

## IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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Although Immanuel Wallerstein achieved recognition in the 1960s as an expert on Africa, his most important contribution to sociology is his book *The Modern World-System* ([1974] 2011). That book was an instant success. It has received worldwide recognition and has been translated into ten languages and Braille.

Born on September 28, 1930, Wallerstein received all his degrees from Columbia University, including a doctorate in 1959. He next assumed a position on the faculty at Columbia; after many years there and a five-year stint at McGill University in Montreal, Wallerstein became, in 1976, distinguished professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton.

Wallerstein was awarded the prestigious Sorokin Award for the first volume of *The Modern World-System* in 1975. Since that time, he has continued to work on the topic and has produced a number of articles as well as three additional volumes, in which he takes his analysis of the world-system up to 1914.

In fact, in many ways, the attention this analysis has attracted and will continue to attract is more important than the body of work itself. The concept of the world-system has become the focus of thought and research in sociology, an accomplishment to which few scholars can lay claim. Many of the sociologists now doing research and theorizing about the world-system are critical of Wallerstein in one way or another, but they all clearly recognize the important role he played in the genesis of their ideas (Chase-Dunn, 2005a).

Although the concept of the world-system is an important contribution, at least as significant has been the role Wallerstein played in the revival of theoretically informed historical research. The most important work in the early years of sociology, by people such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, was largely of this variety. However, in more recent years, most sociologists have turned away from doing this kind of research and toward using ahistorical methods such as questionnaires and interviews. These methods are quicker and easier to use than historical methods, and the data produced are easier to analyze with a computer. Use of such methods tends to require a narrow range of technical knowledge rather than a wide range of historically oriented knowledge. Furthermore, theory plays a comparatively minor role in research utilizing questionnaires and interviews. Wallerstein has been in the forefront of those involved in a revival of interest in historical research with a strong theoretical base.

### The Modern World-System

Wallerstein chose a unit of analysis unlike the units used by most Marxian thinkers. He did not look at workers, classes, or even states because he found most of these too narrow for his purposes. Instead, he looked at a broad economic entity with a division of labor that is not circumscribed by political or cultural boundaries. He found that unit in