

Immanuel Wallerstein: Nobel Prize in Social Sciences

Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas.¹

Just as Fernand Braudel was the world's most important twentieth-century historian, Immanuel Wallerstein was the world's most important twentieth-century sociologist. His absence leaves a gaping void in the contemporary social sciences—a hole as vast as the singular, exceptional mark he left on the intellectual landscape of the last century—. In the face of this void—essential, impossible to fill—, we will miss Wallerstein's profound, acute, and incisive analyses of the global history of the capitalist world-system, the key events of the (ongoing) “long twentieth century”, the immediate worldwide circumstances and occurrences alongside their possible future outcomes, and the urgent need to reorganize the entire system of modern knowledge and the present-day social sciences. These, indeed, are the four major theoretical concepts around which Wallerstein's vast and complex opus revolves.

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I met Immanuel Wallerstein in Paris in January 1989, after three years of correspondence. In 1986, I had sent him an essay of mine that compared Marx's work with Fernand Braudel's. I was surprised to have learned that Wallerstein too, in his own ways, was interested as I was, in recovering the contributions of certain authors affiliated with the misnamed Annales “school”, such as Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel, through a clearly Marxist perspective.

And so, on reading my essay “Entre Marx y Braudel: hacer la historia, saber la historia”,² Wallerstein offered to translate it into English and publish it in the prestigious

¹ Senior Researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Translation from the Spanish, by Robin Myers.

² See Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas, “Between Marx and Braudel: Making History, Knowing History”, in *Review*, Vol. XV, number 2, Spring 1992, pp. 175-221.

Review, issued by the Fernand Braudel Center, which Wallerstein himself directed. And so began a three-decade intellectual exchange I found rich and fruitful. After our first in-person meeting in Paris in 1989, we also struck up a genuine personal friendship, and I was able to meet his wife Beatriz, his first intellectual interlocutor, as well as his highly intelligent daughter Katharine.

As is widely known, one of Wallerstein's most original and provocative ideas is that, over the past five hundred years, the true relevant *unit of analysis* for all our research, assessments, and studies has been the world-system as a whole: first semi-planetary and then strictly planetary in scope. However, not everyone is familiar with this theory's profound intellectual implications when applied, concretely and specifically, to a particular continent, region, nation, time period, or singular social process; for example, in explaining various essential moments and processes in Mexican and Latin American history.

A powerful element that recurs throughout Wallerstein's analyses is his capacity to reinsert the issues he addresses not only into *global* perspectives and horizons, in both the Marxist and the Braudelian sense of the term, but also and simultaneously into a strictly *planetary* framework. In the latter, local, national, and regional dynamics constantly interact with the planetary dynamics of the capitalist world-system, explaining and illuminating each other. Naturally, this capacity led him to interpret concrete subjects in novel and often unexpected ways.

For example, Wallerstein describes the processes of so-called "independence" in Latin America, which developed in the early nineteenth century, *not* as achievements of independence as such, but rather and exclusively as mere *decolonizations* of these future Latin American nations. In doing so, he bases his analysis on Latin America's perennially *peripheral* historical status, which automatically eliminates any possibility for its true economic, social, political, or cultural independence. He also compares these supposed Latin American "independences" in the nineteenth century with Africa's decolonization process in the twentieth. Wallerstein thus reaches the obvious conclusion that such processes do *not* signify the real independence of Latin American countries, but rather their

formal *legal* independence and their real decolonization or separation from the Spanish capital.³

In the contemporary historiography of Latin America, and in the official imaginary of all Latin American nations, this conclusion is a true “intellectual scandal.” Indeed, it entirely departs from habitual historical explanations, and it forces us to rethink and reconstruct most official histories of all Latin American countries over the past two hundred years.

Just as Wallerstein demystifies the French Revolution, refuting the idea that it was a bourgeois revolution and that it created the modern bourgeois state, so too does he deconstruct the myth of nineteenth-century Latin American independence. Wallerstein based his conclusion in part on his in-depth knowledge of Latin American history, which include the work of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the very important and rich dependency theory, developed also by his close colleague Andre Gunder Frank. Wallerstein thus revisited the distinction between countries of the center and the periphery, enriching and complicating it with the addition of a third stratum: countries of the capitalist semi-periphery.

The same phenomenon occurred when Wallerstein analyzed more recent political processes in Latin America and Mexico, particularly in his studies of supposedly “progressive” Latin American governments and of Mexican neo-Zapatismo. Once again, Wallerstein analyze this problems, from his views about the world’s many different lefts, from a planetary perspective, as well as through a *longue durée* perspective of the key dilemmas that anti-systemic movements of the past two centuries have confronted all over the world. In this way, he sees the “progressive” governments of Evo Morales, Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, Felipe Lugo, Lula da Silva, etc., —and, more recently, of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico—, as simply *defensive and transitory* solutions, profoundly *limited* in their capacities for change, and able only to faintly mitigate the severe hardships suffered by the working and popular classes across Latin America. Yet he refrains from harboring any false illusions about these limitedly “progressive”, utterly pro-capitalist governments, that are nothing more than an immediate, purely defensive response

³ For more on this original theory, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2011, pp. 191-256.

to the catastrophes unleashed by the terminal crisis of capitalism, on working and subaltern classes all over the world.

Instead of placing stock in this defensive and transitory solution, Wallerstein turns to a radical, genuinely *anti-systemic* one; for example, Mexican neozapatista movement, which he considered “the most important social movement in the world, the barometer and the igniter of antisystemic movements around the world”.⁴ Wallerstein always closely followed the neo-Zapatista movement: he wrote about it periodically, dedicating various essays to the phenomenon at different points, and spoke about it in multiple important interviews. He also visited Chiapas on at least three occasions. On one of them, he participated in a Colloquium alongside the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, with whom he conducted a compelling, still-unpublished interview; Sergio Rodríguez Lazcano and I also took part. Unsurprisingly, a Centro Immanuel Wallerstein was founded in Chiapas in 2005. This Center was highly active from 2005 to 2008, although, unfortunately, it was later thrown into crisis and practically disappeared.

Wallerstein visited Mexico many times. In 1991, he participated in the conference *Primeras Jornadas Braudelianas Internacionales*, held in Mexico City. He later enthusiastically supported the sequels to this initiative, along with Maurice Aymard. There was the *Secondes Journées Braudeliennes* in Paris at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme; the *Terzi Giornati Braudeliani* in Geneva; the *4th Braudelian Journeys* in Wassenaar, the Netherlands; and the *5th Journées Braudeliennes* at the Fernand Braudel Center in Binghamton, New York. He also received four honorary doctorates from various Latin American universities: one in Peru, another in Brazil, and two in Mexico, from the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, respectively. He once held the prestigious Julio Cortázar Chair at the University of Guadalajara, founded by Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes.

Furthermore, Wallerstein was a member of the International Scientific Committee of the Mexican journal *Contrahistorias*, since its founding in 2003. He was an assiduous contributor to this publication from its first issue onward: in the 32 issues published to date,

⁴ See Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Zapatistas: The Second Stage,” *Commentary*, No. 165, July 15, 2005, at <https://www.binghamton.edu/fbc/commentaries/index.html>

he authored 20 articles, two written specifically for this journal, and also three interviews all afforded for exclusive publication in *Contrahistorias*.

Mexico also witnessed the original publication of the long interview Wallerstein granted me in 1999. As a visiting researcher at the Fernand Braudel Center, I was able to recorded conversations with Wallerstein for thirteen hours, in what became the longest interview he ever gave.⁵ It was also in Mexico that he first published three volumes of his collected essays, which we organized together at various moments, and which were subsequently republished in Colombia and Chile. First, *La crisis estructural del capitalismo*, containing an entire section of his essays on Latin America that had been published by that time. Next came *Historia y dilemas de los movimientos antisistémicos*. Finally, the two-volume *Horizontes del análisis de los sistemas-mundo*, of which only the first has yet been published.⁶

Immanuel Wallerstein, a more genuinely *critical* intellectual than most we have ever known, with uncommonly global and strictly planetary visions, has left this world. In doing so, he has also left us with his rich intellectual opus as a legacy and inheritance. As a call, too, to continue working and fighting, as he did during his entire lifetime, for a non-capitalist world: egalitarian, democratic, and truly just. Without a doubt, if there had existed a Noble Prize in the Social Sciences, Wallerstein would have won it with ease. Although, like Jean-Paul Sartre, I suspect he would have turned it down.

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⁵ See Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas, *Immanuel Wallerstein: Crítica del sistema-mundo capitalista*, Ediciones Era, Mexico, 2003, reprinted several times in Mexico. It was subsequently published in Chile, and partially in Cuba; it was also translated into English and published, with some cuts, modifications, and additions, as *Uncertain Worlds: World-Systems Analysis in Changing Times*, Paradigm Publishers, New York, 2012, (reissued in 2013).

⁶ See Immanuel Wallerstein, *La crisis estructural del capitalismo*, Ed. Contrahistorias, Mexico, 2005; *Historia y dilemas de los movimientos antisistémicos*, Ed. Contrahistorias, Mexico, 2008; and *Horizontes del análisis de los sistemas-mundo*, Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Mexico, 2015.