



## DÜNYA-SİSTEMLERİ KURAMI İLE DÜNYAYI YORUMLAMAK: SOSYAL BİLİMDE ALTERNATİF BİR YAKLAŞIM OLARAK KURAMIN ÖNEMİ, GÜÇLÜ VE ZAYIF YÖNLERİ

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### Öz

Toplumsal sorunların çözümlenmesinde sosyal bilim yöntemleri ile elde edilen bulguların öneminin fark edilişi sosyal kuramın gelişimini sağlamıştır. Bu daimi gelişimin vazgeçilmez unsurlarından biri, dünyayı sosyal, ekonomik ve kültürel özellikler ile tanımlanan bütün bir yapısal sistem olarak analiz etmek olmuştur.

Immanuel Wallerstein'in öncülüğünü yaptığı dünya sistemleri kuramı, bu tür bir analizi, yaygın olarak bilinen klasik kuramlardan farklı bir bakış açısıyla gerçekleştirilmeyi amaçlayarak, sosyal bilim dünyasında önemli bir yer edinmiştir. Kuram, kırk yılı aşkın bir süredir, toplumsal dünyayı anlamaya ve açıklamaya yönelik birçok çalışmaya hem kuramsal hem de yöntem bilimsel temeller sağlamıştır.

Bu makale Dünya-Sistemleri Kuramının sosyal çalışmalara farklı bir yaklaşım olarak önemini, onun kuramsal ve yöntem bilimsel açıdan gücünü ve zayıf yönlerini dikkate alarak açıklamaktadır. Tarihsel olaylardan kapitalist sistemlere ve küresel tanımlar ile küreselleşmeye kadar geniş bir yelpazeye yayılan tartışmaları kapsayan içeriğiyle mevcut makale, kırk yıllık verimli bilimsel tartışmaları katalize ederek dünya üzerindeki toplumsal problemleri farklı bir yaklaşımla anlama çabasındaki yeni araştırma fikirlerinin gelişimine katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dünya Sistemleri, Kapitalist Ekonomi, Küreselleşme, Bağımlılık Kuramı, Tarihsel Sosyal Bilimler, Sosyoloji.

## INTERPRETING THE WORLD WITH WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY: ITS SIGNIFICANCE, STRENGTHS, AND WEAKNESSES AS AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

### Abstract

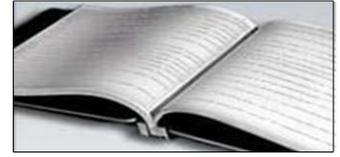
The recognition of the significance of the findings which is obtained by social scientific methods in analysing social problems has led to develop social theory. One of the most indispensable parts of this continuing development has been to analyse the world as a complete structural system defined by social, economic, and cultural features.

World-systems theory, which was pioneered by Immanuel Wallerstein, has attained a significant place in the world of social science by aiming to achieve such an analysis from a unique perspective that differs from widely known classical theories. For over forty years, it has provided both theoretical and methodological grounds to a great deal of studies aiming to understand and explain the social world.

This article explains the significance of World-Systems Theory as an alternative approach to social studies, with a consideration of its theoretical and methodological strengths and weaknesses. With a content that covers a wide range of discussions from historical occurrences to capitalist systems, and to globalisation with global identifications, the current article aims to catalyse forty-year-old fruitful scientific discussions, and thus nourish the development of new research ideas which aim at understanding social problems over the world with a distinctive approach.

**Key Words:** World-Systems, Capitalist Economy, Globalisation, Dependency Theory, Historical Social Sciences, Sociology.

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## AN INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Since the first publication of Immanuel Wallerstein's first volume of *the Modern World-System* (1974a), World-Systems Theory (WST) has been attracting a lot of interest. As Hechter (1975: 8) states in his review of the book, it has been excited many scholars and caught their imagination; no doubt, it has been infuriating others. Therefore, there has been a huge amount of literature that both analyses and criticises the theory. The growing body of this literature, shaped by critiques and appraisals over the past four decades, can be seen through the boldness of the theory in creating an understanding of the modern world in which we live, by reinvigorating historical analysis as a kind of extraordinary historical sociology (Aronowitz, 198: 503). Theoretically speaking, this means that the object of the social inquiry in the contemporary world becomes "the historical systems" – instead of commonly used dominant social science categories, such as class or nation-state, which are, indeed, already located in these historical systems (Wallerstein, 2004: 6-7). This, exactly, is a proposition to change the appropriate unit of analysis; thus, as Scokpol (1974: 1075) states at the opening paragraph of her critical article, to achieve a conceptual break with modernisation theories or developmentalism.

Given this brief background, WST can be readily grasped with Wallerstein's own words: "it is an attempt to combine coherently concern with the unit of analysis, concern with the social temporalities, and concern with the barriers that had been erected between different social science disciplines" (Wallerstein, 2004: x). It can also be extracted from the definition that WST attempts to combine several already-existing radical traditions, which are to some extent in direct opposition to the dominant investigative ways of social sciences, particularly of those that are influenced negatively by positivist or functionalist perspectives. These are, following Goldfrank's (2015:160) categorisation and based on Wallerstein's own account: German Historical Economy, the Annales School, and Marxism.

Firstly, German Historical Economy Perspective, particularly the imprints of Max Weber can be readily noticed in *The Modern World-System* (1974a) and historical analysis of the World-Systems theorists. Although their analysis is markedly different from his own, Weber's account on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the Western History has been an influential reference. In *The Modern World System*, for instance, this account is widely discussed (Wallerstein, 1974a: 57-61). Additionally, Weber's concept of status-group is used as one of the main institutions of the modern world in which the collection of intertwined institutions set up the system (Wallerstein, 2004: 24-25). Furthermore, in addition to Weber, Karl Polanyi can be mentioned as another significant figure from this tradition. His main contribution to WST are his types of social economy: reciprocal, redistributive, and market, which became: mini-systems, world empires, and world economies, in WST (Wallerstein, 2004: 17; Goldfrank, 2015: 161).

Secondly, the influence of the Annales School on WST is mostly at the methodological level (Goldfrank, 2015: 163). The idea of total-history and long-term generalisation of historical phenomena against the idiographic and empiricist historiography, and particularly Frank Braudel's endeavour to attack the traditional divergence of social science disciplines from each other, constitute as the intellectual background for World-System theorists' historical analyses, which shall be discussed in the following part of this article.



Finally, among these traditions, the most controversial one may be Marxism. If we follow once again Goldfrank's (2015: 163) categorisation, Marxist concerns such as social conflict, totality, transition of social forms, capitalism as a system, and dialectical sense of notion can be seen in WST (Goldfrank, 2015: 163). In this respect, it should also be noted that Prebisch's and his colleagues' Dependency Theory, which heavily influenced WST, established one of its crucial concepts: core-periphery relation, is also a Marxist or Neo-Marxist tendency.

Overall, other than the three main traditions noted, there are many different works that have influenced WST and contributed to its establishment. For example, Hier, (2001) in his intriguing article, argues that an American sociologist Oliver Cox is the real founder of the WST, rather than Immanuel Wallerstein, who he believes to be the senior developer of the theory. Cox studied the origin, structure and development of capitalism as a world system: a single economic unit unequally stratified along geographical lines – a long time ago before Wallerstein – but due to the limited nature of this article, it is not possible to explore this further.

Therefore, accepting, as Hier posits, Wallerstein's senior developer position, and dismissing discussions on the foundational accounts of WST, this article approaches WST from Wallerstein's stance, aiming to assess its significance, strengths, and weaknesses as an alternative approach to the dominant investigative ways of social sciences in order to understand social problems. Therefore, throughout the current article, the main focus is on Wallerstein's works, based on his two explanatory books: *The Modern World-System* (1974a), *World-System Analysis* (2004), and several articles and their renowned critiques.

With this focus, first, the position of WST in the debates on social sciences will be discussed in the next section of the current article. This will provide an understanding of the significance of the theory in terms of social science methodology, as well as indicate its historical shortcomings in constructing its own methodology. Then, second, in the following section, in order to elucidate the theory further, a more detailed account of the theory with explanations of its main concepts will be given. This will also help us to evaluate the adequacy of WST's historical formulations. Following these explanations and evaluations, in the third section of the article, World-Systems Theorists' view on the current world system will be assessed, focusing its theoretical position in comparison to another significant the concept in current social theory: The globalisation. The article will then conclude with a final evaluation and clarification of the significance, strengths and weaknesses of the WST, with regard to its theoretical contribution in interpreting the current and the likely future condition of the world.

## 1. HISTORICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE, WHY WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY?

In the opening chapter of his introductory book, Wallerstein argues that WST sits against the conventional knowledge of dominant liberal social sciences, and so proposes a new theoretical paradigm as a sort of protest, in an attack of ways in which we perceive and interpret the world (Wallerstein, 2004: ix-xii). This thought first of all includes modernisation or developmentalism theories, that each nation or society develops by following a similar set of evolutionary stages from tradition to modernity; in other words, a historical critique of social sciences' ideal types of tradition versus modernity (Skocpol, 1997: 1075; Hier, 2001: 74; Goldfrank, 2015: 151). (Despite its oppositional nature and considerable positive impacts on



WST, Marxist view, social formation from feudalism to capitalism, it lies in the same vein.) In such an attack on these theories, WST aims to create a grand narrative to analyse the origins, interactions, and ongoing transition of the modern world as a social creation with a history (Wallerstein, 2004: 16-22). Yet, beware, it is neither a new history nor empirical knowledge (Wallerstein, 1974a: 7). It is exactly the starting point for and an early example of Historical Social Science.

According to Wallerstein, the intellectual lines of the social science disciplines are: distinctions between past and the present; the West and the Rest; and the nomothetic structural positions of the market, the state, and the civil society that limit the explorations of the historical aspects of the modern world (Wallerstein, 2003: 454). To eliminate these limitations, WST excludes the concerns of liberal social science disciplines: economics, politics, history and sociology, and suggests unidisciplinarity. In other words, it abolishes the traditional boundaries of the social sciences and their economic, politic, and socio-cultural modes of analysis (Wallerstein, 2004: 16-22). However, one problem remains, which is to find the appropriate unit of analysis for historical investigation of the modern world. The solution of this problem is the proposition of the ‘historical systems’ that become inter-state relations based World-Economy within the modern world. As the modern world cannot be defined by merely a unitary political structure such as nation-state, it includes many political units and cultural patterns, which are loosely tied together in an inter-state system. (Wallerstein, 2004: 23)

In direct opposition to dominant liberal social sciences’ methodologies, WST with a Historical Social Science proposal provides a robust scientific approach to analysing the modern world. This unidisciplinary historical approach makes it also possible to explain both the past and likely future, which shall be discussed in the fourth part of this article (Chase-Dunn and Grimes, 1995: 414). These can be seen as the main strengths of WST in terms of methodology. It is an alternative to ahistorical modernisation fallacy on the one hand, and a bridge for the gap between logical arguments of Marxist theory on capitalism and its failures of revolutionary predictions on the other.

However, there are obvious difficulties in such a Historical approach, which can be exemplified from the grand narrative of WST. For example, as noted by Skocpol (1997), despite how he tries to avoid the developmentalists’ abstract and erroneous structuration of historical evidence, Wallerstein himself, in his analysis, deals with historical patterns in terms of a preconceived model of the capitalist world economy. In the last chapter of *The Modern World System: Theoretical Reprise*, Wallerstein argues that in order to understand the modern world, we must first analyse the social change referring a social system which is, in his terms “largely self-contained”, and developmental dynamics of it are “largely internal” (Wallerstein, 1974a: 347).

This defines the boundaries of historical systems which are two large scale social systems: world empires and world economies (there are also mini-systems which are said to be swallowed up by these two, but we cannot find sufficient details about them in *The Modern World*), and thus he stuck historical evidences and their developmental process to a certain time, place and preconceived certain way. Therefore, in Skocpol’s words, “If obvious pieces of historical evidences or typically asserted causal patterns do not fit WST, either they are not mentioned, or they are discussed but only to be explained in ad hoc ways and treated as



accidental in relation to the supposedly more fundamental connections emphasised by WST” (Skocpol, 1997: 1088).

Excluding the Ottoman lands and Africa – the former because of its strong commercial intercourse, the latter due to colonialization – in terms of space issues, and the lack of the explanation of the dynamics of feudalism, whose crisis leads the emergence of the capitalist world economy (according to WST) would be the main example. The following part of this article will give a more detailed account of WST and its basic concepts, providing a clearer understanding of these historical shortcomings.

## 2. MAIN CONCEPTS: WHAT ARE WORLD-SYSTEMS? WHAT IS THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM?

As summarised in the opening paragraph of this article, WST substituted “historical systems”, instead of erroneously used units of analysis of dominant social sciences – nation-state, in general; social formation or classes, in Marxist terminology. These historical systems are: mini-systems which are relatively small, self-contained tribal economies with a single division of labour; polity; and culture, and world-systems of two kinds: world-empires and world-economies (Wallerstein, 1974a: 348; 2004: 16-17; Goldfrank, 2015: 166; Hier, 2001: 75).

In this this context, world-empires include centralised political structures which can never have an effective control on the entire economic system that is redistributive and based on taxation and tribute. This centralisation guarantees economic flow through the forcible appropriation of surplus; however, at the same time, leads to the eventual disintegration of the system (Wallerstein, 1974: 2003). World-economies, by contrast, include multiple political structures that are decentralised and interdependent, with respect to economic interests in an inter-state structure. Unlike world-empires, they are dynamic systems in which there is a geographically differentiated division of labour, and hence an ongoing competition with the flow of capital and labour (Wallerstein, 1974: 2003). Drawing on this explanation, although the world-economies are unstable structures which can be turned into empires or disintegrate, the modern European World-Economy has survived for 500 years and become a long-lasting world-economy that we can entitle as a capitalist world-economy or the modern world-system, in which we live today.

WST, with this historical explanation, provides a useful model for analysing the modern world. Having defined the difference between world-empires and world-economies, it moves on the historical structure of the current statement of the modern world and offers a unique insight into how it functions. It comes back the origins of the modern world-system to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in which we encounter the crisis of feudalism as the dawn of it and determine the very feature of this system with the economic self-interest of profit maximising rational individuals (Denmark and Thomas, 1988; Gulalp, 1981; Brenner, 1977). That is to say, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as a result of the commercial expansion after the collapse of feudalism, and of the historical choices of free will, modes of labour control or geographical division of labour over the world were distributed between Western Europe and the Rest. Thus, the unequal exchange occurred and became the main characteristic as a process or a mechanism that consolidates the central relation of the system among the core, semi-periphery, and periphery (Wallerstein, 1974a: 16-20; 1974b: 390-392; 2004: 23-41). Core-Periphery relation is a production and exchange or surplus transfer process between capital-intensive and labour-intensive, culturally and



geographically distinct regions (Goldfrank, 2015: 168-169). However, semi periphery is not a process, but a definition for a region or state that have a mix of core- and periphery-like productions (Wallerstein, 2004: 28).

Drawing on this summary, it can be seen how WST defines the modern world system as a trade-based division of labour, and attempts to analyse its developmental dynamics (Wallerstein, 2003: 2). Therefore, although it provides a well-organised theoretical framework for historical social analysis – particularly the successful identification of the historical nature of events which occur outside the boundaries of nation-states – there are many gaps among its historical evidences and explanations, particularly in comparison to Marxist history (Chase-Dunn and Grimes, 1995: 53).

Firstly, as mentioned briefly in the previous part, WST cannot provide a fruitful insight into the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or the developmental dynamics of capitalism. Two main questions that arise from this: “Can the rise of capitalism be attributed purely to extrinsic causes”, and “does the historical transition depend on principally internal contradictions of feudalism that can explain the expansion of trade?” remain unanswered (Aronowitz, 1981: 512). Secondly, as Brenner points out in his critique of Wallerstein, WST explains the production process through the development of capitalism in the context of division of labour, by reducing the importance of class struggle (Brenner, 1977: 1527). These explanations are directly related to neo-classical analysis and assume that the capitalist rationality exists before capitalism itself (Gulalp, 1981: 183). Despite the fact that WST takes into account the class structures of the capitalist system, its explanation of historical dynamics gives priority to market relations, ignoring the evident social relations of production. Therefore, due to its liberal economic approach, WST cannot provide adequate answers for Brenner’s questions: “What allowed for, and ensured, that, wealth brought into the core from the periphery would be used for productive rather than non-productive purposes, and what determined that this would be used for development of the productive forces, so as to increase the productivity of labour?” (Brenner, 1977: 22).

### **3. CAPITALISM IN CRISIS, GLOBALISATION, OR THE AGE OF TRANSITION?**

The previous parts of this article have attempted to show that methodological discussions regarding an adequacy of historical formulations of WST, aiming to assess its strengths and weaknesses, and to demonstrate its significance in social theory. This part is also a critical evaluation of WST, but in a somewhat different way: it attempts to assess the strengths and weaknesses of WST, focusing its theoretical position in comparison to the concept of the globalisation.

According to world-systems theorists, as briefly discussed in the previous part of this essay, world-systems are unstable structures which come into existence for several explainable historical reasons, and live, if they survive – in Wallerstein’s words – “their birth pangs” following cyclical rhythms and secular trends until the transformation to a new system (Wallerstein, 1974a: 348-39; 2004: 77-76). This transformation process emerges at a time when structural contradictions of a system cannot be overcome. In this direction, WST provides a clean periodical analysis of the cyclical rhythms of the modern world from the 16<sup>th</sup> century: the



period of the growth and expansion of the world, to the last decade: the moment of transformation or the age of transition (Wallerstein, 2000; 2004).

Following the periodic way above, as Wallerstein states in his final chapter of the introductory book *World-System Analysis*, capitalist world economy can be seen in a structural crisis (Wallerstein, 2004). As the system can no longer resolve its difficulties and secular trends slowly reaches its boundaries – in mathematical terms – approaching the asymptotes. Following Goldfrank’s categorisation, these secular trends are: geographical expansion, commodification, mechanisation of production, and – in Weber’s terms – bureaucratisation, and the asymptotes: wage level in relation to the cost of production, ecological limitations accompanied by non-renewable resources, rising taxation due to security or social welfare concerns and the discontent of the working classes (Wallerstein, 2000; 2004, Robinson, 2003). For these reasons, a new future system is inevitable, and Wallerstein believes that our choices in the chaotic bifurcation of this transition process make this new system unpredictable.

However, Robinson, in his critical appraisal, contends to this crisis idea, and claims that it is not a structural crisis, but a “qualitatively new epoch in the ongoing and open ended evolution of the world capitalist system” (Robinson, 2003). This, indeed, is one of the formulations of the globalisation concept among with those: a continuous process that dates back to dawn of history, and a process coterminous with the development of capitalism that Wallerstein subscribes to (Robinson, 2003: 725, Wallerstein, 2012: 525). In that point, world-systems theorists perceive nothing new in the Globalisation concept. They agree with the statement of qualitatively new ongoing process, yet do not take it to be an important change in how capitalism functions. They consider this process as merely a structural crisis, as summarised earlier in this essay (Wallerstein, 2012: 525).

For globalisation theorists, world-system theorists’ crisis analyses can provide fruitful explanations for social change or inequalities of the world-system in the age of globalisation, but cannot overcome the new conceptions of changes, which emerged in recent decades, such as the new global production and financial system (Robinson, 2003: 737-738). In other words, it seems difficult to analyse particular institutional components of national state, as world-systems theorists do, because they began to dissolve in new power dynamics, which can be described as “global capital” and “global capital markets” (Saskia, 2003: 9). The problem of the WST in this regard is the assumption that distinct and competing national economies, and the production and labour processes – the main concepts being the division of labour and core-periphery relations – still exhibits the same structural characteristics, ignoring the all new features of the recent global decade.

## CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

WST is one of the strongest theoretical works, which are established aiming to provide vigorous answers for the inquiries of social sciences in recent decades. However, its visionary character and boldness distinguish WST from other theories, positioning it among monumental intellectual projects. This is, at the same time, the main reason for difficulties faced within this article, which have aimed to demonstrate the significance, and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the theory. Firstly, it is unfortunate that the article cannot encompass all remarkable works of WST: it focused, as stated in the introduction, Wallerstein’s two books,



dismissing the other volumes and numerous articles. Secondly, due to a huge number of historical events, data and relations, an assessment of the theory focused on its overall structure, rather than historical details. For this reason, the significance, strengths and weaknesses of the theory had to be embedded in this overall evaluation, which raised the necessity to make a final clarification of the possible strengths and weaknesses of the theory in this conclusion part.

It can be seen throughout the article how many propositions and explanations of WST would be either a strength or a weakness. For instance, one of the main contributions of WST is a sort of historical sociology based on the idea of historical social science, providing a unique perspective to think about and to study today's social world, with its long historic explanation, which unsettled the problematic social inquiry objects of the dominant liberal social sciences. In doing so, it also attempts to reconcile all existing social science disciplines to build bridges among their modes of analysis and languages (Wallerstein, 2003: 457). From this perspective, numerous studies have carried out and made a significant contribution to both WST and general social inquires. However, as stated with some examples in the second part of this essay, although historical perspective of the theory requires adequate explanations of evident historical aspects, there exist many important gaps that cannot be filled by WST, and so it cannot provide a clean theoretical guide for investigations of the historical phenomena.

As explained in the third section of the current article, world-system level inquiry, based on the geographical division of labour is another strength of WST, to the understanding of socio-economic and political features of the world today. Such an inquiry can successfully investigate the very features of historical events that are overlooked by previous theories, such as the Marxist history of capitalism. However once again, it can be explored as one of the weaknesses of WST in relation to this example of Marxist History. This is its reduction of social relations – in Marxist terminology, class struggles – to trade-based economic conditions and wills of the dominant individuals, which is Brenner's rightful reason to title his critique as "Neo-Smithian Marxism" (Brenner, 1977).

The previous section of this article provided a comparison between an "age of transformation" and "globalisation", and heavily showed the weaknesses of WST to reflect the open-ended evolution of the modern world and its emerging global concepts. Although WST do not accept these kind of critiques, insisting on the idea of structural crisis, its shortcomings are obvious to explain new features, which occurred in the last 15-20 years, such as "global capital markets" of the Modern world. Yet, it still provides a fruitful insight to engage in macrosocial structural analysis of Globalisation, for, ironically, Globalisation theorists. Because, it would not seem possible to create an understanding of globalisation without a world-systems level historical perspective.

To sum up, WST is a bold attempt to analyse the world in which we live, with a stunning historical narrative that provides a unique understanding of the origins and structure of the current system. Today, this may be the best guide for choosing the rational ways in the chaotic transformation of the current system through an unpredictable future, a new system. In addition to this theoretical guidance, for the scientific analysis, and for the present and likely future based on World-systems theorist's identifications, it has also an important potential to create consistent solutions for the chronic and current problems of the world, such as social inequalities, or even climate change. Using its historical perspective with its conceptualisation



and identification of politicians and theorists, for instance, can contribute to the establishment of a more egalitarian and more democratic system.

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