

# Immanuel Wallerstein, A major thinker for another possible world, for a better world

Wednesday 11 September 2019, by [AGUITON Christophe](#), [MASSIAH Gustave](#) (Date first published: 2 September 2019).

**Immanuel Wallerstein has left us, we feel a great sadness and emptiness. It is a great loss that we will no longer be able to discuss and debate with one of the people to whom we were intellectually closest and who counted so much.**

Immanuel represented the best imaginable figure of the committed intellectual, in the line of the great intellectuals who have given scientific, cultural and political thought their letters of nobility. He was first of all a great philosopher. His philosophy was nourished by his knowledge of the social sciences to which he contributed and in which he excelled. As an economist, he extended the Marxist approach and participated in its renewal. As an historian, he navigated long history and created the Fernand Braudel Centre at State University of New York at Binghamton. As a sociologist, he was attentive to the evolution and understanding of societies and chaired the International Sociological Association from 1994 to 1998.

Immanuel was an outstanding teacher. He did not impose his lessons. He had the rare ability to dare to think aloud for his audience. His courses and seminars were moments of great creation; they allowed us to deepen, to cross approaches, to always hang on to realities. We were always discovering new proposals, dives into history, reasons to get involved. He also knew how to galvanize large audiences. A memory, among many others: at the World Social Forum in Detroit in June 2010, Immanuel at the centre of lively discussions lasting several hours with an enthusiastic audience of hundreds of young people sitting on the floor.

Immanuel was first of all a specialist in African societies after independence. In the early 1970s, a period when, under the impact of the movements of 1968, new intellectual approaches appeared and developed, he was one of those who developed a new way of understanding social realities: the analysis of "world systems". This approach appeared at the confluence of several major ruptures dating back to the 1960s and even the 1950s.

Immanuel had participated in the Braudelian adventure of the history of capitalism. He shared with Fernand Braudel a passion for long time and the "grammar of civilizations". He crossed this Braudelian approach of long time with the approach and questions arising from Marxism and the "theories of dependence". The theories of dependence criticized the analysis of underdevelopment as being linked to the backwardness of a country and opposed it with the idea that the cause was the very development of the capitalist system in which these countries participated in an unequal exchange. Based on an economic analysis (Raul Prebisch, Andre Gunder Frank), dependency theorists broadened their approach by integrating a philosophical (Enrique Dussel) and sociological (Anibal Quijano) critique of the "colonial difference" that was from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century the mechanism that marginalized non-Western knowledge. Anibal Quijano showed that "coloniality" was an omnipresent dimension of modernity: the emergence of the triangular transatlantic trade constituted, at the same time, modernity, capitalism and coloniality based on a hierarchy between

racés.

At the same time, independent Marxists, mostly Anglo-Saxon, were working on the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Paul Sweezy, an American economist, focused on exogenous factors, particularly trade flows, to explain the evolution of European feudal societies. These debates, like those posed by theorists of dependence, had direct political consequences: they made it possible to question the orientation of the communist parties, which intended to respect the stages of the evolution of societies - capitalism should succeed feudalism - and which confined social and political struggles within the national spheres.

We can find Immanuel's innovative analysis of the capitalist world system in *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Duke University Press, 2004. (*Comprendre le monde, analyse des Systèmes mondes* Ed. La Découverte 2009). Immanuel offers a presentation of the beginnings of capitalism in the first of his four-volume *The Modern World-System*, vol. I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century. New York/London: Academic Press, 1974. (**Capitalisme et économie monde 1450-1640**, Ed. Flammarion 1980). His 1983 book *Historical Capitalism*. London: Verso is both pedagogic and synthetic.

Immanuel was not only interested in the birth of capitalism. He became passionate and engaged in the fight against capitalism by questioning the end of capitalism. Having studied the beginning of capitalism in the history of civilizations, he had no doubt that capitalism would come to an end. It was based on the crisis of liberal ideology that dominated the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

For Immanuel, an ideology is more than a vision of the world or a set of ideas and theory: it is a "coherent strategy for intervention in the social field that makes it possible to establish fairly clear political orientations". Ideologies, because they presuppose the existence of an explicit strategic debate, only appeared during the French Revolution with the liberal/conservative split. In response to the double rupture brought about by the French Revolution - the sovereignty of citizens and the normalising of change and political transformation - conservative ideology was constituted in defence of traditional hierarchies and structures and, above all, of the family and local communities alone capable of maintaining the fragile balances of societies. The Liberals, on the other hand, presented themselves as the party of the movement to change things through permanent institutional reforms. If they did not trust traditional structures to ensure these developments, the Liberals were wary of the irrational and uneducated crowd. Experts should be at the forefront of change, experts who should go beyond the study of the "humanities", the source of traditional knowledge, and move towards scientific knowledge which alone is capable of paving the way for progress.

The "European revolution" of 1848 saw the emergence of a radical current that brought about a general social critique. If the 1848 revolution was short, it changed the terms of the debate. The Conservatives realized that the only European country spared by this revolution had been Britain, where social movements had been very important. The reason seemed to them to be the "enlightened conservative" policies - a series of limited concessions - applied in this country and this orientation spread to the rest of Europe in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Radicals, on the other hand, quickly moved away from the path of utopian communities and into the political arena. Finally, the Liberals also got involved in the political field so that important matters could be entrusted to experts, with a centrist orientation between conservatives and radicals. The way was open for a rapprochement between these positions leading to the domination of a liberal program in the most powerful countries of the world system. This programme focused on the progressive expansion of the right to vote at the same time as the establishment of a generalized education system, the strengthening of the role of the state in ensuring the establishment of minimum social protection

systems and the promotion of national sentiment among citizens to ensure the cohesion of the system.

For Immanuel, the radical current - or anti-systemic current - that emerged with the 1848 revolution paradoxically strengthened the system, at least until 1968, by allowing the victory of liberalism instead of calling it into question. The reason for this is twofold: the consequences of the long struggle for recognition - and therefore integration - led by trade unions and workers' parties, and the deep gap between these organizations dominated by skilled workers, mostly white and male, and other movements of radical criticism of the system, feminists, ethnic or religious minorities, or national emancipation movements in the colonies.

For Immanuel, the 1968 world revolution marked the end of liberal hegemony and was an additional factor in destabilizing the world system. The 1968 movements occurred at a time when labour's share of capital and taxes on wealth were relatively high. These movements had enabled anti-systemic forces to integrate issues that were dissociated in the previous period, social, environmental, feminist, racial, etc., and to assert themselves autonomously. The liberal and conservative forces took into account, in a first step, the cultural changes brought about by 1968 but focused on restoring profit rates by lowering labour costs and taxes through policies initiated by Reagan and Thatcher and generalized behind the term globalization. Even if these policies achieved their objective of expanding the neo-liberal model, they could not withstand the attacks of September 11, 2001 which allowed the Conservatives to separate from the Liberals with unilateral military interventions and the questioning of the cultural evolution that began in 1968. All these elements further accentuate the unstable and chaotic nature of the current situation and open a period of sudden fluctuations in all institutional spheres of the world system.

Immanuel's hypothesis was that we have entered a deep structural crisis that will not be resolved by a new phase of capitalism. He believed that a new mode of production would succeed capitalism in the next thirty or forty years. But he pointed out that, if the end of capitalism is historically certain, it does not automatically lead to the advent of an ideal world. He thought that a new "post-capitalist" mode of production could be unequal. He saw the possibility of several bifurcations: « one leading to a non-capitalist system that retains its worst characteristics of capitalism (hierarchy, exploitation and polarization), and one that lays the foundations for a system based on relative democratization and relative egalitarianism, that is, a system of a type that has never existed before ».

What allowed Immanuel to broaden his horizon and situate his analyses on world systems on a global scale was his understanding of the fundamental historical character of decolonization. He was committed to decolonization, as illustrated by his early work: Africa, **The Politics of Independence**. New York : Vintage, 1961 (Africa and Independence, Ed Présence africaine, 1966 and *Les inégalités entre les États dans le système international: origines et perspectives*, Ed Centre québécois des relations internationales, 1975). He was very attentive to the dependency school and to the analyses articulating "center and periphery" in the analysis of the long period.

Immanuel also contributed to the analysis of the social sciences. To this end, he drew an historical map of university disciplines. It was at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that empirical sciences separated from philosophy and the "humanities", thus creating a gap between two cultures. The French Revolution opened a new phase in which the study of social, economic and political realities proved indispensable in order to be able to act on them: this was the emergence of the human sciences. History, breaking with hagiography, then economics, sociology and political science were built "between" empirical sciences and philosophy. A little later, the need for Western states and intellectuals to understand other societies gave rise to anthropology, orientalism and then development studies after World War II. The realities of the post-colonial world and academic development in the rest of the world have led to a crisis in the separation of academic disciplines

and have allowed the emergence of “heretical” theories that have been the foundation on which the analysis of world systems has been built. These analyses can be found in the book *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth Century Paradigms*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991

Since the early 1980s, Immanuel was present in a series of meetings and seminars, initially in Dakar, at the initiative of Samir Amin, with committed intellectuals from Africa, Asia and Latin America. This approach was part of the search for the autonomy of decolonial thinking; it has been extended to the world social forums. He participated in the group formed by four historians and economists (Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, André Gunder Frank and himself) demanding the appropriation of the long history from the periphery and the anti-colonial struggle. This led to two books: *Dynamics of Global Crisis*. London: Macmillan 1982 and **Transforming the Revolution: Social Movements and the World-System**. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990.

At the turn of the 2000s, Immanuel was one of the thinkers of the anti-globalization movement. He participated very actively in it by bringing a vision, nourished by his research and commitment, and characterized by a dialectical approach. He was concerned to situate the movement in a historical dynamic while paying great attention to contradictions and counter-trends. He attached particular importance to what he defined as an anti-systemic movement against the dominant logic. He conceived the process as a movement that starts from the class struggle and expands it. For him, at each historical period, the main classes are antagonistic, but they form blocks of classes with alliances that oppose the movement leading the system with the anti-systemic movement that opposes it. He left us a method that has the advantage of not restricting social analysis and history to economic confrontations and of giving way to ideological, cultural and political dimensions. On these essential dimensions, Immanuel has published one of his most striking books: *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*, New Press, 2006 (L'universalisme européen : de la colonisation au droit d'ingérence Ed. Démopolis, 2008) which dissects the claims of the dominant ideology to capture universalism.

At the same time, he organized, with Etienne Balibar, a seminar in Paris at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme which lasted three years, from 1985 to 1987, around the theme Race, Nation, Class (hence the book *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, 1991 ; Race, Nation, Classe, les identités ambiguës, Ed. La Découverte 1988, reprinted in 2007). This materialistic approach remains highly relevant on the need to broaden the struggle of the social classes by taking into account other dimensions, in particular gender that has emerged over the past thirty years as an essential issue.

Immanuel attached great importance to cultural revolutions. He considered that there was a rupture that began with the ideological upheavals visible in the world in the 1968s. Beyond the counter-revolutions, he made the link between the ideas that broke out at that time with the anti-globalization movement, with the ecological movement and with the movements of places from 2011 onwards. He considered that the violence of ideological, geopolitical and military reactions demonstrated the importance of the changes underway. Historical periods do not follow one another in a clear-cut manner; they interpenetrate and combine over time. The history of the future is not written and we must be attentive to what is emerging. Immanuel was listening to the new world and he did so without sacrificing great humour. One day in a debate we had in Porto Alegre, he replied that he fully shared Occupy Wall Street's analysis on the 1% and the 99%, but that it should not be forgotten that 99% was not enough to make a majority!

Immanuel was committed to keeping a close eye on the news. Since October 1, 1998, he published a short and powerful commentary twice a month. He decided to stop a few months ago, after publishing his 500<sup>th</sup> *Commentary* in which he estimated that there was a 50% chance that the transformations of the 1968s would lead to positive transformations that were more democratic and

egalitarian. And he concluded: there is only a 50% chance, but there is still a 50% chance.

In the long 23-page preface he wrote for Gustave and Elise Massiah's book, *Strategy for the alternative to Globalization*, Ed. Black Rose Books in 2013, based on *Une stratégie altermondialiste* Ed. La Découverte in 2011, he explains the importance of the alterglobalization movement. He indicates that the movement is a break with the theory of the seizure of power that has long dominated anti-systemic movements: first to conquer state power, then to change society. He concluded that it is necessary to start from everyone's action to help change the course of events. The smallest contribution, such as the flapping of the butterfly's wings on the other side of the world as part of the coming storm, is necessary, indispensable, he said. There are no "small" struggles, no "small" resistances. There is a disparate set of actions and interventions that sometimes (but not always) converge to force "big" changes. This collective and continuous action is the decisive element for "building another possible world, a better world".

**Christophe Aguiton and Gustave Massiah**, September 2, 2019

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- Translated with the help of Deepl ([deepl.com](https://www.deepl.com)).