
5. World-systems analysis

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INTRODUCTION: THE ORIGINS OF WORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

World-systems analysis was formulated as an alternative to studying social change as the modernization process in nation-states. In the post Second World War world this modernization paradigm dominated. Inspired by American academics such as Walt Rostow (1960) the relation between the universal stages of modernization and the developmental path of individual societies dominated the social sciences. Differences between the general modernization process and the individual idiosyncrasies of national development were studied and linked to policies. For instance, the late industrialization of southern European states was linked to state policies to promote industrialization partially funded by the American Marshall Plan.

After the youth revolts in 1968, students increasingly questioned this modernization paradigm which dominated academic and political debates. The revival of the Marxist tradition undermined the assumption that everybody profited from modernization. This resulted in a growing interest in inequalities within society based on class struggle. Some shifted from studying exploitation within societies to studying the role of unequal exchanges between countries. The differences between developing and developed countries was no longer explained by the internal obstacles to development within societies, but through 'the development of underdevelopment' of Latin American, African and Asian states by Western states (Frank, 1989). The growing interest in comparisons, inequalities and international relations did not yet undermine the premise of separate national societies. The world-systems approach developed by Immanuel Wallerstein challenged the core assumption of national development within national borders. In his late twenties he studied social change in African states during the process of decolonization. He was especially interested in state formation and policies towards national integration. He tried to compare this with similar processes in other states which gained independence at other times and other places. Comparisons with Latin American states in the late eighteenth century and East European states in the beginning of the twentieth century did not seem very relevant for African states with their arbitrary colonial borders cutting through many social relations. Making such comparisons across space and time would not only be complicated but also problematic.

Did it not call for some simplifying thrust? It seemed to me it did. It was at this point that I abandoned the idea altogether of taking either the sovereign state or that vaguer concept, the national society, as the unit of analysis. I decided that neither one was a social system and that one could only speak of social change in social systems. The only social system in this

scheme was the world-system. This was of course enormously simplifying. I had one type of unit rather than units within units. (Wallerstein, 1974: 7)

Wallerstein needed a unit of analysis big enough to embody all causes of structural social changes. External influences should only have a superficial influence (Wallerstein, 1974: 3–11, 1979: 4, 220). One problem is that there are many different kinds of human behaviour with spatial boundaries that do not necessarily overlap. Cultural, political, and economic processes can all operate in different only partially overlapping areas. Wallerstein chooses economic exchanges to delimit his social system, because these relations have the biggest influence on the other spheres of human activity (Wallerstein and Hopkins, 1977: 114). This results in what Wallerstein himself calls a ‘basically materialist bias’ of the world-system theory (Wallerstein and Mosely, 1978: 284).

SOCIAL SYSTEMS: MINI-SYSTEMS, WORLD-EMPIRES AND WORLD-ECONOMIES

The present global world-system is the most important, but certainly not the only, social system in world history. Wallerstein identifies two other kinds of social systems: mini-systems and world-empires. These social systems differ in the extent to which economic, political, and cultural boundaries coincide. Mini-systems are very small social systems, with a single culture and polity. They exhibit hardly any division of labour. This means that economic, political, and cultural boundaries are identical. These systems are comparable to what others call tribal societies. They have virtually disappeared. Only some isolated indigenous tribes might nowadays be classified as mini-systems (Wallerstein, 1979: 155). The two other social systems Wallerstein distinguishes are world-systems. World-systems are much larger than mini-systems, but only the modern world-system covers the entire globe. World-systems have more complex economies in which an elite profits from the production of the masses, which are separated through a spatial division of labour between rich urban and poor rural areas. These spatial divisions are institutionalized through cultural differences between areas. The main difference between world-empires and world-economies is their political structure. A world-empire is characterized by a central administration, whereas in a world-economy numerous states oppose each other. These systems achieve integration in different ways. A world-empire is united through the political control over its economic relations. A world-economy lacks central political control and is integrated through economic exchanges. World-empires are therefore generally more stable than world-economies. The modes of production are also different. Whereas the mode of production of a world-empire is characterized by political redistribution, the mode of production of a world-economy is based on economic exchanges regulated by market forces (Wallerstein, 1974: 348–349, 1979: 5, 256).

Many world-economies had existed since the agricultural and urban revolutions thousands of years ago. The wealth generated by these world-economies commonly attracted militarily conquest through which they were transformed into a world-empire. These empires like Egypt, Greece, Persia, Rome and China used their wealth to build

imposing buildings which makes world-empires and their ancient civilizations much more visible than world-economies in world history. History is written by the victors. The European world-economy which emerged during the long sixteenth century was an exception. It was not conquered and transformed into a world-empire and over time subjugated all other mini-systems, world-economies and world-empires in the world.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN WORLD-ECONOMY

According to Wallerstein (1974) the European world-economy emerged out of the crises of feudalism in the 'long sixteenth century' covering roughly the period from 1450 to 1640. The general stagnation at the end of the Middle Ages commonly associated with the Black Death and linked to a crisis in seigniorial revenue stimulated the search for new sources of wealth overseas. This resulted in the emergence of a European world-economy covering most of Europe and the American colonies.

The commercializing of the economy in the core areas was linked to the increasing coercion in the periphery. The increased wealth in European cities was based on the colonization of the Americas with a slave based plantation economy and a growing grain trade with the Baltic based on the 'second serfdom' of landless labourers on large estates. The profits generated by the cheap imports of gold, silver and sugar from the Americas and the grain and timber from Eastern Europe enabled entrepreneurs in core states to concentrate on highly profitable industries. The economic development in peripheral states suffered from their specialization in agricultural commodities with low profit margins. The relations with Northwest Europe also hindered the emergence of an independent class of entrepreneurs and weakened the peripheral states (Wallerstein, 1974). Although some historians question the importance of the international trade links in this period (Brenner, 1977), Wallerstein points out that – unlike the historians studying this period – his goal is not to describe that period, but to analyse the roots of the emerging capitalist world-economy which only later came to full fruition (Wallerstein, 1983).

In this period the rulers of the House of Habsburg tried to transform the emerging European world-economy into a world-empire based on their territories in Spain, Italy, Germany, the Balkans, the Low Countries and their colonies in the Americas. The House of Habsburg failed to do this, while others like the Ottoman sultans and the French kings had imperial ambitions of their own (Wallerstein, 1974: 182), or opposed it like the English and the Dutch. This struggle over control of the European world-economy ended in a stalemate that created an international political system of sovereign states. This was symbolized by the Treaty of Westphalia concluded in 1648 which ended decades of wars in Europe and further institutionalized the division of the European world-economy in a multitude of sovereign territorial states. This institutionalized rivalry between states gave the European world-system its dynamic thrust. It gave the economy the necessary relative autonomy and flexibility to develop. Growing economic integration and political fragmentation went hand-in-hand. Rivalry with other states forced states to concede to the European entrepreneurs the freedom to develop trade relations and accumulate profits. Individual states could not control the large-scale trade network and the mobility of capital in the European world-economy. This

was a symbiotic relationship. States needed the financial support of the entrepreneurs to be successful in their competition with other states, while entrepreneurs in the core states profited from their political and military domination of peripheral areas. This continuing competition and the increasing tax base due to economic development, caused an ongoing build-up of their political and military strength (Wallerstein, 1974; Chase-Dunn, 1989).

After this period in which the modern world-system was created, it stagnated economically. International economic relations and production declined. The economies of the different countries became more self-sufficient in this period. Although the strength of the economic ties declined in this period, the basic structure of the European world-economy remained intact and it was not succeeded by a new world-system. It even strengthened its political structure in this period between roughly 1600 and 1750. The many wars in this period strengthened the core states and further institutionalized the interstate system of competing sovereign states. External conflicts forced European states to strengthen their bureaucracies and military. Internally, the territorial states made important progress in integrating their territories into national markets (Wallerstein, 1980).

This second phase of consolidation created the conditions for a phase of renewed expansion at the end of the eighteenth century. The military power of the European core states created new peripheries for the world-system in Africa and Asia. Only in this period did a significant gap in economic development and wealth develop between the European core and the rest of the world. This spatial expansion went hand-in-hand with the further intensification of the world-system. The economic specialization and social polarization increased to such a degree that many characterized it as an industrial revolution. Although agriculture no longer dominated the economy and the role of wage labourers increased, there was no fundamental break in the functioning of the modern world-system. The membership of the core, semi-periphery and periphery changed in this period, but the working of the market based capitalist world-economy remained the same (Wallerstein, 1980).

After this phase of expansion and intensification the modern world-system became more unstable while it became more integrated. After its further economic and political integration and spatial expansion in the previous phases, it became during the nineteenth century also more culturally integrated in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent spread of a liberal ideology which further stimulated the capitalist character of this world-economy. In this period quite similar brands of centrist liberalism became to dominate the state politics and social sciences creating a 'geoculture' (Wallerstein, 2011). After its glorious nineteenth century, the world-system entered into a more challenging period at the beginning of the twentieth century. Economic stagnations and world wars characterized the first half of the twentieth century. A renewed period of economic growth and a changing spatial division of labour characterizes the second half of the twentieth century. The European core states lost their dominant position in the world-system to new core states. The centre of the world-system shifted further westward. The USA and later Japan overtook West Europe. The more recent globalization further intensified integration and spreads semi-peripheral development towards some parts of the former periphery, especially in Asia. The modern world-system has become more dynamic and unstable and is

changing role of urban networks. His studies, for instance, show that the dominant or hegemonic position of Dutch, British and American core states in the sixteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century, was preceded by the emergence of new cities. The growth of these cities preceding the rise of these states indicates that the new developments, on which a new phase in the world-system is based, are initiated in cities (Taylor et al., 2010). Others stress that cities are not only important as hubs in economic networks, but that cities and their administrations are becoming new important political actors in the world. Cities and their mayors become more important in the current era of globalization in which especially the role of states in economic regulation is undermined (Barber, 2013; Acuto, 2013). This growing role of cities and urban networks can form the basis of a new world-system in which cities succeed states as the key political institutions (Khanna, 2011).

FROM THE OUTSIDE TO THE INSIDE: THE INCORPORATION OF EXTERNAL ARENAS INTO THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM

The modern world-system has incorporated all other world-systems and mini-systems. The character of the relations between these areas changed fundamentally upon incorporation. External arenas became incorporated in the modern world-system as a new periphery which offered new opportunities for exploitation by the entrepreneurs in the core states. This transformed these new peripheries to the needs of the capitalist world-economy.

The way goods are produced changes fundamentally upon incorporation into the capitalist world-economy. Normally there was some trade between an external arena and the modern world-system, but the goods exchanged were not specifically produced for this trade. It was a trade of surpluses which were left over after internal demands were satisfied. It was a luxury trade of goods which did not become part of the commodity chains in the capitalist world-economy. External arenas traded also with many different other parties outside the modern world-system. All this changed upon incorporation. The trade between the new peripheral areas increased in volume, became less erratic and focused on specific core states. The goods exported to the core were now specifically produced for this trade, like on the plantations in the Americas, or on the large grain estates in the Baltic. This transformed the local social structure and the economy in the peripheries so that they were able to satisfy the requirements of the profit-seeking entrepreneurs in core states. This was enforced by the powerful core states. Indigenous production structures linked to a predominantly self-sufficient production were largely destroyed and replaced by mostly large-scale foreign dominated production in the form of plantations, mining companies and later labour intensive industries. Incorporation also transformed the local political structures. When the political structures in these new peripheries were too weak to protect trade, core states created their new colonial states in these areas. This happened to most mini-systems, such as in nineteenth century Africa. World-empires like the Ottoman and Chinese empires were usually defeated militarily and subsequently transformed into territorial states which were internally strong enough to enable the new trade from which the core

states profited, but which were not so strong externally that they could resist domination by the European core states (Wallerstein, 1974; Terlouw, 1992: 65–78).

The capitalist world-economy is based on this exploitation of the periphery by the core. Based on low wages the economy in peripheries is based on the production of a few low-priced products. These cheap imports are beneficial for the core and enables the development of a much more diversified economy based on high wages and innovation. These differences between core and periphery were initially quite small, but have intensified in the last phases of the modern world-system. The types of goods exchanged between core and periphery vary between periods. The first, mostly agricultural division of labour in the modern world-system was based on importing commodities from the periphery. Grain and timber from the Baltic and plantation crops and silver from the Americas were exchanged with equipment and consumer goods for the local comprador elites. Later, the international division of labour shifted to the unequal exchange between cheap raw materials from the periphery with the expensive industrial products made in the core. Nowadays, many industrial products come from the periphery, and the core profits from its dominance of the high-tech service sector. The core and periphery in the modern world-system are not defined by their production of specific products, but by their unequal relation through which the core profits from the products produced by cheap labour in the periphery (Wallerstein, 1979).

Not only the products exchanged between core and periphery shift over time, also the position of specific areas and states in the world-system can change. Old peripheries can improve their position and become part of the semi-periphery which is in between the core and periphery. The semi-periphery also profits from trade with the periphery, but is still subject to exploitation by the core. Its economy is based on a combination of peripheral and core like products. Almost all areas which belonged to the periphery in the first phase of the modern world-system have now become semi-peripheral or even core states.

Figure 5.2 sketches the mobility in the world-system that emerges from many scattered remarks by Wallerstein on the position of states in different years (Terlouw, 2002). These maps show that only Portugal and most of Spain have always belonged to the semi-periphery. Usually, the older semi-peripheries have achieved core position by 1900, like Germany and the United States, or by 1980, like Sweden and Northern Italy. Most older peripheries have improved their position in the world-system. Only some Latin American states, like Peru, Colombia and Surinam, have always belonged to the periphery.

The existence of a semi-periphery not only helps to better classify individual states than the simple core–periphery dichotomy or describe the development of the modern world-system. The existence of a semi-periphery is also an important structural characteristic of the modern world-system. The semi-periphery depolarizes the relation between core and periphery. The exploited will always be divided and unable to unite and overthrow the system, because the strongest among them – the semi-periphery – profit from the exploitation of the periphery (Wallerstein, 1974: 348–350; Wallerstein and Hopkins, 1977).

The possibility to join the core also appeases the semi-periphery. As Figure 5.2 shows, the semi-periphery is the most dynamic part of the world-system. Its political and economic power is clearly subordinate to the core, but unlike the periphery, it has

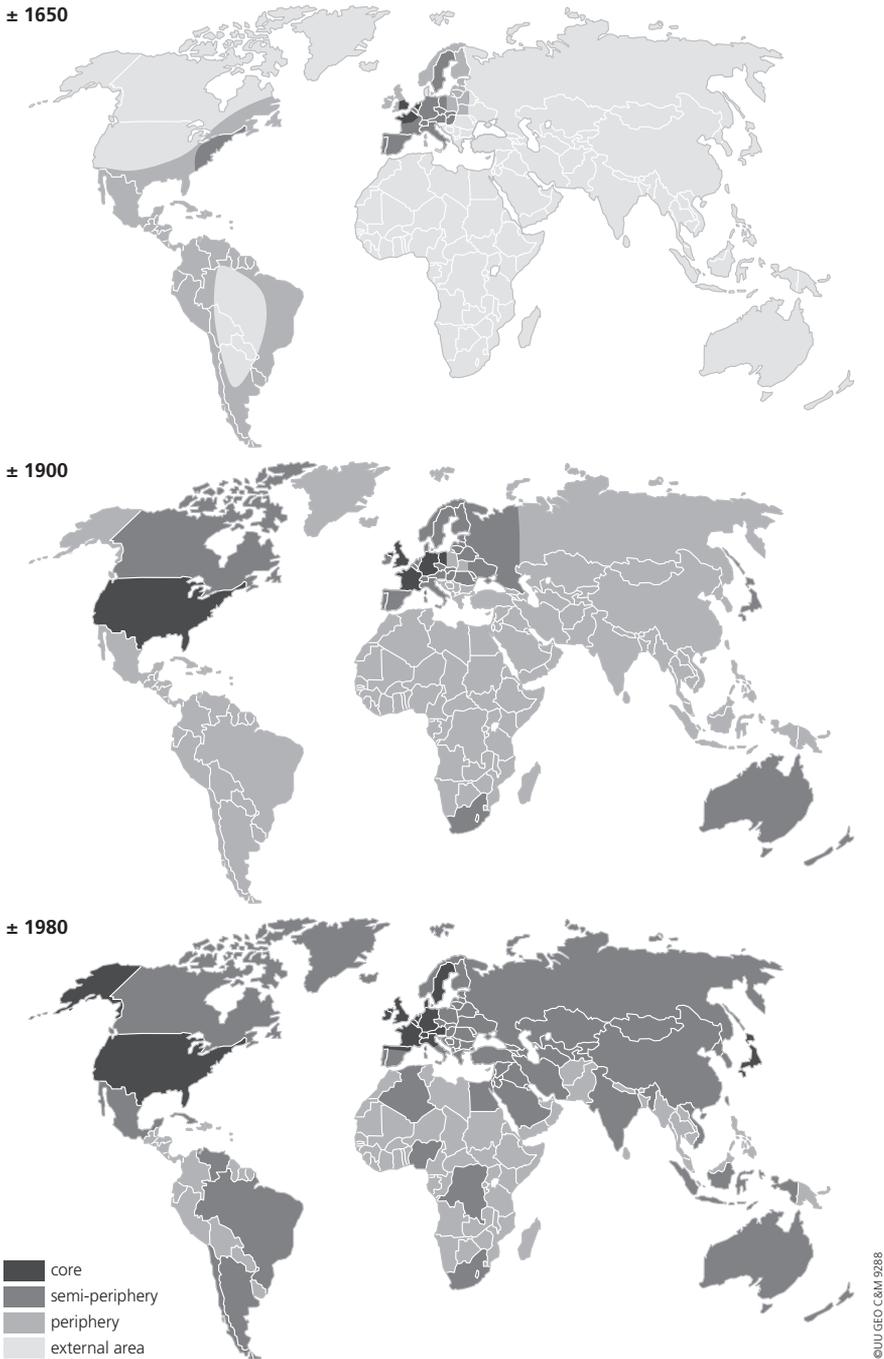


Figure 5.2 *The developing modern world-system: expansion and mobility between external arena, periphery, semi-periphery and core*

some resources to resist exploitation. In many core states institutional sclerosis and congestion stifle development, while in the periphery the absence of good government, services and skilled labour hamper development. The semi-periphery tends to have enough, but not too much regulation. The semi-periphery maximizes the need and necessity for development. Semi-peripheral development is part of the cyclical renewal of the world-system. Crises in the Kondratieff like economic long waves give opportunities to the semi-periphery. Only some semi-peripheries can transform this temporary advantage into a promotion to the core (Wallerstein and Hopkins, 1977; Wallerstein, 1979). This happened in continental European states after the Second World War and in many states in the Asian Pacific Rim in the last decades.

Periods of system wide economic stagnation interrupt the development of new industries in the core, and stimulate their redeployment. Semi-peripheral areas attract new development, while they are unburdened by the negative side effects of previous development and do not suffer from the negative spiral of underdevelopment. Labour costs are the most visible cause of this global re-division of labour, but other, more hidden, production costs, like transportation costs and environmental protection measures, are also important. This combination of lax regulation and strong developmental pressures makes the semi-periphery vulnerable to social, cultural, political and ecological conflicts.

Semi-peripheral development focuses on semi-peripheral states. Their possibility for semi-peripheral development enabled capitalism to develop. However, there is not a uniform semi-peripheral developmental path (Arrighi, 1985). Each semi-peripheral state has its own developmental path. Economic factors are important for some, while other semi-peripheral developments are more based on political factors (Terlouw, 1992).

RIVALRY AND HEGEMONY

The modern world-system not only has cycles in its economy, but also in how its politics functions. The rivalry between core states, which characterizes and strengthened the modern world-system, sometimes escalated into world wars. These end with a wide-ranging peace agreement (1648 Westphalia, 1815 Vienna, 1945 Yalta), which heralds a new period of relative peace under the hegemony of a leading member of the winning coalition not directly affected by warfare. This was the case for the Dutch United Provinces in the mid-seventeenth, the United Kingdom in the mid-nineteenth, and the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Despite the differences between these three states, they all dominated the world-system in a similar way. However, rivalry and hegemony are not completely separate phases. 'Hegemony therefore is not a state of being, but rather one end of a scale which describes the rivalry relations of great powers to each other' (Wallerstein, 1984: 39). Hegemony exists when a single core state is superior to all others in the world-system. No other state, or coalition of states, is able to threaten the superiority of the hegemonic state. But it is not omnipotent. The international system of states is still functioning in the world-system.

The other states are still strong enough to prevent the hegemonic state from transforming the modern world-system into a world-empire with a central authority (Wallerstein, 1984: 37–46).

Hegemonic states have the most advanced production process. As a result, their products were even competitive on the home markets of their rivals. The hegemonic state always dominates world trade. It even has an important role in the trade between other core states. The hegemonic state is also superior in the financial sector. It has the highest rate of return on capital, it lends money to others, and it is a net exporter of capital. Furthermore, a hegemonic state also dominates world politics. This is based on its dominant position in the world-economy and manifests itself in the military field as well. The dominant, though not necessarily unrivalled, military strength of the hegemonic state, especially in sea power, is instrumental in maintaining its dominant position (Wallerstein and Hopkins, 1977: 121, 130, Wallerstein, 1980: 38–39, 1984: 37–46).

The existence of a hegemonic state affects the way in which the world-system functions. Because of its economic superiority, a hegemonic state profits from the unrestrained functioning of the world market. A hegemonic state rarely intervenes directly in the functioning of the world market. The hegemonic state only cracks down on other states when they try to compensate for the economic weakness of their bourgeoisie through state intervention. A period of hegemony is therefore a period of relatively free trade. During a period of hegemony, semi-peripheral states have consequently little opportunity to improve their position in the world-system (Wallerstein and Hopkins, 1977: 131, Wallerstein, 1980: 38, 61, 65, 269, 1984: 37–46). But hegemony is not a stable condition of the world-system. Within the hegemonic state the production costs in the hegemonic state rise because the workers negotiate increasingly better deals with the bourgeoisie in the hegemonic state, who appease the workers in order to capitalize on their hegemonic advantage over other states. After several decades the other core states also succeed in undermining the dominant position of the hegemonic state. The liberal ideology of the hegemonic state allows the new technologies developed in the hegemonic state to spread to the other states. The other states are therefore able to catch up in this period of declining hegemony like in our present era of globalization. This is then followed by a new long period of rivalry between core states, culminating again in a world war and the emergence of a new hegemonic power (Wallerstein, 1980: 211, 241, 1979: 99, 116, 1984: 37–46).

TRENDS AND THE CRISIS OF THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM

Besides these repeating economic and political cycles, there are also trends which transform the modern world-system. These changes are not reversible like hegemony or economic stagnation. The rivalry between states generates not only a political cycle of alternating rivalry and hegemony, but also a trend of a growing role of the state in society as each state tries to improve its position in relation to the other states by strengthening its machinery. This trend undermines the profitability of the modern world-system for the bourgeoisie. Also the rising wages and welfare redistributions in the core cut into the privileged position of the bourgeoisie (Wallerstein, 1979: 499).

The bourgeoisie tries to compensate for this trend of diminishing privilege by expanding the sphere of action of the modern world-system. Traditionally, incorporating new peripheries increased the possibilities of capital accumulation. Besides this spatial expansion, the capitalist world-economy also expands its social boundaries. All kinds of social relations become more and more commercialized. Relations that were previously regulated by moral principles are now 'freed' from this constraint. Social relations become further subject to market forces. Not only subsistence farming in the periphery is commercialized, but also activities in the core households are increasingly commercialized ranging from ready-made meals to commercial hospice services.

These trends of bureaucratization, diminishing privileges for the bourgeoisie, geographic expansion, and commercialization from the cradle to the grave cannot continue forever. The world-system can hardly expand beyond the globe and at a certain moment all social activities are commercialized. Also the growth of the power of the state and the redistribution of surplus towards the proletariat deplete the resolve of the bourgeoisie to defend the present world-system against the growing resistance in the form of all different kinds of anti-systemic movements. This is a mixed bag which includes terrorist, liberation, LGBT and climate movements. This will according to Wallerstein (1979) bring the modern world-system into a structural crisis. It will be replaced by another kind of world-system.

World-systems analysis has since its formulation in the early 1970s provided an alternative to the nation-states centred modernization perspective. World-systems analysis gives a powerful analysis of how the worldwide inequalities in our world were formed and perpetuated. It places current developments like globalization into a wider historical perspective. This account of the developing modern world-system provided new viewpoints to many traditional debates in the social sciences, like the crisis of feudalism, the character of capitalism, the role of industrial revolution and the consequences of (de-)colonization. World-systems analysis has been criticized as an overbearing systems-based explanation, which does not do justice to all the peculiarities of social development, which many specialists are eager to point out. World-systems analysis does not aim to give such detailed analyses. Its goal is to point out the importance of worldwide interconnection for social change over the last centuries. As such it provided an important contribution to the debates related to globalization.

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