

Obituary: Immanuel Wallerstein, public intellectual and leader of progressive social science, passes

Çağlar Keyder

The passing of Immanuel Wallerstein is a heartfelt loss of an engaged public intellectual and a global leader of progressive social science. Born in New York and educated at Columbia University both as an undergraduate and through his Ph.D. in 1961, Wallerstein wrote his doctoral dissertation on African liberation movements. He stayed on at Columbia's Department of Sociology during the turbulent period when students staged one of the more vigilant movements of 1968 to protest the university's involvement with the war in Vietnam. Throughout the 1960s, Wallerstein wrote several books and articles on colonized societies, independence movements, race, class, and nation, as well as reflections on the student movement and the future of the university. In 1971, after a year as fellow at the Center for Advanced Study of Stanford University, he left Columbia to accept a position as Professor of Sociology at McGill University in Montréal.

It was while he was at McGill that Wallerstein published two of the key articles that laid out the contours of the world-systems approach, his signature contribution to social sciences: "Three Paths of National Development in Sixteenth-Century Europe" in 1972 and "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis" in 1974.¹ These articles laid out the essential theses of Wallerstein's research program: the capitalist world system had dominated the world since the beginnings of capitalism; it was spatially and functionally differentiated into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral areas, with their differentiation being due to state strength; and it was a historical system whose beginning, development, and future demise could be analyzed in terms of cycles of the ascending and declining power of the hegemonic state and the growth and stagnation of the

State University of New York at Binghamton, Koç University

- 1 Immanuel Wallerstein, "Three Paths of National Development in Sixteenth-Century Europe," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 7, no. 2 (1972): 95–101. doi: [10.1007/BF02800528](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02800528) and Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 4 (1974): 387–415.

world economy. With these pieces and the detailed history of the genesis of the modern world system that he was about to complete, Wallerstein was about to embark on a long-term project of studying the historical sociology of the entire world since the sixteenth century. This was a project that provided a reformulation of and fruitful advance over some of the vexing questions of the scholarship of the time, such as the nature and definition of capitalism, the meaning of dependency and development, and the relationship between the state and the economy. To pursue such a vast project properly would require the collaboration of colleagues, graduate students, and willing partners from all over the world, and to this end Wallerstein accepted a position at the State University of New York in Binghamton, where he was able to start a research institute, invite scholars from around the world, organize academic meetings, and train graduate students. His close friend and colleague from Columbia, Terence K. Hopkins, had been at Binghamton since 1970 and had invited Wallerstein to the relatively new campus. The institute they founded was named the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations, after the doyen of the Annales school of historians, a proponent of total history and the *longue durée* perspective. Wallerstein served as the director of this center, as well as holding a prestigious Distinguished Professor post in the Department of Sociology.

I had first met Immanuel in Montréal and read the first volume of his *The Modern World-System* in manuscript form.² When he moved to Binghamton, he invited me to spend a few weeks at the Fernand Braudel Center, and subsequently to join the Department of Sociology as an adjunct, which I did, and in 1984 I became a permanent member of the faculty on a half-year basis. This was an exciting period when a large number of very capable students from all over the world (many of them from Turkey) were recruited into the department and a number of intellectually exciting projects were launched at the center. The history of Ottoman incorporation into the world system was one such area of research, and in line with this biennial conferences on Ottoman topics were organized under Wallerstein's sponsorship. Research Working Groups directed by him along with Hopkins and Giovanni Arrighi, who joined the faculty in 1980, conducted research motivated by hypotheses advanced within the framework of the world-systems paradigm, with most of their output being published in *Review*, the journal edited at the Center.

With students, Wallerstein was patient and attentive, and he had a remarkable ability to focus on the critical point in a presentation. Even though he may

2 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

have appeared to be absorbed in the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, as soon as he opened the discussion he would distill the essence of the presentation and lucidly formulate the problem so as to guarantee a coherent conversation. He was unfailingly generous with younger colleagues, students, and visitors to the Center. He traveled frequently and widely, almost always with his wife Beatrice, lecturing and receiving numerous honors, fellowships, and honorary doctorates. Most of his oeuvre has been translated into and published in Turkish, and he and Beatrice visited İstanbul several times, where he had a grateful following.

During this period and on through the turn of the millennium, Wallerstein's intellectual productivity was remarkable. On his own and in collaboration with Hopkins and Arrighi at Binghamton—as well as with Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank, who joined them—he tirelessly worked to reveal the logic of development of the world system. In addition to two more volumes of *The Modern World-System*,³ he published (with Amin, Arrighi, and Frank) a book on the crisis that began in the 1980s,⁴ a collection of essays (with Arrighi and Hopkins) on antisystemic social movements,⁵ and a report for the Gulbenkian Commission on the epistemology of social sciences, while another collection of essays—*Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*—was a collaboration with Etienne Balibar.⁶ These studies extended the themes explored in Wallerstein's earlier contributions and were enormously popular globally.

In 2000, Wallerstein retired from Binghamton and moved to New Haven, Connecticut, though he maintained his link with the Fernand Braudel Center. He also held a position as Senior Research Scholar at Yale University and continued to lecture at various universities around the world. His writings during this period focused on declining American hegemony and the future of the capitalist world system. They shine with the optimism of the will despite the increasing darkness of the horizon. It was also during this period that Wallerstein reaffirmed his commitment to public engagement with his fortnightly commentaries on crucial contradictions in the world system, published on his personal website.⁷ These commentaries were widely propagated and

3 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011) and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s–1840s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

4 Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Dynamics of Global Crisis* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1982).

5 Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements* (London: Verso, 1989).

6 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991).

7 See <https://www.iwallerstein.com/>.

translated into several languages. In all his work, beginning with his involvement in African liberation movements, a constant premise was the need to struggle for freedom from all forms of exploitation and domination. He taught progressive social scientists all over the world to study the whole picture with a conviction that progress was attainable. In his last commentary, published in July this year, he repeated his credo: "I have indicated in the past that I thought the crucial struggle was a class struggle, using class in a very broadly defined sense. What those who will be alive in the future can do is to struggle with themselves so [the] change may be a real one."⁸ To have known him over the last four decades has been a rare privilege.

8 Immanuel Wallerstein, "This Is the End; This Is the Beginning," Commentary No. 500, *Immanuel Wallerstein*, July 1, 2019. <https://www.iwallerstein.com/this-is-the-end-this-is-the-beginning/>.