

The Culture of World-Systems Analysis

Frank van Doorn

EDER 655.09

Professor : Dr. M. Zachariah

University of Calgary

July 20, 2005

Culture is human existence. Quite possibly without culture *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* would have not endured and become the dominant species on this earth, whether we stay that way or become extinct like our favourite glamorized prehistorians, the dinosaurs, is a whole other matter. Aside from the obvious biological differences of individual species, we can describe the behavior of other creatures in terms of economics; whether they are subsistence primary resource users, say grazers of grass and eaters of leaves, or whether they are tool-users as in the case of Galapagos Island finches using cactus thorns to dig out insects from crevices and chimpanzees using slender twigs to tease out termites from their mounds, or whether they are a supremely organized pack of wolves on a hunt in the Arctic and Orcas in the seas. We can further describe animals in terms of politics; a male dominated harem of Sea Lions or a maternalistic group such as a pride of African Lions or the cooperative organisation of Cape Hunting Dogs.

We call certain humans rogues, some individuals a lone wolf and others peacocks where we apply behaviors and nuances of animal behavior to ourselves but not once do we see in nature these ideas; quasi-monopolies, semi-free markets, capitalist, socialist, peripheral and semi-peripheral production, feudalism, despotism, dictatorial socialism, primitive society or “Third World”. These terms we save only for ourselves and our descriptions of our very complicated ways of doing things, in effect our culture, and as such are biased heavily towards what we know, and believe we know, of ourselves. If we say that culture is the accumulation of our experiences, ever changing and evolving over time, our way of manipulating and then expressing these experiences in a symbolic way, whether through speech, ritual or writing then we can say that culture is what really separates us from the other species we share this planet with as it is with culture that we define ourselves. Immanuel Wallerstein’s book, “World-Systems Analysis , An Introduction”, is his effort at briefly describing ourselves, our world and our development within it.

Wallerstein contends that world-systems analysts “... have said that it is important to look anew not only at how the world in which we live works but also how we have come to think about this world. (p. xi). ” His explanation of our development, through world-systems analysis, from prehistory through the earliest of times of our recorded history to the present is his version of a systems theory explaining why we developed, or ended up, the way we did. It is a method to more clearly explain, with as little bias and as multi-disciplined as possible, the

movement of our history culminating in the impact of huge economic growth of the capitalist west and terrible events like the 9/11 bombing, their interrelatedness and their attachment to the larger questions of globalisation and terrorism in our present day. His stated purpose of this book was to “... explain in one place what I consider its premises and principles, to give a holistic view of a perspective that claims to be a call for a holistic historical social science (xi).” To convincingly do this in five chapters and in little under a hundred pages is astonishing.

In the first chapter of this introductory book Wallerstein explains the historical origins of his World-Systems Analysis beginning with the Enlightenment and French Revolution periods where there were methods developed to explain the “history of “man” and how in the end they tell only partial biased versions of the story. His explanations regarding the breakup, or “divorce” of the once universal disciplines of higher study and how this has led to many more different forms of bias to appear within these studies based on the demands of special interests such as business, governments, societies, minorities, liberals, conservatives, radicals and reactionaries who wanted a better understanding of their adversaries and themselves. Thus, over time a myriad of disciplines had evolved: history, economics, political science and sociology, then adding anthropology, Orientalism and ethnography. He then goes on to explain the great points in history where changes in these forms of thought began to experience some dissonance.

The global circumstances had greatly changed after the Second World War. By 1945 much was different in the world but essentially productive processes remained the same, power, both political and economic, became highly centralized and formalised. The distinctions and relationships, between “developed” and “undeveloped” nations became a topic of discussion and concern. Between 1945 and 1970 several means of describing these relationships were brought to the fore. Competing views as to what “development” was, as well as how it would work, fought for acceptance among those in positions of power. Basic beliefs regarding capitalism and socialism held sway but were ill understood as they were studied in so many different ways by so many different disciplines, both empirically and anecdotally. Biases of all forms and varieties in relation to development and growth systems were discussed and argued over at length in Universities all around the world. Wallerstein speaks of Fernand Braudel of the Annales group and his “... intellectual and institutional attack on the traditional isolation of the social science disciplines from each other (p.15).” From here Wallerstein further develops his “holistic” theory

of World-Systems Analysis; of the economic “unequal exchange” relationships between the core, semi-periphery and periphery producers and consumers; of production and consumption; surplus-value and surplus-labour, their alienation and subsequent exploitation. And here Wallerstein tips his hand as he is also biased. He speaks from a very definite Marxist point of view, but not the Marxism of our Cold War textbooks, that is revisionist Leninism, but rather from a more orthodox, or original, form. He defends his work and those of his world-systems analysis compatriots very vigorously and effectively. Actually, Wallerstein’s work is a more modern extension of what Marx intended in the 1850’s. Indeed it could be said that his work is a more palatable modern version, but then it could also be said that he is speaking to a more enlightened populace than Marx ever did and perhaps more is being heard than ever before. In as much as it is virtually impossible to be unbiased, Wallerstein does his best, and makes no apologies, to at least stay true to his course throughout the book.

In the second chapter, “The Modern World-System as a Capitalist World-Economy: Production, Surplus-value, and Polarization”, Wallerstein lays out the structure of the “modern capitalist world-economy”. He describes how it operates, what its goals are and why it continues to operate as if no-one is at the controls and it is getting bigger and more chaotic in the “periphery” and more intense at the “core”, similar to a strengthening hurricane threatening to make us all underneath feel its power, from those in the fleeting relative calm of the eye to the driving rain and blasting winds of the outer rim. He describes inherent contradictions of the capitalist in thought and in action. For example Wallerstein’s idea that a true free market is a myth would seem a shock to most capitalists. They all frequently, if not all the time, say what they wish is a free market. But what they do not say is that with a free market is a couple of other assumptions, namely that of a very large number of buyers and a very large number of sellers. All information would be true and extensive and the consumer would then be able to see exactly what producer costs are and then could presumably make useful choices which would undercut the profit margin of sellers to such a degree that they would not participate in the market as there would be in the end no incentive, no profit in it, implying the collapse of the free-market and presumably restoring the barter system.

What the capitalist would then prefer, Wallerstein goes on to say, is a semi-free market where the profit margin is greater and the basic need of capitalism, the endless accumulation of

capital, then could be met with some greater degree of success for the seller at the expense of the buyer. Monopoly is what the capitalist really wants, "...for then they can create a relatively wide margin between the costs of production and the sales price, and thus realize high rates of profit (p. 26)." Of course this cannot be, but "quasi-monopolies" are relatively easy to build and generate enough profit for the capitalist to be highly encouraged to maintain and continue the business particularly when supported by governments through patents offices, subsidies and tax benefits. One would also think that capitalists would say, as they often do, apparently without thinking, that the more businesses the better, but that is not true. The more business failures the better as that aids in the concentration of capital as money flows from the losers to the winners. Wallerstein exposes all these contradictions quite plainly and easily. He goes on to explain other forms of income that may be created by the worker and discusses the ramifications regarding the workers' relative degree of reliance on wage income alone as opposed to other forms. The more dependent on wage-income the more easily controlled they are and the more anxious the worker obviously would be and so their demands of job security and good pay are high, where as in a peripheral state wage income may be low but there are other forms of income such as other family members and subsistence activity to augment the lower wage income.

The issue of universality is also taken to task by Wallerstein as he goes on to say that while we all would like universality, be equally admitted into the political system and equal before the law, we all know this is not so for all people within our own country let alone elsewhere in the world. At some point we are all a minority and at some point discrimination, in all its forms, puts people on the fringes of power and decision making.

Chapter three "The Rise of the States-System: Sovereign Nation-States, Colonies, and the Interstate System" is Wallerstein's discussion of the development of the modern nation state from the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 where the state was first recognised as a single entity as opposed to just fealty shown to a feudal lord no matter where his, or his subjects, real residence. The flow from traditional arbitrary power to effective power of a monarch was slow if at all, but what did develop was the greater centralised authority of the state after the fall of the monarchs with the French Revolution of 1789 and the creation of elected positions within a nation-state of even greater power than any monarch ever had. As much as the entrepreneurs didn't like government they also recognised its necessity. Government now had the power to clearly set the

rules concerning business practice, enshrine private property as an institution, enable trade with foreign governments and determine which costs that a firm will externalize without penalty and how much of a firm the government will internalize for the betterment of society. Wallerstein goes on to describe the idea that a state ruled by a dictator and/or ruled ruthlessly is not a strong nation state but a weak one that must apply all its power to maintain itself rather than make life truly better for its businesses and its people and thereby rule more by effect than affect. And again a contradiction appears that while firms would rather be without states, they are needed. As Wallerstein says "... this is best achieved by an ever shifting set of political and cultural dominance's within which capitalist firms maneuver, obtaining their support from the states but seeking to escape their dominance (p. 59)."

The fourth chapter of Wallerstein's book "Creation of a Geoculture: Ideologies, Social Movements, Social Science" reveals the development of the ideas of conservatism, liberalism and radicalism. The basic idea that the centrist values of liberalism came to the fore was a phenomenon based on the idea that some slow change was better than either no change or too rapid of one. This thought lasted until 1968 as Wallerstein writes, "The triumph of liberalism in defining the geoculture of the modern world-system in the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth was made possible institutionally by the development of the legal underpinnings of the liberal state (p. 67)." The social movements begun in France in 1789 and continued during the revolutions of 1848 continued their development right through this period. and these social changes were accepted and made the population feel inclusive in the ideals of nationalism, eventually imperialism, and the workers saw for themselves and their families an opportunity to get better conditions both at home and at work. But as Wallerstein points out at the same time as the state was becoming more inclusive in its definition of the citizen it was also becoming more selective, that is discriminatory about who should be a citizen, however by around 1968 all the social movements had made headway and citizenship was open to nearly all, but in very few cases did they change any society.

In the fifth and final chapter "Modern World-System in Crisis: Bifurcation, Chaos, and Choices", Wallerstein describes the tensions between the thesis and the antithesis and its final boiling over in 1968. Through all the years of growth and liberalism a degree of malaise began to

fall on people everywhere. For all the successes, few of the real fundamental reforms, only a few of the real desires of the people for a perfectible, all inclusive, sustainable and livable society came to pass. Even among capitalists was a sense of foreboding as the “profit-squeeze” began to be felt everywhere, coupled with a long standing recession in the business cycle. The liberals had failed and it was now the time of the conservatives led in the 1980’s by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Developmentalism was replaced by globalisation exposing the world “... to the free flow of goods and capital (but not labour) (p. 87).” Financial speculation profits rather than hard production profits, making the economy fluctuate more, became the order of the day. Today we have uncertainty in our governments and their policies, economic fluctuations are rampant, powerful nations like the United States and Britain are using their military power in far off lands, in a sense externalizing the cost of the angst built up from the uncertainty of the citizenry within, for purely realpolitic aspirations. Wallerstein refers to our present day as a “world-system in crisis” and steers us into two choices that between liberty of the majority, where a tyranny of the majority can hold sway, or liberty of the minority where deciding on paths among many will be very fractious and difficult especially when it must be made clear that we are all equal in all things otherwise it will not function. He goes on to say that one further choice will need to be taken that between a hierarchical or egalitarian system. In either case the world will change. But he leaves us with a vote of confidence, we know more now, we know about the issues that face us and we know what we already have achieved, what has failed and although the switch from one system to another can be difficult I sense his general optimism for the people.

Immanuel Wallerstein’s book, ‘World-Systems Analysis, An Introduction’, has clearly demonstrated the mechanisms by which our present world-system functions at this moment. The capitalist world-system is in trouble, here in Canada as well as in the rest of the world. I am familiar with the general history of the time periods he illustrates, however I have even myself had to know them divided into a number of individual disciplines: economics, politics, history, geography and anthropology. I have personally struggled with how to reconcile, or put together again these seemingly disparate parts to create a holistic world view I could come to grips with myself as well as impart to my students in my classes. There has always been a hint of more, out there, somewhere but it was very difficult to find. Wallerstein’s book has been like manna to

me, I have seemingly wandered in a wilderness of confusion and have only sought to make sense of it all by myself. It is wonderful and somewhat shocking to read things I have felt and heard and had somewhat conjured up myself, but to have it in less than 100 pages clearly and succinctly written is at once exhilarating as much as it is somewhat frightening. This has put into perspective for me what my mandated curriculum has been all about all these years. Though Wallerstein made no direct application of his world-systems analysis to education, it is easily seen that through time education has been used as a vehicle of promotion of certain state and now global systems. The type of education, strictly for employment and insertion of the narrowly educated into the increasingly unstable capitalist world-system or for a more global social justice consciousness, is now a part of the analysis and educational decisions, to go one way or the other, may very well play a very significant part towards the solutions, or the exacerbation, of the chaos of today's world and on into the future. In less than one hundred pages, Wallerstein has given me back the culture that went missing from the split disciplines, for when the disciplines are realigned with one another it is the sum of them that becomes our culture once again.