

Title—Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century

Author—Immanuel Wallerstein

Year—2011

Categories: World History, Economics, Capitalism

Place: The World

Time: 1450-1640

Argument Synopsis:

Immanuel Wallerstein's *Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* attempts to provide a global history using the analytical framework of a 'world-system.' This book is the first in a series that chronicle the transformation from an exclusively European world-system to a genuinely global world-system. The first volume focuses exclusively on the period of 1450-1640 and the origins of the early European world-system. A world-system is a social system, one that has boundaries structures, member groups, rules of legitimation and coherence. He explores two varieties of world-systems, which he deems world-empires and world-economies. He creates terminology for different positions within a world-system: core-states, semi-peripheral, and peripheral. World-systems are understood to be a multitude of states and territories that are intrinsically linked, so much so that events in one part of the world-system reverberate throughout.

In order to demonstrate the positions in a world-system, particularly the difference between peripheral and semi-peripheral, Wallerstein compares Russia and Eastern Europe, as well as comparing the Indian Ocean arena and Hispanic America all during the sixteenth century. His discussion of trade in Eastern Europe and Russia illuminated the central aspect of the peripheral states, being that their goods are an integral part of the world-system. Poland's wheat trade was contrasted with Russia's fur and other luxury trade to highlight the relative importance of Poland's trade with the core-states, due to the necessity of wheat. Wallerstein attempts to craft an analytical tool that can adequately analyze the entire history of the world. Wallerstein's attempt remains based in a Eurocentric understanding of modernity. The logic of his world-system theory follows that the modern world-system originated in Europe and was only dispersed globally through European trade interactions. Therefore, the world-system theory is not particularly useful in crafting histories outside of the hegemony of Eurocentrism.

World-systems theory rejects the 'country-by country' mode of analysis, highlighting the work's prominent role in the foundations of world history. Wallerstein finds that our modern capitalist world-economy has supplanted empires. The theory stems from the belief that a modern, capitalist society was the result of the economic crisis that arose the feudal societies of Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Eurocentrism is a pervasive problem in history in general, and especially in early world histories
- Division of world into spheres (core-states, semi-peripheral, peripheral) overly favors European states as the center