of market relations – a ‘commercialization model’ – leads to a view of globalization as a movement in both the intensity and extent of international commercial interactions, whereas a view of capitalism as involving exploitative property relations and the accumulation of capital *through the capital–labor production relation* will lead to a distinct view of globalization.

How we define capitalism is, therefore, not a matter of mere semantics and gets to the heart of the question posed above: is the world-system approach a theory of globalization or an alternative theory of world society? The market/exchange definition implies that globalization can only be a *quantitative* intensification of a 500-year-old process, whereas the production definition allows for quantitative change to give way under globalization to *qualitative* change. Wallerstein and others from the world system paradigm, by virtue of their definition of capitalism, conceive of globalization not as something qualitatively new in the world but as a mere quantitative intensification of connections and systemic exchanges dating back to circa 1500. This is why Wallerstein, Arrighi and others from the paradigm insist that worldwide changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries can be adequately characterized as simply more of the same and are dismissive of the concept of globalization.

On the other hand, Wallerstein has put forward an explanation of late 20th/early 21st-century change from the logic of world-system theory as a moment of transition in the system. In an essay titled ‘Globalization or the age of transition?’ (2000b; see also Wallerstein, 1998, 2004a: esp. Ch. 5), he analyzes the late 20th- and early 21st-century world conjuncture as a ‘moment of transformation’ in the world-system, a ‘transition in which the entire capitalist world-system will be transformed into something else’ (2000b: 250). According to this analysis, the world-economy entered a long period of stagnation circa 1970, which corresponded to the B-phase, or downswing, in the Kondratieff cycle, following an A-phase, or upswing from 1945 to 1967–73. Several of the phenomena typically identified with globalization, including rampant financial speculation in the world-economy, rising unemployment, shifts in the loci of production from high- to low-wage zones and corporate downsizing are in response to this downturn (2000b: 253). At the same time, a combination of cyclic rhythms and secular trends that define the capitalist world-system, argues Wallerstein, are hitting ‘asymptotes’. An asymptote refers to something that is self-intersecting, and in mathematics, refers to a straight line that always approaches but never meets a curve (the asymptote is the 100 percent point). Wallerstein seems to be arguing, therefore, that these cyclical and secular trends are reaching their upper-limits within the logic of the system. Wallerstein then goes on to identify three secular trends that are approaching their asymptotes and creating a structural crisis of capital accumulation in the world-system.

The first asymptote is the trend in the real wage level in the capitalist world-system as a percentage of the costs of production. The curve of the political strength of the working classes has been upward over the *longue durée*, says Wallerstein, leading capitalists to relocate given sectors of production to other zones of the world-economy where average wages are lower. Lower-wage workers, specifically, tend to be newly recruited immigrants from rural areas often entering the wage-labor market for the first time. But a significant rural sector not yet engaged in wage labor from which capitalists can continue

to draw 'is precisely what has been diminishing as a secular trend. The deruralization of the world is on a fast upward curve. It has grown continuously over 500 years, but most dramatically since 1945. It is quite possible to foresee that it will have largely disappeared in another 25 years' (2000b: 259).

The second asymptote is the trend in rising costs of material inputs to the capitalist world-system. Although this would appear to be an argument that non-renewable resources are becoming exhausted, Wallerstein actually seems to argue something different, namely that unutilized areas in which to dump waste in the world-system are drying up. Hence, waste disposal becomes a rising cost, which poses ecological limits to world accumulation: 'Eventually there are no more streams to pollute, or trees to cut down – or at least, there are no more without serious immediate consequences for the health of the biosphere' (2000b: 161). What can be done? The costs of a 'vast clean-up campaign and a vast campaign of organic renewal' would either have to be borne by governments via some form of taxes, or by the total internalization by firms of all costs. Taxing capitalists would put pressure on profit margins, as would the internalization by individual firms of their waste disposal and organic renewal costs, while taxing would be a mounting tax burden. There is no 'plausible solution for this social dilemma within the framework of a capitalist world-economy', and hence 'this is the second structural pressure on the accumulation of capital' (2000b: 161).

The third asymptote has to do with rising taxation to cover the costs of security, civil bureaucracies and social welfare, this last item often a government 'pay-off' to 'keep the class struggle within limited bounds' (2000b: 261). Popular demands for social welfare 'have been made in more and more zones of the world-system . . . with no clear limit in sight', and this 'has meant, has had to mean, steadily rising tax rates in virtually every country, with at most occasional slight reductions' (2000b: 261). However, such redistributive taxes interfere with the possibility of accumulating capital, representing the third structural pressure on such accumulation.

Meanwhile, working classes have lost faith in the ability of anti-systemic movements (Communists, social democrats and national liberation movements) due to the inability of these movements where they took power in the post-Second World War period to fulfill their promises. As a result there has been a massive disinvestment in state structures, as the masses of the world, 'having turned towards the states as agents of transformation, have now returned to a more fundamental skepticism about the ability of the states to promote transformation, or even to maintain social order', with a resulting 'world-wide upsurge of anti-statism' (2000b: 263). 'Thus', argues Wallerstein in conclusion,

. . . at the very moment that capitalists are faced with three structural squeezes on the global rates of profit, and hence on their ability to accumulation capital, they find that the states are less able than before to help them resolve these dilemmas. Thus it is that we can say that the capitalist world-economy has now entered its terminal crisis, a crisis that may last up to fifty years. . . . We can think of this long transition as one enormous political struggle between two large camps: the camp of all those who wish to retain the privileges of the existing inegalitarian system, albeit in different forms, perhaps vastly different forms; and the camp of all those who would like to see the creation of a new historical system that will be significantly more democratic and more egalitarian. . . . The outcome of the political struggle will be in part the result of who is able to mobilize whom, but it will also be in large part the degree to which who is able to analyze better what is going on what are the real historical alternatives with which we are collectively faced. (2000b: 263, 265)

There are a number of problems in this argument, including a certain inconsistency between its propositions and empirical reality in the late 20th and early 21st century. Anti-statism, it could be argued, has resulted not so much from a withdrawal of working classes from the state but as a result of capitalist dismantling of public sectors, welfare systems and state regulation of the economy. And as Marx and others have analyzed, capitalists constantly seek to replace the human labor element with machinery and technology in the production process, which expands a reserve army of labor and drives down wages. This is a well-documented cyclical process in world capitalism. The secular trend toward rising structural unemployment in the global economy – at the turn of the century some one-third of the economically active population worldwide was un- or underemployed (ILO, 1997) – provides a vast pool of cheap labor that offsets the dwindling supply of rural migrants. Under globalization the wage level has gone down in the core simultaneous to the shift in sectors of production to lower-wage zones. Despite these problems, Wallerstein's thesis on the terminal crisis of the system can be said to provide an explanation for social change in the age of globalization consistent with his own world-system theory.

## **Globalization and world-system theory: Earlier criticisms and recent debates**

The world-systems paradigm has faced criticism on a number of fronts since the 1970s, and more recently, from competing approaches to globalization. Early critics are numerous (but see, inter alia, Aronowitz, 1981; Brenner, 1977; Fitzgerald, 1981; Skocpol, 1977; Smith, 1986; Zeitlin, 1984; Zolberg, 1981). These charged the paradigm with a reified concept of the world-system, with teleology and circular reasoning, with neglecting historically specific development at the national level, as well as political contingency, autonomy and agency, and with conflating class and status group and highlighting stratification analysis at the expense of class analysis (So, 1990: 220).

Examples of reification, teleology and circular reasoning can certainly be found throughout Wallerstein's *Modern World-System* trilogy and other writings. Wallerstein attributes the distinct character of early European states to each country's distinct role in the international division of labor: 'The different roles [in the division of labor] led to different class structures which led to different politics' (1974: 157). But how did these different roles come about historically? In what appears to be a clear case of circular reasoning, Wallerstein in turn explains this by different class structures and different politics. Wallerstein often refers to states, and even to the world-system, as if they were conscious macro-agents. 'The Netherlands Revolution liberated a force that could sustain the world-system as a system over some difficult years of adjustment, until the English (and the French) were ready to take the steps necessary for its definitive consolidation' (1974: 210), he writes. Passages such as these, suggesting some conscious design on the part of countries as systemic agents, or some teleological necessity for social forces to sustain the world-system, are not uncommon. Skocpol has charged in this regard that there is an underlying functionalist bias in explaining the dynamics of the system over historical time where changes in parts are understood as necessary to the continual operation and reproduction of the whole system (Skocpol, 1977).

In the same vein, Zeitlin charges that Wallerstein ‘inverts the real historical process in which these global relations were created. The world economy itself, so it is said, apparently “assigned specific economic roles” within itself to its own “zones,” and these “zones” then “used different modes of labor control” and so forth’ (Zeitlin, 1984: 227). In other words, historical events are used to explain the origins of the world-system, but these historical events had to happen because the world-system required them to happen, *ergo*, the world-system originated because of its consequences. Smith refers to this as the ‘tyranny of the whole’, which assumes that because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, the parts lead no significant existence separate from the whole, but operate simply in functionally specific ways entirely as a consequence of their place in the world-system (Smith, 1986). Events, processes, group-identities, class and state projects are explained by reference to the system as a whole. Actions would seem to become reflexes of systemic imperatives.

It is also important to note that Wallerstein’s and the Fernand Braudel Center’s pioneering theoretical system has spawned a huge and constantly expanding literature *within* the world-system paradigm involving differences and many fruitful debates among the leading senior scholars associated with the paradigm, such as the late Giovanni Arrighi, Terry Boswell and Andre Gunder Frank, as well Christopher Chase-Dunn and Samir Amin. I cannot take up these *intra*-paradigm debates here, other than a few examples. Chase-Dunn and Hall (1996) have developed a comparative and evolutionary world-systems perspective that shows that pre-agrarian societies were not necessarily the culturally homogeneous mini-systems as they are characterized by Wallerstein but ‘multicultural world-systems with their own complex networks of exchange’. Chase-Dunn (1998), among others, argues that the labor of slaves and serfs in the modern capitalist world-system was significantly commodified so as to characterize them as proletarians, and hence as internal to capitalist *production* (not just exchange) relations in the world-system. Frank and Gills (1996) claim that the capitalist world-system dates back not 500 but 5000 years, and Arrighi (1994) places its origin with the 12th- and 13th-century Italian city states, which he considers the first ‘hegemons’.

Of more concern to me here are recent critiques of world-system theory from other theoretical approaches to globalization, and in particular from the global capitalism approach with which I am closely identified (see e.g. Robinson, 1998, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008),<sup>2</sup> and which argues that globalization represents a qualitatively new epoch in the ongoing and open-ended evolution of world capitalism. For world-systemists, two key questions are: (1) Is there something new going on in the world of the late 20th and early 21st centuries that cannot be adequately explained by world-system theory? (2) In the face of late 20th- and early 21st-century changes, does the system of world capitalism still exhibit the essential structural characteristics, cyclical patterns and secular trends postulated by the theory?

The biggest challenge facing world-system theory in this regard is accounting for transnational processes unfolding under globalization, particularly the construction of a new global production and financial system that is clearly transnational rather than international in nature. Internationalization is seen as involving the extension of economic activities across national boundaries and is essentially a *quantitative* process which leads to a more extensive geographical pattern of economic activity, whereas transnationalization

is *qualitatively* different from internationalization processes, involving not merely the geographical extension of economic activity across national boundaries but also the transnational fragmentation of these activities and their *functional integration* (Dicken, 2003; Robinson, 2004a). Alongside the emergence since the 1970s of globally mobile transnational capital increasingly divorced from specific countries, an integrated global financial system has replaced the national bank-dominated financial systems of earlier periods. Global financial flows since the 1980s are qualitatively different from earlier international financial flows. Values cross borders seamlessly as the move swiftly – often instantaneously – through these new transnational or global circuits of accumulation. National economies have been dismantled and then reconstituted as component elements of this new global production and financial system, which is a qualitatively distinct world economic structure from that of previous epochs, when each country had a distinct national economy linked externally to one another through trade and financial flows. This is a shift from international market integration to global productive integration. This conception of changes in recent decades is incompatible with world-systems theory, which sees the world-economy as broken down into distinct and competing national economies bringing together national capitalists and firms with their respective states that the theory posits as immanent and immutable to the capitalist world-system.

I along with a number of other theorists (Cox, 1987; Hoogvelt, 1997; Robinson, 1998, 2003, 2002a) have argued that the production and labor processes that are central to the conceptual distinction world-system theory makes among core, semi-periphery and periphery have undergone qualitative transformations and transnationalization in recent decades that render a geographical or territorial conception of core and periphery increasingly outdated. As noted earlier, central to Wallerstein's construct is the international division of labor, which he terms an *axial* division of labor. What he means by this is that core-like (e.g. high-wage, high-technology, high-productivity) and peripheral-like (e.g. low-wage, low-technology, low-productivity) production processes are bound together in the world-system and that peripheral production-like processes are concentrated in a geographic periphery and core-like processes are concentrated in a geographic core. As we saw earlier, world-system theory insists that this axial division of labor *must* take not only a geographical/territorial form, but specifically a *nation-state* form, so that core and periphery by definition are spatially distinct zones in the world-system. These zones are coterminous with particular nation-states characterized as core, semi-peripheral and peripheral states. Wallerstein is very clear in affirming that lower and upper strata in the world take the form of a hierarchy of territorial states. 'States can be viewed . . . as a sort of upward or downward "mobility" of the state as an entity, a movement measured in relation to other states within the framework of the interstate system', he argues (1980: 179). The core-periphery divide as a territorial and specifically as a nation-state divide is *immanent* to world capitalism and an *immutable* structure from the world-systems perspective.

I and others have argued that there is a changing relationship between production and geography – between space and accumulation – under globalization that Wallerstein is ignoring. The social configuration of space is less territorial and certainly the nation-state is only one possible historical form of configuring social space. The *transnational* geographic dispersal of the full range of world production processes suggests that core and peripheral production and accumulation processes correspond increasingly less to the

logic of geography and to specific territorially defined nation-states (Castells, 1996; Cox, 1987; Hoogvelt, 1997; Robinson, 1996b, 1998, 2002a, 2003, 2008). While in earlier epochs core and periphery referred to specific territories and the populations that resided therein, under globalization these concepts need to be reconceived in social rather than geographic terms, as social location in a global society is increasingly stratified less along national and territorial lines than across transnational social lines. Cox argues:

While it is relatively simple to describe [the] characteristics of core and periphery, it is more difficult to give the terms *core* and *periphery* generalizable concrete points of reference. The terms originated with a geographical connotation that they still retain. The core was located in the leading industrial countries and the periphery in the economically less developed countries. Yet it is quite possible to note shifts in industrial leadership within the geographical core . . . as well as instances of conventional core-type industry in certain less-developed countries. Similarly, within so-called core countries, there exists a core–periphery division within industries between the principal centers of innovation and development, on the one hand, and regional or provincial production units of a lower technological level, on the other. Geographical shifts of the core have also taken place within countries. . . . Although the functional characteristics of core and periphery remain analytically valid, their association with specific geographical positions must be considered to be a matter of perhaps transitory circumstances, not of immutable destiny. (Cox, 1987)

I have argued, further, that ‘nation-state centrism’ and ‘state structuralism’ in world-system theory impede the theory’s ability to conceptualize the dynamics of globalization (Robinson, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2001, 2002a, 2004a, 2008). World-system theory takes a national/international approach that views the system of nation-states as an immutable structural feature of the larger world or inter-state system, in contrast to *transnational* or *global* approaches that focus on how the system of nation-states and national economies, and so on, are becoming transcended by transnational social forces and institutions grounded in a global system rather than the inter-state system. The world-system is assumed still to be characterized in the current epoch by competitive nation-states as the appropriate subunits of analysis and the competitive inter-state system is an immutable feature. The key actors are rival states operating in an inter-state system, each in competition with all the others to move up the hierarchy of states or preserve their position, so that transnational social relations become subsumed under inter-state relations. This position is justified with the presumption that 21st-century world capitalism is characterized by national capitalist classes and states that defend the competing interests of these respective national groups against each other. For most world-system analysts, world political dynamics are to be explained by competition and rivalry among these national status groups and their national states. States ‘are by definition rivals, bearing responsibility to different sets of rival firms’, Wallerstein continues to insist (2004a: 56), despite mounting evidence that the transnationalization of capital has advanced considerably so that rival firms tend to be global rather than national corporations housed in particular states (see e.g. Barnett and Cavanagh, 1995; Robinson, 2004a; Sklair, 2000).

There are emerging new relationships between the state, classes, institutions and accumulation under globalization that cannot be so easily framed in the territorial, geographical and statist terms posited by world-systems theory. Some globalization theories see the rise

of such supranational political and planning agencies as the Trilateral Commission, the World Economic Forum, the Group of Seven – and now the Group of 22, and the World Trade Organization – as signs of an incipient transnational or global governance structure (see, *inter alia*, Held et al., 1999). I have theorized the emergence of a transnational state apparatus (Robinson, 2001, 2004a). For Wallerstein (2000b: 255) and most world-system analysts (see e.g. Arrighi and Silver, 1999), these agencies are instruments of a US effort to maintain its worldwide political control over potential rivals for hegemony.

The world-system paradigm's approach to hegemony is that a particular hegemonic country's *national* products outcompete the products of other countries (see, *inter alia*, Wallerstein, 1980: 38–9). Hegemony in the world-system paradigm, as in much international relations theory, is predicated on this nation-state centric approach that associates hegemony in the world-system with the dominance of a particular country. Most world-system analysts, including Wallerstein (2003), see a new round of inter-core rivalry over which state will be the next hegemon in the wake of declining US hegemony. But in the age of globalized production one is hard-pressed to find evidence that supports the notion of each country producing and trading its own national products. The problem of state-centric and nation-state centric analysis is that it does not allow us to conceive of an emergent global hegemony in terms of transnational classes and groups not bound to any state or to specific geographies. An alternative view of the struggle for hegemony in the global system sees it not in terms of a dispute *among* nation-states but in terms of transnational social and class groups and their struggles to develop hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects. I have criticized this nation-state conception of hegemony (Robinson, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2008), arguing instead that the 21st century is witness to emergent forms of transnational hegemony by social groups operating through multiple states, through intra- and supranational organizations, states and other institutions.

Nation-state centric analyses of inter- and transnational relations fail to appreciate the integrative character of global capitalism. Both Sklair (2000) and I (Robinson, 1996b, 2001) have suggested that a new transnational capitalist class (TCC) has emerged out of fractions of national capitalist classes that have inter-penetrated through numerous mechanisms with such fractions from other countries. The TCC is grounded in the global rather than the inter-state system. It has been attempting to position itself as a new ruling class group worldwide since the 1980s and to bring some coherence and stability to its rule through an emergent TNS apparatus (Robinson, 2004a, 2004b). In distinction to the world-system perspective, the world politics of this would-be global ruling class is not driven, as it was for national ruling classes, by the flux of shifting national rivalries and alliances played out through the inter-state system but by the new global social structure of accumulation.

## Concluding comments

I set out here to review and appraise Wallerstein's *œuvre*, to identify the explanatory purchase of this theoretical system to our understanding of contemporary 21st-century world affairs, specifically, to systemic-level transformations coming into focus one decade into the new century, and to contrast, however briefly, world-systems and global capitalism explanations for the current epoch of transformations. Wallerstein's *œuvre* is

vast, and he continues to write prolifically. No one who wishes to engage in macrosocial theory or analysis can avoid dealing with the sweep of his scholarship.

If one had to identify two overarching or 'signature' contributions of Wallerstein (and his colleagues) they would surely be: the reinvigoration of historical sociology; and the elaboration of a theoretical system that accounts for the division of world capitalism, seen from the broad sweep of its inception and development, into developed and underdeveloped regions as polar opposites of a single unity. By drawing our attention to the historical and the large-scale nature of the processes identified with world capitalism, Wallerstein has made an enormous contribution to the way we think about and study the contemporary world. The long historic view, one that identifies enduring cycles, tendencies, structures and the patterns of structural change – one of the hallmarks of world-system scholarship – is essential if we are to understand the current period of globalization and of global crisis.

On the other hand, as I have alluded to in this article and have taken up at considerable length elsewhere, neither the emergent transnational stage in world capitalism nor the current crisis of global capitalism can, in my view, be understood through the lens of the nation-state centric thinking and the state-structuralism that is immanent to Wallerstein's construct. This is not to say that the nation-state is no longer important or is disappearing – far from it – but that the system of nation-states as discrete interacting units, the inter-state system, is no longer the fundamental organizing principle of world capitalism and the principal institutional framework that shapes global social forces or that explains world political dynamics. The nation-state/inter-state centric perspective bound up with world-system theory – and for that matter with many other approaches to world capitalism and world order – has become a blinder that limits and increasingly distorts our understanding of contemporary global capitalism and its crisis.

Yet whatever view is afforded by alternative perspectives, such as the global capitalism approach, we must recognize that this view would not be possible were we not standing on the shoulders of giants, top among them Immanuel Wallerstein.

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## Notes

1. See the Center's home page: [fbc.binghamton.edu/fbcintel.htm](http://fbc.binghamton.edu/fbcintel.htm).
2. Globalization in my own theoretical construct constitutes a qualitatively new epoch in the ongoing evolution of world capitalism, marked by a number of fundamental shifts in the capitalist system. These shifts include: (1) the transition from a *world-economy*, or national circuits of accumulation in an integrated international market, to a *global economy*, or globalized circuits of accumulation; (2) the *rise of truly transnational capital* and the integration of every country into a new global production and financial system; (3) the appearance of a new *transnational capitalist class*, a class group grounded in new global circuits of accumulation rather than national circuits; (4) the rise of a *transnational state*, a loose network comprised of supra-national political and economic institutions and of national state apparatuses that have been penetrated and transformed by transnational forces; and (5) the appearance of *novel transnational relations of inequality and domination* in global society. These propositions are laid out most succinctly in Robinson (2004a, 2008: Ch. 1) and are fundamentally at odds with the constitutive assumptions of world-systems theory.

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