

## 6. Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory and the Role of Revolutions

---

Frank Jacob

“Human history is progressive, and inevitably so.”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Human progress is often linked to revolutionary change and is a consequence of transformative processes that seem to intensify the speed of reforms and even time itself. The first two decades of the 21st century were marked by a “rapid intensification of revolutionary situations, social revolts and rebellions on a global scale,” and Karatasli argued that “[t]his is not an ordinary wave of social unrest. It belongs to one of the major world historical waves of mobilization which has the *potential* to transform political structures, economic systems and social relations.”<sup>2</sup> The protests that have gained momentum since the beginning of the century were often perceived to have been motivated by anti-globalizing and anti-capitalist ideas that criticized the uncontrolled accumulation of capital while natural resources were exploited, the ecosystem of the planet destroyed, and human rights ignored.<sup>3</sup> Within revolutionary protest formation, multiple crises and different motifs or motivational factors overlapped and created a heterogenous mass of protesters whose demands for a

---

1 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 146.

2 Sahan Savas Karatasli, “The Twenty-First Century Revolutions and Internationalism: A World-Historical Perspective,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 25, no. 2 (2019): 306. Emphasis in original.

3 *Ibid.*, 307.

socio-political discontinuum unite them.<sup>4</sup> Scholars interested in the study of the world-system and world-systems theory emphasized that the study of the former, following the works and ideas of Immanuel Wallerstein,<sup>5</sup> offers a very sophisticated and fruitful method to study revolutionary developments in general and the “global inequalities” that created the unrest of the last two decades in particular. As Manuela Boatcă highlighted, world-systems analysis offers a “more complex and differentiated terminology and a more encompassing historical perspective, anticipating many of the recent arguments and even predicting several country trajectories by a long shot.”<sup>6</sup>

Wallerstein, who initially worked on African history, developed his theoretical approach because he “grew dissatisfied with existing tools of social science that, he believed, led to incorrect conclusions.” The increasing “African nationalism” in the early Cold War period and during the decolonization of many African states in combination with the “[student] protests at Columbia [University] revealed [to Wallerstein] that social science tools of the sixties could not explain the empirical world.”<sup>7</sup> As such, Wallerstein wanted to change the way social scientists look at and try to understand society:

[M]y epistemological premise that the much-vaunted distinction between idiographic and nomothetic epistemologies is outdated, spurious, and harmful to sound analysis. Social reality is always and necessarily both historical (in the sense that reality inevitably changes every nanosecond) and structural (in the sense that social action is governed by constraints deriving from the historical social system within which the described activity occurs).<sup>8</sup>

---

4 On the motivational overlaps within revolutionary movements, see Frank Jacob, *#Revolution: Wer, warum, wann und wie viele?* (Marburg: Büchner, 2022), 21–56. For a detailed discussion of the revolutionary discontinuum, see Gunnar Hindrichs, *Philosophie der Revolution* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017).

5 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 4 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974–1989; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

6 Manuela Boatcă, “Global Inequalities *avant la lettre*: Immanuel Wallerstein’s Contribution,” *Socio* 15 (2021): 71–91.

7 Gregory P. Williams, *Contesting the Global Order: The Radical Political Economy of Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020), 97.

8 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, vol. 4: *Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), ix.

Wallerstein was criticized for such an approach for three reasons: 1) he used world-systems as an analytical unit instead of looking at the history of nation-states; 2) he emphasized the meaning and necessity of a *longue durée* as an analytical time frame; and 3) these world-systems were supposed to be studied interdisciplinarily. It was consequently no surprise that Wallerstein's ideas and suggestions were attacked from different directions and disciplines alike, including orthodox Marxists and cultural particularists.<sup>9</sup> Wallerstein did not want easy answers to complex solutions but “to make all so-called simple variables more complex and to put them in a context in order to understand real social situations.”<sup>10</sup> Together with other colleagues who worked relentlessly to understand the formation, demise, and reconfiguration of the world-system, Wallerstein attempted to provide broader and more complex explanations to better understand the complicated world in which we live.<sup>11</sup> Social movements and revolutionary developments are variables within this complicated story that often change the existent world-system through their reconfiguratory power.<sup>12</sup> They are expressions of specific groups within the world-system who wish to alter their own position or even the nature of the whole system due to protest and revolutionary acts. Considering that the world-system is capitalist in nature, one would assume that revolutions intend to overcome it as an organizational unit of a global scale and replace it with a truly equal form of coexistence. However, the historical reality seems to show that revolutions, which often seem to appear in waves that shake the world-system's founda-

---

9 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Welt-System-Analyse: Eine Einführung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2019), 25.

10 Ibid.

11 See, among others, Christopher Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation: Structures of the World-Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall, *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Jennifer Blair and Marion Werner, “New Geographies of Uneven Development in Global Formation: Thinking with Chase-Dunn,” *Journal of World-System Research* 23, no. 2 (2017): 604–619.

12 Terry Boswell, ed., *Revolution in the World-System* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); Jackie Smith and Dawn Wiest, *Social Movements in the World-System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation* (New York: Russell Sage, 2012).

tions,<sup>13</sup> are only able to shatter it momentarily before it begins to reconfigure itself according to the post-revolutionary reality.

The following chapter intends to take a closer look at the relationship between world-systems and revolutionary processes, focusing on the ideas Wallerstein expressed about this connection in his different texts. After this first analysis, the role of the semiperiphery as a control instrument within an existent world-system that nevertheless seems to stimulate revolutionary developments shall be discussed.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, the future role of revolutions in the transformation of the capitalist world-system of the early 21st century will be taken into closer consideration. The chapter therefore offers an approach that combines theoretical suppositions that have been applied in world-system studies with the comparative analysis of revolutions.<sup>15</sup>

## World-Systems and Revolutionary Processes

Revolutions or revolutionary movements, as Wallerstein remarked, intend “to end an oppressive situation.” On the other hand, he emphasized with regard to the so-called Third World revolutions of the anticolonial period that revolutionaries act according to the “expectation that their victory at the state level will open the door at last to the real development of their country.”<sup>16</sup> Wallerstein also understood the existent social structure within the world-system to

- 
- 13 Manfred Kossok and Walter Markov, “Zur Methodologie der vergleichenden Revolutionsgeschichte der Neuzeit,” in *Studien zur Vergleichenden Revolutionsgeschichte 1500–1917*, ed. Manfred Kossok (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1974), 9. Recently, similar claims have been renewed in David Motadel, ed., *Revolutionary World: Global Upheaval in the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- 14 For works with a focus on world-systems and revolution, see, among others, Terry Boswell and William J. Dixon, “Dependency and Rebellion: A Cross-National Analysis,” *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 4 (1990): 540–559; Terry R. Kandal, “Revolution, Racism and Sexism: Challenges for World-System Analysis,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 25, no. 4 (1990): 86–102; Thomas Reifer, ed., *Globalization, Hegemony and Power: Antisystemic Movements and the Global System* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 15 For the latter, see, in particular, Frank Jacob, “Revolutionen und Weltgeschichte,” in *Revolution: Beiträge zu einem historischen Phänomen der globalen Moderne*, eds. Frank Jacob and Riccardo Altieri (Berlin: WVB, 2019), 11–40.
- 16 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Development: Lodestar or Illusion?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 39 (1988): 2017.

develop according to specific stages,<sup>17</sup> and he seems to have understood revolutions as marking points or watersheds that lead from one stage to the next and determine the future course of development. Considering that Wallerstein formulated his world-systems analysis to address the social realities of the 1970s and provide a better understanding of the world at that time,<sup>18</sup> it definitely contains some revolution-related elements. Gregory P. Williams remarked in this regard that “Wallerstein announced that the capitalist world-economy had a division of labor between the powerful developed core, the underdeveloped periphery, and the in-between semiperiphery. He noted that this division of labor created a vicious cycle, with core states becoming strong and weak states becoming weak through unequal exchange.”<sup>19</sup> This basic consideration points to the revolutionary possibilities for world-system-related developments as a consequence of historical caesuras marked by revolutions per se. If a core state or area falls while another semiperipheral region rises, this may be related to the outcome of revolutionary change and the end of old orders that are replaced – fully or partially – by new ones that contest the existent shape of a specific world-system.

Wallerstein's initial thoughts in relation to the world-system as a “unit of analysis”<sup>20</sup> were related to questions about the historical developments of the modern world. Referencing “Marx, who argued, if you will, that the nineteenth-century present was only an antepenultimate stage of development, that the capitalist world was to know a cataclysmic political revolution which would then lead in the fullness of time to a final societal form, in this case the classless society,”<sup>21</sup> Wallerstein intended to provide more complex but probably also more fitting explanations of these considerations from a global perspective. Therefore, he pointed out that

if we are to give an explanation of both continuity and transformation, then we must logically divide the long term into segments in order to observe the structural changes from time A to time B. These segments are, however,

---

17 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): 389.

18 Wallerstein, *Welt-System-Analyse*, 5.

19 Williams, *Contesting the Global Order*, 96.

20 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 71.

21 *Ibid.*

not discrete but continuous in reality; ergo they are “stages” in the “development” of a social structure, a development which we determine however not a priori but a posteriori. That is, we cannot predict the future concretely, but we can predict the past.<sup>22</sup>

Especially considering the linear explanations related to historical materialism and the Marxist interpretation of all history as a history of class struggles that has to follow certain stages to develop to reach the revolution that opens the gate to a communist, i.e., classless society of the future, Wallerstein was interested in one particular question that can be tied to theoretical revolutionary debates<sup>23</sup> as well:

[C]an stages be skipped? This question is only logically meaningful if we have “stages” that “co-exist” within a single empirical framework. If within a capitalist world-economy, we define one state as feudal, a second as capitalist, and a third as socialist, then and only then can we pose the question: can a country “skip” from the feudal stage to the socialist stage of national development without “passing through capitalism”?<sup>24</sup>

Wallerstein accepted the existence of stages and demanded that these be applied as analytical units for chronological processes as well. However, he demanded these be “stages of social systems, that is, of totalities. And the only totalities that exist or have historically existed are mini-systems and world-systems, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been only one world-system in existence, the capitalist world-economy.”<sup>25</sup> If one considers this to be the case and revolutions to be caesuras within the developmental history of the modern world-system, it is not surprising that revolutions that might begin in either the core, the semiperiphery, or the periphery set a wave of revolutionary events in motion that soon transform the world-system at large, redistributing the roles of former core regions or renegotiating the status of

---

22 Ibid., 73.

23 One such debate occurred in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, as Russia was considered, in contrast to Marx’s expectations for a revolution in industrialized Western Europe, too backward to be the country where a world revolution could start. On this and the debate about the “revolutionary potential” of Russia and its post-revolutionary leaders, i.e., the Bolsheviks, see Frank Jacob, 1917: *Die korruptierte Revolution* (Marburg: Büchner, 2020), 149–202.

24 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 74.

25 Ibid.

core, semiperiphery, and periphery among those regions or states that advance or decline as a consequence of the revolutionary process.

The shaping of human history due to the “geographic expansion of the European world-economy to include now the whole of the globe”<sup>26</sup> was stimulated by the necessity to acquire raw materials while exporting manufactured goods and, later, capital to foreign markets within a more and more globalized economy. The building and enhancing of a “capitalist world-economy,”<sup>27</sup> a process one could also refer to as the “accumulation of capital,”<sup>28</sup> was achieved “by integrating a geographically vast set of production processes. We call this the establishment of a single ‘division of labor.’ Of course, all historical systems are based on a division of labor, but none before was as complex, as extensive, as detailed, and as cohesive as that of the capitalist world-economy.”<sup>29</sup> Basing his considerations on the work of other economist thinkers, e.g., Nikolai Kondratiev (1892–1938),<sup>30</sup> Wallerstein argued that the capitalist world-economy showed a “pattern of cyclical rhythms”<sup>31</sup> and stated in this regard that

[t]he most obvious, and probably the most important, of these rhythms is a seemingly regular process of expansion and contraction of the world-economy as a whole. On present evidence, this cycle tends to be 50–60 years in length, covering its two phases. The functioning of this cycle (sometimes called “long waves,” sometimes Kondratieff cycles) is complex and I will not review it here. One part, however, of the process is that, periodically, the capitalist world economy has seen the need to expand the geographic boundaries of the system as a whole, creating thereby new loci of production to participate in its axial division of labor. Over 400 years, these successive expansions have transformed the capitalist world-economy from a system located primarily in Europe to one that covers the entire globe.<sup>32</sup>

The capitalist world-system created by European expansion was, however, not the first world-system, but absorbed other regional systems and declining em-

---

26 Ibid., 94.

27 Ibid., 243.

28 A classical text would be Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals: Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus* (Berlin: Paul Singer, 1913).

29 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 268.

30 Nikolai Kondratiev, “About the Question of the Major Cycles of the Conjuncture” [in Russian], *Planovoe Khozyaystvo* 8 (1926): 167–181.

31 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 269.

32 Ibid.

pires, especially in the Americas, where the Aztec and Incan empires were already in decline. These were eventually absorbed by the Eurocentred world-system, which turned former systems into peripheral or semi-peripheral regions through invasion, occupation, and exploitation.<sup>33</sup> The fact that positions within the world-system can be changed through an overall change of its configuration is important to note, especially in light of the revolutionary ambitions often expressed in a semi-peripheral context discussed later.

The previous stages of expansion and contraction within world history also changed due to globalization and the establishment of the modern capitalist world-system, which, as mentioned elsewhere in this book,<sup>34</sup> marked the transition from world to global history. According to Wallerstein,

The modern world-system changed the rules of the game in two ways. In the first place, the operation of the rules of world-empires led to long-term geographical expansion followed by geographical contraction. The rules of the capitalist world-economy (the expanded reproduction of capital) involved expansion but no contraction – periods of relative stagnation, yes; attempts of areas at tactical withdrawal, yes; but real contraction, no. Hence, by the late nineteenth century, the capitalist world-economy included virtually the whole inhabited earth, and it is presently striving to overcome the technological limits to cultivating the remaining corners: the deserts, the jungles, the seas, and indeed the other planets of the solar system.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to other “developmentalist” interpretations tied to Marx or Weber, Wallerstein further argued that the global transformation(s) from “feudalism” to the modern capitalist world-economy had to be understood according to the world-systems theory and the complexity of the processes involved instead of applying a form of historical determinism that only included Eurocentric

---

33 Ibid., 94. On the Aztec and Incan empires and their role for and relation to world-system analysis see Lawrence A. Kuznar, “Periphery-Core Relations in the Inca Empire: Carrots and Sticks in an Andean World System,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 2, no. 1 (1996): 322–349; Michael E. Smith, “The Aztec Empire and the Mesoamerican World System,” in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds. Susan E. Alcock et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 128–154.

34 See Chapter 2.

35 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Civilizations and Modes of Production: Conflicts and Convergences,” *Theory and Society* 5, no. 1 (1978): 6.

perspectives.<sup>36</sup> Revolutions were without any doubt the triggers or catalysts for such transitions, especially with regard to a transformation that would stimulate a change of position – of a region or nation-state – within the world-system of the time. Consequently, Wallerstein was interested in Marx's and Engels's considerations about revolutionary change, although neither from an "orthodox" nor a utopian perspective.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore only fitting to take a closer look at several revolutions Wallerstein tied to world-systems theory in more detail.

Until the mid-18th century, the globalization of the world-economy and the steady accumulation of capital and access to resources, raw materials, and possible markets changed the relations between core and periphery and even whole demographic settings in some regions of the world.<sup>38</sup> The French Revolution, or, more precisely, the first revolutionary wave of modernity, i.e., the Atlantic revolutions in the United States, France, and Haiti, marked the beginning of a transitory period within the world-system.<sup>39</sup> Wallerstein remarked with regard to the French Revolution that it "propagated two quite revolutionary ideas. According to the first, political change was not unusual or bizarre, but normal and therefore a permanent condition. The second idea held that 'sovereignty' – the right of the state to make autonomous decisions within its borders – did not reside in (or belong to) a monarch or the legislature, but resided with the 'people,' who alone can legitimize a regime."<sup>40</sup>

The world's transition to modernity was consequently linked to the rise of revolutionary movements that opposed the current structure of the world-

---

36 Immanuel Wallerstein, "From Feudalism to Capitalism: Transition or Transitions?" *Social Forces* 55, no. 2 (1976): 277.

37 Immanuel Wallerstein, "Marxisms as Utopias: Evolving Ideologies," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 6 (1986): 1295–1298. For Engels's view on utopian interpretations of socialism, see Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/index.htm>. On Engels's thoughts about revolution, see Frank Jacob, "Friedrich Engels and Revolution Theory: The Legacy of a Revolutionary Life," in *Engels@200: Reading Friedrich Engels in the 21st Century*, ed. Frank Jacob (Marburg: Büchner, 2020), 49–90.

38 Wallerstein, *Welt-System-Analyse*, 5. See also Immanuel Wallerstein, "American Slavery and the Capitalist World-Economy," *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 5 (1976): 1199–1213.

39 For a detailed discussion of this first modern revolutionary wave, see Frank Jacob, *Revolution and the Global Struggle for Modernity*, vol. 1: *The Atlantic Revolutions* (London: Anthem Press, 2023).

40 Wallerstein, *Welt-System-Analyse*, 8.

system, and the French Revolution “firmly established the ideological motifs of the modern world, the rallying cries and the rationale of the movements to come.”<sup>41</sup> The French Revolution also challenged the uncontested existence and acceptance of the modern world-system, and therefore, as Wallerstein emphasized, it “was a crucial watershed in the ideological history of the modern world-system in that it led to the widespread acceptance of the idea that social change rather than social stasis is normal, both in the normative and in the statistical sense of the word. It thereby posed the intellectual problem of how to regulate, speed up, slow down, or otherwise affect this normal process of change and evolution.”<sup>42</sup> While the revolution in France “presumably represent[ed] the overcoming of a mismatch,”<sup>43</sup> it also marked a historical moment in which the division of the world and its system’s categories were challenged, maybe even more so when the revolutionary wave hit the colonial sphere, i.e., St. Domingue (later Haiti). Not only did the “bourgeois revolution” in France change the global sphere and its perception among people around the globe, but the modern world-system was tremendously changed as well “by [the] unleashing [of] two new concepts, whose impact was to transform the modern world-system. These concepts were the ‘normality of change’ as opposed to its exceptional and limited reality, and the ‘sovereignty of the people’ as opposed to that of the ruler or the aristocracy. This pair of concepts was the basis of something new, a geoculture that spread throughout the historical system and legitimated radical ‘change’ of the system by the ‘people.’”<sup>44</sup>

The experience of the French Revolution changed the way the world was received, and since the ideas of the Enlightenment had caused actions that altered the historical course tremendously, the ruling elites needed to counter the existent danger. According to Wallerstein, the answer to the changing situation was the creation of “the three modern ideologies – conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism,”<sup>45</sup> as the “ideological turmoil” that had been caused by the

---

41 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Antisystemic Movements: History and Dilemmas,” in Samir Amin et al., *Transforming the Revolution: Social Movements and the World-System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 13.

42 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 137.

43 *Ibid.*, 144.

44 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Antisystemic Movements, Yesterday and Today,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 20, no. 2 (2014): 158.

45 *Ibid.* See also Immanuel Wallerstein, “Las Tres Hegemonías Sucesivas en la Historia de la Economía-Mundo,” in *Capitalismo Histórico y Movimientos Antisistémicos*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (Madrid: Akal, 2004), 212–223.

revolutionary process needed to be addressed, for “the state represented what was and was not perfect, and society represented the force that was pushing toward the perfectibility of the state.”<sup>46</sup> Starting from Wallerstein’s consideration that “both the anti-capitalist relational matrix and the liberal matrix”<sup>47</sup> had been created by the French Revolution, Chilean scholar Ignacio Muñoz Cristi emphasized that this revolution “can be seen as generative of the practices of *popular self-management* and *social intervention* and the three institutions that operationalized these practices, each for their own specific ends, to wit: Ideologies, Social Sciences, and Anti-Systemic Movements.”<sup>48</sup> The latter movements, however, could have an ambivalent influence on existent world-systems, because “the rise of anti-systemic movements ... [has] historically debilitated and simultaneously reinforced the world-system”<sup>49</sup> as the latter’s existence usually stimulates these forms of anti-systemic protest in the first place. Muñoz Cristi consequently also argues that there was not “a bourgeois revolution, or a merely anti-authoritarian one in which a new class, the bourgeoisie, would arise between feudal lords and peasants. Rather, it is a history of how lords were forced by events to transform themselves into bourgeoisie in order to conserve their privileges as governors.”<sup>50</sup> The revolution had simply demanded a structural change within the world-system’s configuration and a visible (although not real) transition of power away from the old elites. However, the events the French Revolution triggered in peripheral and semi-peripheral parts of the world-system of the late 18th century proved tremendously transformative, especially with regard to those people who now, as active revolutionary conscious beings, considered themselves eligible to be political subjects.<sup>51</sup>

---

46 Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Development of the Concept of Development,” *Sociological Theory* 2 (1984): 104.

47 Immanuel Wallerstein, “La Revolución Francesa Como Suceso Histórico Mundial,” in *Impensar las Ciencias Sociales*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (México: S. XXI Editores 1998), 9–26.

48 Ignacio Muñoz Cristi, “Popular Self-Management, Social Intervention, and Utopistics in the Capitalist World-System,” *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center) 38, no. 3 (2015): 219. Emphasis in the original.

49 *Ibid.*, 222.

50 *Ibid.*

51 On the political ambitions of those who had been excluded from decision-making processes before, see Jacques Rancière, *Das Unvernehmen: Politik und Philosophie*, 7th ed. (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018), 44.

Another consequence of the revolutionary events since 1789 was the creation of the “quintessential protagonist [of the modern world, i.e.] ... the bourgeois. Hero for some, villain for others, the inspiration or lure for most, he has been the shaper of the present and the destroyer of the past.”<sup>52</sup> Since the bourgeoisie, however, was merely a replacement of old aristocratic elites by a new financial elite that naturally incorporated some of the former, the historical dialectic taught by Hegel and taken up by Marx needed, at least in the latter’s interpretation,<sup>53</sup> a revolution to reach the final stage of the historical process. The proletarian revolution was thus supposed to open and clear the path toward it after a limited political “interregnum,” i.e., the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>54</sup> The role of the bourgeois as the new ruling elite and the shortcomings of the French and American Revolutions in particular with regard to creating a totally equal society led to the formulation of a “two-stage theory of national revolution,” according to which “socialist parties have the responsibility not only to carry out the proletarian (or second-stage) revolution but also to play a very large role in carrying out the bourgeois (or first-stage) revolution. The argument is that the first stage is historically ‘necessary’ and that, since the national bourgeoisie in question has ‘betrayed’ its historic role, it becomes incumbent on the proletariat to play this role for it.”<sup>55</sup>

Considering world-systems theory here, one would argue that the existent world-system was not sufficiently transformed. The frustration with this, in combination with the further industrialization needed due to the intensification of the capitalist accumulation process, inevitably caused further frictions within the world-system and, sooner or later, stimulated a new revolutionary attempt to transform the status quo. Wallerstein highlighted that the polarization caused by capital’s further centralization in the world-system’s core would have a significant effect on the continuously changing social strata within it

---

52 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 324.

53 On Hegel’s idea of a single historical “storyline,” see Joshua Foa Dienstag, “Building the Temple of Memory: Hegel’s Aesthetic Narrative of History,” *The Review of Politics* 56, no. 4 (1994): 697. On the similarities between Marx and Hegel, see, among others, Peter Knapp, “Hegel’s Universal in Marx, Durkheim and Weber: The Role of Hegelian Ideas in the Origin of Sociology,” *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 4 (1986): 590–595.

54 Mike Schmeitzner, “Lenin und die Diktatur des Proletariats: Begriff, Konzeption, Ermöglichung,” *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* 14, no. 1 (2017): 17–69.

55 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 328.

and thereby increase the tension between two opposing classes, namely the bourgeoisie and the proletarian working class.<sup>56</sup>

The order that had been established by the French Revolution and the following events was shaken in 1848, the other pillar of Hobsbawm's "age of revolution,"<sup>57</sup> when, according to Wallerstein, a "world-revolution ... marked a turning-point in the relations of the three ideologies – rightwing conservatism, centrist liberalism, and leftwing radicalism."<sup>58</sup> The first two would forge an alliance to secure their positions against the menace of the social revolution that could have brought an end to the existent world-system.<sup>59</sup> The radical left elements were unable to change the fate of the revolution, the European continent's "first great proletarian insurrection,"<sup>60</sup> which was eventually suppressed. This led to Wallerstein's conclusion that a revolutionary change needed to be prepared somehow to be successful, especially since spontaneous eruptions of revolutionary spirit would hardly be enough to force a change upon the world-system.<sup>61</sup> Eventually, what "began as a threat to the world liberal regime" turned out to "bec[o]me the crucible in which the dominance of liberalism in the geoculture was ensured."<sup>62</sup> The experience of 1848 naturally stimulated thoughts about revolution, but the experiences of that year also further impacted those who would not represent the radical potential for change in the decades to come.<sup>63</sup>

What Marx and Engels had only briefly touched on in their writings, namely the "dictatorship of the proletariat," played an important role in later debates about revolution, in particular in 1917,<sup>64</sup> when a semi-peripheral country was shaken and transformed by a supposedly successful revolution, though

---

56 Ibid., 329–330.

57 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe: 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962).

58 Wallerstein, "Antisystemic Movements," 159.

59 Ibid.

60 Charles Tilly, "How Protest Modernized in France, 1845 to 1855," in *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History*, eds. William Aydelotte, Allan Bogue, and Robert Fogel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 228.

61 Wallerstein, "Antisystemic Movements," 159–160.

62 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, vol. 4, 96.

63 Herfried Münkler, *Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche: Welt im Umbruch*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2021), 137–173.

64 One could mention the Mexican Revolution (1910) or the Chinese Revolution (1911) here as well.

it was corrupted and turned into a party regime instead.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, with regard to the precedent it created and its global impact throughout the 20th century,<sup>66</sup> 1917 was, as Karatasli correctly outlines, much more important for challenging and reconfiguring the modern world-system:

Especially the success of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the rising tide of proletarian revolutions and national liberation movements went beyond the preceding historical examples of the 1871 Paris commune and 1905 revolutions by demonstrating that the exploited, the oppressed and the excluded could take power, establish their own states, invent new modes of governments and successfully defend it against the ruling classes and imperialist states. In short, despite all of their shortcomings, the revolutions that took place in the early 20th century were unprecedented world-historical achievements.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, the socialist revolutions of the 20th century – Wallerstein mentioned China, Cuba, and Russia in this regard – all occurred in places where revolutionary theorists would not have expected them to happen; instead, they were waiting, too close to Marx's textual legacy, for the revolution to begin in France or Germany. According to Wallerstein, the revolutions of the 20th century

occurred in countries that, in terms of their internal economic structures in the pre-revolutionary period, had a certain minimum strength in terms of skilled personnel, some manufacturing, and other factors which made it plausible that, within the framework of a capitalist world-economy, such a country could alter its role in the world division of labor within a reasonable

- 
- 65 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 97. For a detailed analysis see Jacob, 1917. Similar developments could be observed in relation to the Chinese Revolution. Mao himself commented on this dilemma as follows: "The class struggle is by no means over. ... It will continue to be long and tortuous, and at times will even become very acute. ... Marxists are still a minority among the entire population as well as among the intellectuals. Therefore, Marxism must still develop through struggle. ... Such struggles will never end. This is the law of development of truth and, naturally, of Marxism as well." Mao Tse-Tung, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*, 7th ed. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 37–38, cited in Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 80.
- 66 Frank Jacob and Riccardo Altieri, eds., *Die Wahrnehmung der Russischen Revolutionen 1917: Zwischen utopischen Träumen und erschütterter Ablehnung* (Berlin: Metropol, 2019).
- 67 Karatasli, "The Twenty-First Century Revolutions," 307.

period (say 30–50 years) by the use of the technique of mercantilist semi-withdrawal.<sup>68</sup>

This is not surprising, as the following discussion of the interrelationship between semi-periphery and revolution will show. All of the countries in question possessed an ambition to rise within the structures of the existent world-system, either by economic exploitation or through war.<sup>69</sup> The latter, however, triggered the revolution in its Russian context and, at least momentarily, imperiled its rise to the core. This was especially since the bipolar world after the Second World War was still far away, and communism had to negotiate its way through numerous wars and political reconfigurations before the world would be dominated by two antagonist cores during the Cold War.<sup>70</sup>

The events of 1968 were probably the most important to Wallerstein as they were the closest to his own experiences. For Wallerstein, who wrote from an American perspective, the “end of the Second World War marked the onset of two important cyclical shifts in the history of the modern world-system. It marked both the beginning of a Kondratieff A-phase and the moment of undisputed hegemony in the world-system of the United States.”<sup>71</sup> For Wallerstein, 1968 was a global revolution, and although the events have been studied in national and regional contexts ever since,<sup>72</sup> he argued that “it was a single revolution. It was marked by demonstrations, disorder, and violence in many parts of the world over a period of at least three years. Its origins, consequences, and lessons cannot be analyzed correctly by appealing to the particular circumstances of the local manifestations of this global phenomenon, however much the local factors conditioned the details of the political and social struggles in

---

68 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 100.

69 Ibid.

70 Frank Jacob and Tobias Hirschmüller, “War and Communism in the Age of Extremes: An Introduction,” in *War and Communism: The Violent Consequences of Ideological Warfare in the 20th Century*, eds. Frank Jacob and Tobias Hirschmüller (Paderborn: Schöningh/Brill, 2022), 1–58.

71 Wallerstein, “Antisystemic Movements,” 161. He considered the timespan of “undisputed hegemony” to be relatively short, namely 25–50 years. Ibid., 162.

72 Works with different foci on the events and their impact include Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: MQUP, 2007); George Katsiaficas, *Global Imagination of 1968: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018); A. James McAdams and Anthony P. Monta, eds., *Global 1968: Cultural Revolutions in Europe and Latin America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021).

each locality.”<sup>73</sup> Wallerstein emphasized the impact of this “world revolution” for his world-system analysis “as *the* crucial moment in which the hegemony of liberalism in the geoculture of the modern world-system was effectively challenged.”<sup>74</sup> Unsurprisingly, Wallerstein tried to connect the events to his understanding of the modern world-system and therefore expressed some theses related to this assumption, primarily that “1968 was a revolution *in* and *of* the world-system.”<sup>75</sup> Following this, all the single forms and formations of protest were part of “one of the great, formative events in the history of our modern world-system, the kind we call watershed events.”<sup>76</sup>

Wallerstein also considered the events of 1968 to be directed first and foremost against the US hegemony within the existent world-system, while in the period of decolonization when the Cold War gained momentum, the “US leadership sought to create a united front at home by minimizing internal class conflict, through economic concessions to the skilled, unionized, working class on the one hand, and through enlisting US labor in the worldwide anti-Communist crusade on the other hand.”<sup>77</sup> However, new social movements had formed, and apparently dead political ideas, e.g., anarchist ones,<sup>78</sup> were revived during the global protests in 1968, proving that the “death notice may have been premature.”<sup>79</sup> The new protest movements “were led largely by young people who had grown up in a world where the traditional antisystemic movements in their countries were not in an early phase of mobilization but had already achieved their intermediate goal of state power.”<sup>80</sup> Consequently,

---

73 Immanuel Wallerstein, “1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries,” ed. Sharon Zukin, *Theory and Society* 18, no. 4 (1989): 431.

74 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 355. My emphasis.

75 Ibid. My emphasis.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 357. The Cold War was not really “cold” for Wallerstein, especially not on the periphery. See Immanuel Wallerstein, “What Cold War in Asia? An Interpretative Essay,” in *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, eds. Hong Liu, Michael Szonyi, and Yangwen Zheng (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 15–24. On the “peripheries of the Cold War,” see Frank Jacob, ed., *Peripheries of the Cold War* (Würzburg: K&N, 2015).

78 George Woodcock had declared anarchism to be dead in 1962. George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962).

79 Carl Levy and Matthew S. Adams, “Introduction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*, eds. Carl Levy and Matthew S. Adams (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3.

80 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 359.

they, too, longed for a transformation of the world-system at hand. This, however, also led to internal struggles within the political left, namely between the old and new left,<sup>81</sup> about the course and methods of the revolutionary struggle. However, “[t]he revolution of 1968 had ... a particularly strong component of unplanned spontaneity and therefore, as the thesis says, counter-culture became part of the revolutionary euphoria.”<sup>82</sup>

Of course, 1968, like other “[l]egacies of watershed-events,” caused “complex phenomena” that are hard to grasp, but the challenges for the world-system’s structure were obvious. It was not the first global protest movement,<sup>83</sup> and bonds and connections between radical elements of national societies had been forged much earlier,<sup>84</sup> but 1968 also marked a diversification of a global revolutionary interest group that was no longer divided into a leading working class and other minorities but united through their shared non-acceptance of the status quo.<sup>85</sup> For Wallerstein, the “triumph of the Revolution of 1968” was marked by the changes it achieved concerning “the legal situations (state policies) ... the situations within the antisystemic movements ... [and previously existent] mentalities.”<sup>86</sup> It is debatable how “triumphant” 1968 really was, but like any other revolution, the demands had been expressed and could hardly be ignored in the future, although in many regards, the aims of the global protesters have still not been achieved. According to Wallerstein, since 1968, six different anti-systemic movements have co-existed. Although they were relatively hostile during the revolutionary events, especially since “all six varieties have some significant antisystemic heritage, some continuing antisystemic resonance, and some further antisystemic potential,”<sup>87</sup> most still exist and (some-

---

81 Philipp Gassert and Martin Klimke, eds., 1968: *On the Edge of World Revolution* (Montréal/New York: Black Rose Books, 2018); Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, ed., 1968: *Eine Wahrnehmungsrevolution? Horizont-Verschiebungen des Politischen in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* (Berlin: Oldenbourg, 2013); Michael Walzer, “La Nueva Izquierda: 1968 y post scriptum,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 63 (2018): 85–97.

82 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 361.

83 Marcel Bois, “1916–1921: Ein globaler Aufruhr,” in *Zeiten des Aufruhrs (1916–1921): Globale Proteste, Streiks und Revolutionen gegen den Ersten Weltkrieg und seine Auswirkungen*, eds. Marcel Bois and Frank Jacob (Berlin: Metropol, 2020), 13–57.

84 Frank Jacob and Mario Keßler, eds., *Transatlantic Radicalism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021).

85 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 361–365.

86 *Ibid.*, 364.

87 *Ibid.*, 366.

times) intersectionally overlap today. Wallerstein categorized these six movements as follows:

(a) In the Western countries, there are “old left” movements in the form of the trade-unions and segments of the traditional left parties. [...]. (b) In the same Western countries, there is a wide variety of new social movements [...].<sup>88</sup> (c) In the socialist bloc, there are the traditional Communist parties in power [...]. (d) In this same socialist bloc, a network is emerging of extra-party organizations quite disparate in nature, which seem increasingly to be taking on some of the flavor of Western new social movements [...]. (e) In the [so-called] Third World, there are segments of those traditional national liberation movements still in power ... or heirs to such movements no longer in power [...]. (f) And finally, in these same ... countries, there are new movements that reject some of the “universalist” themes of previous movements (seen as “Western” themes) and put forward “indigenist” forms of protest, often in religious clothing.<sup>89</sup>

The revolutionary wave of 1968 was consequently very diverse, presenting a conglomerate of protest formations, but just as 1848 had failed in the 19th century, as Giovanni Arrighi, Terrence Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein remarked, the 20th-century protesters were also unsuccessful because “the bubble of popular enthusiasm and radical innovations was burst within a relatively short period.”<sup>90</sup>

Other world-system scholars do not consider the impact of 1968 as tremendous as Wallerstein did. To name just one example, Valentine M. Moghadam argued that “[i]t seems more appropriate to call 1968 a dress rehearsal for the events of the new century – the anti-globalization protests, the World Social Forum, and the Latin American pink tide starting in 2001; and in 2011, the Arab Spring, the European anti-austerity summer, and the American Occupy Wall Street encampments.”<sup>91</sup> However, she also considered the impact on the Arab Spring(s) of some of the protest movements that, in Wallerstein’s view, formed

---

88 These represented minorities of all sorts.

89 Ibid., 365.

90 Giovanni Arrighi, Terrence Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, “1968: The Great Rehearsal,” in *Revolution in the World-System*, ed. Terry Boswell (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 19–20.

91 Valentine M. Moghadam, “The Semi-Periphery, World Revolution, and the Arab Spring: Reflections on Tunisia,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 23, no. 2 (2017): 624.

or were formally established in or after 1968.<sup>92</sup> The developments in the MENA region, i.e., what were called the “new Arab revolutions,”<sup>93</sup> among other things, were, in fact, revolutionary and related to the world-system. As a consequence of the events since 2011, this also had a tremendous impact on the world-system because it began to change or reconfigure its original realms due to immense movements within the world-system's different zones or spheres and contesting worldviews.<sup>94</sup> Among these, once again, was the question of the geography of revolutions.<sup>95</sup> Again, the revolutionary movements seemed to be particularly strong in the semi-periphery. As mentioned before, it therefore makes sense to take a closer look at the relationship between revolutions and the “buffer zone” of the world-system, which tends to separate core and periphery to avoid direct contact between the exploiter and the exploited. Consequently, the next section will try to make a point for a better understanding of the semi-periphery's revolutionary potential and its role in protest formations directed against an existent world-system.

### The Semi-Periphery as Control Mechanism and Revolutionary Space

Wallerstein's semi-periphery, an intermediate between core and center that was also “theorized to be a blended mix of core and peripheral activities,”<sup>96</sup> seems to be a particularly lively space for revolutionary developments that intend to change the current status of a country or region within the world-system. The co-existence of peripheral and core elements within the same realm makes a clash between these two parts of the ambivalent world-system much more likely, intensifying the revolutionary potential in the intermediate sphere. Although it exists, in a way, to flatten the dichotomy between core and periphery and to avoid the peripheral regions of the world-system directly

92 Ibid., 625.

93 Farhad Khosrokhavar, *The New Arab Revolutions that Shook the World* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

94 Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

95 David N. Livingstone and Charles J. Withers, eds., *Geography and Revolution* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

96 Albert J. Bergesen, “World-System Theory after Andre Gunder Frank,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 21, no. 1 (2015): 147.

contesting the core, it is hardly surprising that revolutions very often take place in semi-peripheral regions. The following section intends to explain this interrelationship in some detail.

The modern world-system as a concept is, according to Albert J. Bergesen, “defined by a core-periphery division of labor which would include any inter-regional, inter-societal, or even inter-city division of labor with a dominant center and a dependent edge, e.g. with a core and periphery.”<sup>97</sup> In the modern world, as Wallerstein argued with regard to this dichotomic divide, there exist

symbiotic dyads of barbarian and civilized, non-Western and Western, periphery and core, proletarian and bourgeois, the dominated and the dominant, the oppressed and the oppressors. None of these pairs of terms involve two separate phenomena brought into (external) relationship with one another. Rather the terms represent positions on a continuum which are the outcome of a single process. The creation of the one was the creation of the other – both materially and ideologically.<sup>98</sup>

These dichotomies were emblematic of the world-system; the periphery and semi-periphery served the core’s main interests and were even only created or turned into such by the expansion of the regions or states that would later determine the core by their power and wealth. This, however, also emphasizes that neither the core nor the other two spheres of the world-system were supposed to be or should be understood as static. The world-system fluctuates, and the positions within it can change through historical processes of advance or decline, technological shifts, or even the end of factors that determine its shape at a particular historical moment.

This was a natural development that nevertheless seems to have been camouflaged by traditional narratives because historical traditions were reinvented to match the self-perception of a nation, especially with regard to artificial continuities that legitimized one’s own superiority, often in abstraction to other regions of the world or the world-system.<sup>99</sup> “Tradition,” as Wallerstein highlighted, “is always a contemporary social creation. Civilizations are the way we describe our particularities in terms of millennial heritages. We are not free to be totally arbitrary. There must be some surface plausibility to the

---

97 *Ibid.*, 148.

98 Wallerstein, “Civilizations and Modes of Production,” 1.

99 *Ibid.*, 2–4.

continuities asserted.<sup>100</sup> Although modernity, or whatever we tend to call it, has been dominated by one capitalist world-system, “[h]istorically, there have been countless mini-systems, a large but countable number of world-empires, a similarly large but countable number of world-economies.”<sup>101</sup> The latter were transformed – although not exclusively<sup>102</sup> – by revolutions that also consolidated the modern world-system. However, the latter’s existence has also been contested by revolutionary events directed against the nature and shape of this system itself. The semi-periphery was supposed to avoid such anti-systemic revolutionary eruptions between the extreme positions in the world-system, i.e., the core and the periphery, as direct contacts or exchanges between these zones might have automatically increased the revolutionary potential in a given time frame.

In the world-system, i.e., “a system of unequal exchange, the semi-peripheral country stands in between in terms of the kinds of products it exports and in terms of the wage levels and profit margins it knows.”<sup>103</sup> In this regard, the semi-periphery prevents the exploited from being too close to their exploiters, thereby seeming to ease the process of exploitation as such. At the same time, the semi-periphery prevents too much anger about one’s peripheral position because it offers a suitable and achievable dream of advance without the overwhelming effect of the core experience that would bluntly show why people in the periphery were poor. The semi-periphery exists because the world-system, according to Wallerstein, “could not function without being tri-modal.”<sup>104</sup>

The capitalist world system needs a semi-peripheral sector for two reasons: one primarily political and one politico-economic. The political reason is very straightforward and rather elementary. A system based on unequal

---

100 Ibid., 4.

101 Ibid., 5.

102 Wallerstein argues in this regard: “Since world-empires operated structurally in a cycle of expansion and contraction, they were continuously abolishing mini-systems by absorbing them and later ‘releasing’ zones within which new mini-systems could be created. World-economies were inherently much more unstable than world-empires, and were constantly either being converted into world-empires by conquest or disintegrating, allowing mini-systems to re-emerge.” Ibid., 6.

103 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Dependence in an Interdependent World: The Limited Possibilities of Transformation within the Capitalist World Economy,” *African Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (1974): 6.

104 Ibid., 3.

reward must constantly worry about political rebellion of oppressed elements. A polarized system with a small distinct high-status and high-income sector facing a relatively homogeneous low-status and low-income sector including the overwhelming majority of individuals in the system leads quite rapidly to the formation of classes *für sich* and acute, disintegrating struggle. The major political means by which such crises are averted is the creation of “middle” sectors, which tend to think of themselves primarily as better off than the lower sector rather than as worse off than the upper sector. This obvious mechanism, operative in all kinds of social structures, serves the same function in world systems.<sup>105</sup>

Of course, it would be too simple to generalize everything within the world according to such a tri-modal system, and Wallerstein himself pointed out that “it would be an oversimplification not to bear in the front of our mind that each structural sector contains states of varying degrees of political and economic strength.”<sup>106</sup> However, it is precisely this complexity and co-existence of differences within the semi-periphery that makes it a hotbed for revolutionary change; because of its closeness to both the core, which turns into a supposedly achievable aim, and the periphery, which resembles a possible decline, the different elements within the semi-periphery struggle against each other. If poverty were sufficient as a reason for revolution, we could probably better predict this relatively unpredictable social phenomenon.<sup>107</sup> Instead, it is the simultaneous co-existence of both possibilities, poverty and social advancement, that seems to allow revolutionary movements to gain ground, especially if the chances for social change coexist with a weakness of the ruling regime, whose elites look too often to the core status they want to achieve, forgetting the peripheral elements that are still part of their own sphere.

As capitalism, and thereby the modern world-system on which it is based, “is a system based on the logic of the endless accumulation of capital,”<sup>108</sup> it simply cannot exist without the exploitation of many for the benefit of a few. To put it in Wallersteinian terms, the core can only exist through and by exploiting the rest of the world-system. For those in the core region, the system is supposed to remain static with regard to their own position because

---

105 Ibid., 4.

106 Ibid., 5.

107 Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionstheorie*, trans. Karl Römer (Cologne/Berlin: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1971), 141; Jacob, #*Revolution*, 57–69.

108 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 335.

[c]apitalists do not want competition, but monopoly. They seek to accumulate capital not via profit but via rent. They want not to be bourgeois but to be aristocrats. And since historically – that is, from the sixteenth century to the present – we have had a deepening and a widening of the capitalist logic in the capitalist world-economy, there is more not less monopoly, there is more rent and less profit, there is more aristocracy and less bourgeoisie.<sup>109</sup>

At the same time, however, the static continuation of the division of the spheres within the world-system must be camouflaged, as the only thing that keeps people and their possible revolutionary potential in check is hope: the hope to end their lives in the (semi-)periphery and work as part of the core. Therefore, the world-system needs the semi-periphery to provide such immediate hope for social advancement for everyone if they only work hard enough to make their way up. Of course, there are people who, due to migration and their participation in the world's exploitative system, will eventually pave the way for some to the core. Hence, some also return from the core to lead the revolutionary movement in their sphere of origin because they no longer intend to accept the given order of the world-system.

Alongside such conscience-related forms of protest formation, which were particularly important during the age of decolonization in the aftermath of the Second World War, there are other reasons why some regions of the world-system revolt against their place or rank within it. For instance, the American Revolution was triggered, at least to some extent, by the rivalry between the different interests of American colonial and British businesses.<sup>110</sup> While it did not involve all parts of colonial American society – which itself could be understood as a mini-system of core, semi-periphery, and periphery, with different interest groups within these spheres<sup>111</sup> – the eventual clash between the semi-peripheral elites of the colony and the core elites could not be prevented. This clash culminated within the American Revolution, although this was less of a social and more of an economic struggle between two spheres of the 18th-century world-system. One can consequently argue that proximity to and rivalry

109 Ibid., 339.

110 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, vol. 3: *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s-1840s* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1989), 196 and 202. See also Jonathan Leitner, "Classical World-Systems Analysis, the Historical Geography of British North America, and the Regional Politics of Colonial/Revolutionary New York," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 24, no. 2 (2018): 409.

111 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3: 237.

with the core stimulates revolutionary developments in the semi-periphery, especially since the advance to become the core would demand a contesting approach toward the latter rather than an attempt to fuse with it. Bearing the three parts of the slogan made famous by the French Revolution in mind, i.e., “liberty, equality, fraternity,” the American Revolution was interested in “liberty in the political arena [and] equality in the economic arena,” but not so much in “fraternity in the socio-cultural arena.”<sup>112</sup> Although this made the revolutionary process in the American context rather “half-hearted,”<sup>113</sup> it showed which elements and competitions turned the semi-periphery into a revolutionary space.

At the same time, a revolution demanding liberty, for Wallerstein, could not exist without the concomitant equality that would be achieved through it:

The antinomy of liberty and equality seems to be absurd. I don't really understand myself how one can be “free” if there is inequality, since those who have more always have options that are not available to those who have less, and therefore the latter are less free. And similarly I don't really understand how there can be equality without liberty since, in the absence of liberty, some have more political power than others, and hence it follows that there is inequality. I am not suggesting a verbal game here but a rejection of the distinction. Liberty-equality is a single concept.<sup>114</sup>

When liberty, especially in the semi-periphery, only exists for the small elite that exploits the majority of the sphere to keep its position on top and obtain a chance to move toward the core, the revolutionary potential almost naturally increases. The world-system's “standard systemic features of hierarchy and exploitation”<sup>115</sup> – in particular through unequal trade<sup>116</sup> – polarized the world. However, it also created such polarization in the middle of its extremes, namely in the semi-periphery, which keeps the core and the periphery from having direct contact. Underdevelopment was therefore politically intended and “a consequence of historical capitalism.”<sup>117</sup>

---

112 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 371.

113 For a more detailed debate of this evaluation, see Frank Jacob, 1776: *Die halbherzige Revolution* (Marburg: Büchner, 2023).

114 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 371.

115 Wallerstein, “Antisystemic Movements,” 158.

116 Wallerstein, *Welt-System-Analyse*, 17.

117 *Ibid.*, 18. On a related argument, see also Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972).

It was European expansion during the “long sixteenth century (1450–1640)”<sup>118</sup> that created the three spheres of the world-system, while capitalism, even before nation-states were established,<sup>119</sup> divided the world into these spheres to serve the economic purpose of accumulating capital through exploitation. The core regions gained from “the strength of the state-machinery” that allowed them to better control the periphery from afar so that “intervention of outsiders via war, subversion, and diplomacy [was usually] the lot of peripheral states.”<sup>120</sup> In the divided world-system, it was consequently clear where and why the influence of the core had the most negative impact, but in most cases, the periphery was not the stage for revolutionary attempts to change the existent system. The semi-periphery, on the other hand, seems to have had more revolutionary potential, although its natural role in the world-system was supposed to achieve the opposite. According to Wallerstein,

The semi-periphery is needed to make a capitalist world-economy run smoothly. Both kinds of world-system, the world-empire with a redistributive economy and the world-economy with a capitalist market economy, involve markedly unequal distribution of rewards. Thus, logically, there is immediately posed the question of how it is possible politically for such a system to persist. [...] The semi-periphery is then assigned as it were a specific economic role, but the reason is less economic than political. That is to say, one might make a good case that the world-economy would function every bit as well without a semi-periphery. But it would be far less *politically* stable, for it would mean a polarized world-system. The existence of the third category means precisely that the upper stratum is not faced with the *unified* opposition of all the others because the *middle* stratum is both exploited and exploiter. It follows that the specific economic role is not all that important, and has thus changed through the various historical stages of the modern world-system.<sup>121</sup>

However, from a revolution-oriented analysis, this middle stratum stimulates the particular danger of the semi-periphery as a revolutionary space. Nowhere else in the world system is an advance to the core and a decline to the periphery as close as in the semi-periphery. Nowhere else do the core and the periphery

---

118 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 93.

119 *Ibid.*, 87.

120 *Ibid.*, 89.

121 *Ibid.*, 89 and 91. Emphasis in original.

coexist as close as in this sphere. This is why the social and political conflicts related to this dichotomy are particularly strong and intensify the revolutionary potential for a violent change of or within the world-system. For Moghadam, the “theorization of the semi-periphery is one of the most significant conceptual contributions to our understanding of both the global economy and cycles of contention.”<sup>122</sup> I would add that only a closer analysis of the semi-periphery will allow a better understanding of the development of revolutions as a consequence of global exploitation and further explain the interrelation of anti-globalizing social movements in the semi-periphery.<sup>123</sup>

### **Conclusion: Revolutions of the Future and the Role of the World-System**

When the three-layered structure of the world-system that Wallerstein established is contested or changed, the whole system begins to disintegrate and transform.<sup>124</sup> In this regard, the world-system seems to be flexible, and the semi-periphery is where this flexibility is supposedly the most visible. Since capitalism is based on the exploitation of labor and its value, as a system, it “requires movement and change, at least formal change. The maximal accumulation of capital requires not only goods and capital to circulate but manpower as well. It requires in addition a constant evolution in the organization of production in terms both of the nature of the leading sectors and of the sites of production.”<sup>125</sup> While these changes constantly happen, capitalism also creates a strong polarization, especially with regard to the core and the periphery as the extremes within the world-system. Next to the spherical polarization, there is also a strong social polarization, with the exploited poor majority of the world on the one hand and the exploiting rich minority on the other. These polarizations are particularly felt in the semi-periphery, which is why the forces contesting this systematic polarized exploitation often begin to move there. What

---

122 Moghadam, “The Semi-Periphery,” 620.

123 Moghadam emphasized this relation as well: “What I find especially interesting is the correlation of semi-peripheral development with both the evolution of capitalism and the emergence of revolutions and rebellions.” Ibid. See also Valentine M. Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 72–73.

124 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 90.

125 Ibid., 270.

we consider revolutionary movements directed against globalization are, in fact, anti-capitalist and anti-world-system movements that intend to dissolve the capitalist system of control within the particular sphere where the revolutionary fire is sparked, i.e., the semi-periphery. The world-system as such, including its shape and structure, can be contested because, as Wallerstein remarked,

the capitalist world-economy is an historical system. And being historical, it has a life cycle and, as any other such system, must at some point cease to function as the consequence of the aggregated results of its eventually paralyzing contradictions. But it is also a system which is based on a particular logic, that of the ceaseless accumulation of capital. Such a system therefore must preach the possibility of limitless expansion.<sup>126</sup>

When the accumulation of capital can no longer be achieved through new resources and the exploitation of them and a global labor force, the system will have to be rearranged. This can be done through revolution, as often occurs in the semi-periphery. On the other hand, it can also be contested by war, especially those waged for the control of access to resources to be exploited in the future.

When the ideological explanation of Western superiority is challenged, a politically and economically motivated underdevelopment will be made visible. This in itself stimulates revolutions against Western control and capitalist exploitation, as in the age of decolonization after the Second World War. Given what has been discussed in this chapter, one could argue that revolutions are as modern as the world-system because they are a by-product of the latter's existence. The waves of revolution express the wish to contest the structure of the world-system and one's position within it, yet at the same time, they pose a threat to its very existence. That these revolutions often start within the semi-periphery is hardly surprising, even though this sphere was supposed to stabilize the world-system. In reality, its existence often triggers social and political conflicts that turn into dangerous revolutionary processes, within which the counter-revolutionary forces intend to keep the world-system unchallenged and unchanged. The revolution of 1968, according to Wallerstein, contested the status quo in different ways, as it not only questioned the role of scientists in

---

126 *Ibid.*, 271.

maintaining the existent situation but also highlighted the position of those minorities who were particularly exploited through and by the system.<sup>127</sup>

Revolutions consequently must continue to exist as long as the foundation of the world-system is exploitation. This means that capitalism is a root for revolutionary change, and although this has been interpreted and contested differently in the past,<sup>128</sup> revolutions' success was rather limited: "Reformers and revolutionaries have been trying to shore up socialist principles and practices for over a century, and though millions of people have been dragged out of poverty and hunger in some parts of the world, arguably the global situation today is as bad as it has ever been."<sup>129</sup> Regardless of the failures of the past, revolutions, and in particular worldwide revolutionary movements, i.e., "time-bound clusters of local, national, and transnational struggles,"<sup>130</sup> will continue to challenge the world-system's existence. Wallerstein himself hoped that humanity would at one point achieve a "socialist world-government,"<sup>131</sup> which has evidently not yet been achieved. The rejection of the Enlightenment and the necessity to overcome capitalist exploitation through revolution by the "harbingers of doom"<sup>132</sup> has been successful. However, it remains to be seen if the revolutionary dream can overcome the modern world-system, opening the door to a post-modern, post-world-system, free, and equal future society that is no longer a utopian dream but a social and democratic reality for all.

## Works Cited

- Achcar, Gilbert. *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013.
- Arrighi, Giovanni, Terrence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein. "1968: The Great Rehearsal." In *Revolution in the World-System*, edited by Terry Boswell, 19–31. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- Bergesen, Albert J. "World-System Theory after Andre Gunder Frank." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 21, no. 1 (2015): 147–161.

---

127 Wallerstein, *Welt-System-Analyse*, 22.

128 Leslie Sklair, "World Revolution or Socialism, Community by Community, in the Anthropocene?" *Journal of World-Systems Research* 25, no. 2 (2019): 298.

129 *Ibid.*, 300.

130 Moghadam, "The Semi-Periphery," 623.

131 Wallerstein, "Civilizations and Modes of Production," 5.

132 *Ibid.*, 9.

- Blair, Jennifer, and Marion Werner. "New Geographies of Uneven Development in Global Formation: Thinking with Chase-Dunn." *Journal of World-System Research* 23, no. 2 (2017): 604–619.
- Boatcă, Manuela. "Global Inequalities *avant la lettre*: Immanuel Wallerstein's Contribution." *Socio* 15 (2021): 71–91.
- Bois, Marcel. "1916–1921: Ein globaler Aufruhr." In *Zeiten des Aufruhrs (1916–1921): Globale Proteste, Streiks und Revolutionen gegen den Ersten Weltkrieg und seine Auswirkungen*, edited by Marcel Bois and Frank Jacob, 13–57. Berlin: Metropol, 2020.
- Boswell, Terry and William J. Dixon. "Dependency and Rebellion: A Cross-National Analysis." *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 4 (1990): 540–559.
- Boswell, Terry ed. *Revolution in the World-System*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- Bourg, Julian. *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*. Montreal: MQUP, 2007.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher. *Global Formation: Structures of the World-Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher and Thomas D. Hall. *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.
- Dabashi, Hamid. *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*. London: Zed Books, 2012.
- Engels, Friedrich. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Accessed November 25, 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/index.htm>.
- Gassert, Philipp and Martin Klimke, eds. *1968: On the Edge of World Revolution*. Montréal/New York: Black Rose Books, 2018.
- Gilcher-Holtey, Ingrid, ed. *1968: Eine Wahrnehmungsrevolution? Horizont-Verschiebungen des Politischen in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*. Berlin: Oldenbourg, 2013.
- Hindrichs, Gunnar. *Philosophie der Revolution*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962.
- Jacob, Frank. *1776: Die halbherzige Revolution*. Marburg: Büchner, 2023.
- Jacob, Frank. *1917: Die korrumpierte Revolution*. Marburg: Büchner, 2020.
- Jacob, Frank. *#Revolution: Wer, warum, wann und wie viele?* Marburg: Büchner, 2022.

- Jacob, Frank. "Friedrich Engels and Revolution Theory: The Legacy of a Revolutionary Life." In *Engels@200: Reading Friedrich Engels in the 21st Century*, edited by Frank Jacob, 49–90. Marburg: Büchner, 2020.
- Jacob, Frank, ed. *Peripheries of the Cold War*. Würzburg: K&N, 2015.
- Jacob, Frank. *Revolution and the Global Struggle for Modernity*, vol. 1: *The Atlantic Revolutions*. London: Anthem Press, 2023.
- Jacob, Frank. "Revolutionen und Weltgeschichte." In *Revolution: Beiträge zu einem historischen Phänomen der globalen Moderne*, edited by Frank Jacob and Riccardo Altieri, 11–40. Berlin: WVB, 2019.
- Jacob, Frank and Mario Kefßler, eds. *Transatlantic Radicalism*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021.
- Johnson, Chalmers. *Revolutionstheorie*. Translated by Karl Römer. Cologne/Berlin: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1971.
- Kandal, Terry R. "Revolution, Racism and Sexism: Challenges for World-System Analysis." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 25, no. 4 (1990): 86–102.
- Karatasli, Sahan Savas. "The Twenty-First Century Revolutions and Internationalism: A World-Historical Perspective." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 25, no. 2 (2019): 306–320.
- Katsiaficas, George. *Global Imagination of 1968: Revolution and Counterrevolution*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018.
- Khosrokhavar, Farhad. *The New Arab Revolutions that Shook the World*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012.
- Kondratiev, Nikolai. "About the Question of the Major Cycles of the Conjunction." [In Russian.] *Planovoe Khozyaystvo* 8 (1926): 167–181.
- Kossok, Manfred and Walter Markov. "Zur Methodologie der vergleichenden Revolutionsgeschichte der Neuzeit." In *Studien zur Vergleichenden Revolutionsgeschichte 1500–1917*, edited by Manfred Kossok, 1–28. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1974.
- Kuznar, Lawrence A. "Periphery-Core Relations in the Inca Empire: Carrots and Sticks in an Andean World System." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 2, no. 1 (1996): 322–349.
- Levy, Carl and Matthew S. Adams. "Introduction." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*, edited by Carl Levy and Matthew S. Adams, 1–23. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Leitner, Jonathan. "Classical World-Systems Analysis, the Historical Geography of British North America, and the Regional Politics of Colonial/

- Revolutionary New York." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 24, no. 2 (2018): 404–434.
- Livingstone, David N. and Charles J. Withers, eds. *Geography and Revolution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals: Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus*. Berlin: Paul Singer, 1913.
- Mao Tse-Tung. *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*. 7th ed. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966.
- McAdams, A. James and Anthony P. Monta, eds. *Global 1968: Cultural Revolutions in Europe and Latin America*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. "The Semi-Periphery, World Revolution, and the Arab Spring: Reflections on Tunisia." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 23, no. 2 (2017): 620–636.
- Motadel, David, ed. *Revolutionary World: Global Upheaval in the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Münkler, Herfried. *Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche: Welt im Umbruch*. 3rd ed. Berlin: Rowohlt, 2021.
- Muñoz Cristi, Ignacio. "Popular Self-Management, Social Intervention, and Utopistics in the Capitalist World-System." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 38, no. 3 (2015): 219–252.
- Reifer, Thomas, ed. *Globalization, Hegemony and Power: Antisystemic Movements and the Global System*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972.
- Schmeitzner, Mike. "Lenin und die Diktatur des Proletariats: Begriff, Konzeption, Ermöglichung." *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* 14, no. 1 (2017): 17–69.
- Sklair, Leslie. "World Revolution or Socialism, Community by Community, in the Anthropocene?" *Journal of World-Systems Research* 25, no. 2 (2019): 297–305.
- Smith, Jackie and Dawn Wiest. *Social Movements in the World-System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation*. New York: Russell Sage, 2012.
- Smith, Michael E. "The Aztec Empire and the Mesoamerican World System." In *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, edited by Susan E. Alcock et al., 128–154. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

- Tilly, Charles. "How Protest Modernized in France, 1845 to 1855." In *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History*, edited by William Aydelotte, Allan Bogue, and Robert Fogel, 192–255. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries." Edited by Sharon Zukin. *Theory and Society* 18, no. 4 (1989): 431–449.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "American Slavery and the Capitalist World-Economy." *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 5 (1976): 1199–1213.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Antisystemic Movements: History and Dilemmas." In Samir Amin et al., *Transforming the Revolution: Social Movements and the World-System*, 13–53. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Antisystemic Movements, Yesterday and Today." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 20, no. 2 (2014): 158–172.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Civilizations and Modes of Production: Conflicts and Convergences." *Theory and Society* 5, no. 1 (1978): 1–10.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Dependence in an Interdependent World: The Limited Possibilities of Transformation within the Capitalist World Economy." *African Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (1974): 1–26.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Development: Lodestar or Illusion?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 39 (1988): 2017–2019 and 2021–2023.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "From Feudalism to Capitalism: Transition or Transitions?" *Social Forces* 55, no. 2 (1976): 273–283.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "La Revolución Francesa Como Suceso Histórico Mundial." In *Impensar las Ciencias Sociales*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (México: S. XXI Editores 1998).
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Las Tres Hegemonías Sucesivas en la Historia de la Economía-Mundo." In *Capitalismo Histórico y Movimientos Antisistémicos*, edited by Immanuel Wallerstein, 212–223. Madrid: Akal, 2004.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Marxisms as Utopias: Evolving Ideologies." *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 6 (1986): 1295–1308.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "The Development of the Concept of Development." *Sociological Theory* 2 (1984): 102–116.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. *The Essential Wallerstein*. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. *The Modern World System*, 4 vols. New York: Academic Press, 1974–1989; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011.

- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "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.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Welt-System-Analyse: Eine Einführung*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2019.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. "What Cold War in Asia? An Interpretative Essay." In *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, edited by Hong Liu, Michael Szonyi, and Yangwen Zheng, 15–24. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010.
- Walzer, Michael. "La Nueva Izquierda: 1968 y post scriptum." *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 63 (2018): 85–97.
- Williams, Gregory P. *Contesting the Global Order: The Radical Political Economy of Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020.
- Woodcock, George. *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962.

