

THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM I



Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins
of the European World-Economy in the
Sixteenth Century

WITH A NEW PROLOGUE

IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN

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“Allegory of Trade,” woodcut by Jobst Amman (1539–1591), who lived in Nuremberg. He was one of the “Little Masters.” This bottom detail illustrated the house of a merchant of Nuremberg, still a flourishing center of trans-European trade.

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It is always difficult to list the immediate sources of ideas and assistance—from authors, colleagues, and students—in the conception and writing of a book, and particularly so in a book that pretends to synthesize other people’s empirical work. The great risk is neglect.

In the case of this volume the two authors whose voluminous writings most immediately inspired me on the path I finally decided to go were Fernand Braudel and Marian Malowist.

Once I had written a draft, Fernand Braudel read it carefully and gave me encouragement at a moment when I needed reassurance. Charles Tilly also read it carefully, and by raising pertinent questions forced me to clarify my argument. This was particularly so concerning the role of state-power and “absolutism” in general, and its counterpoint with the phenomenon of banditry in particular. Douglas Dowd put me onto Frederic Lane for which I thank him, since Frederic Lane is very worth being put onto.

As for Terence Hopkins, my debt is to our twenty years of intellectual discussion and collaboration. There is no sentence that can summarize this debt.

This book was written during a year’s stay at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Countless authors have sung its praises. Aside from splendid surroundings, unlimited library and secretarial assistance, and a ready supply of varied scholars to consult at a moment’s notice, what the center offers is to leave the scholar to his own devices, for good or ill. Would that all men had such wisdom. The final version was consummated with the aid of a grant from the Social Sciences Grants Subcommittee of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research of McGill University.

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C'est par une crise des revenus seigneuriaux que se termine le moyen-âge et s'ouvrent les temps modernes.

—MARC BLOCH

This collapse in real wage-rates [in Europe] formed the counterpart to the revolutionary rise of prices in the sixteenth century. The operation was fully paid for by the increased toil, hardships, impoverishments and dejection of the majority. Contemporaries were often aware that the deterioration was taking place.

—FERNAND BRAUDEL and FRANK SPOONER

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre.

—KARL MARX

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PROLOGUE TO THE 2011 EDITION

The Modern World-System was published in 1974. It was actually written in 1971–1972. I had some difficulty finding a publisher for it. The book was about the sixteenth century, and it dealt with a virtually unknown topic: a world-economy, spelled deliberately with a hyphen. It was long, and it had an enormous number of substantive footnotes. When it appeared, one less than friendly reviewer complained that the footnotes crawled up and down the page. Finally, Academic Press, and its then scholarly consulting editor, Charles Tilly, decided to take a chance by putting it in their new social science series.

When it appeared, its reception surprised everyone, and in particular both the publisher and the author. It received favorable reviews in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (on the front page) and in the *New York Review of Books*. In 1975, it received the award of the American Sociological Association for the best scholarly publication. At that time, the award was called the Sorokin Award. The award was so unexpected that I was not even present at the session at which the award was announced. The book was rapidly translated into a large number of other languages. It sold remarkably well for a scholarly monograph. By any measure, it was a success.

However, it also turned out right away that it was a highly controversial book. The book received wonderful plaudits, but it also was the subject of vigorous denunciations, and the latter came from many different camps. Writing thirty-seven years after the initial publication, I believe it is worth reviewing the critiques. What were their sources? How well have the critiques survived? What do I think myself today of the validity of the critiques? How have these critiques influenced the succeeding volumes?

I should note at the outset one particular subtext of the critiques. I was professionally a sociologist. This book seemed to many to be a book of economic history. Sociologists were not presumed, at least in the early 1970s, to be interested in writing about the sixteenth century or about matters with which economic historians dealt. Historians, on the other hand, were wary of intruders coming from other university disciplines, especially if they relied, as I did, almost entirely on so-called secondary sources. Furthermore, the book dealt centrally with global spatial relations, and this was supposed to be the purview of geographers. And finally, among the early enthusiasts for the book was an unexpected group: some archaeologists. So, I seemed to be defying the categories that at that time defined scholarly work, and not to fall into the usual boxes enshrined in the structures of knowledge.

I should start this discussion with my self-perception at the time I wrote the book. I explained in the introduction to the book how I came to write it. I was following a bad idea—that I might better understand the trajectories of the “new nations” of the twentieth century by studying how the nations that had been “new” in the sixteenth century had come to “develop.” This was a bad idea because it presumed that all states followed parallel independent paths to something called “development.” This bad idea, however, was serendipitous. It got me to read about western Europe in the sixteenth century and turned my attention to realities I hadn’t anticipated.

In my mind at the time, I was arguing primarily with Weberian sociologists—not with Max Weber himself, but with the use made of his categories in U.S. (and to some extent world) sociology in the period following 1945. Weber’s book on the Protestant ethic was very widely interpreted to mean that the existence of certain kinds of values was a necessary prerequisite to what in the post-1945 period tended to be called modernization or (economic) development. The usual scholarly procedure at the time was to examine, country by country, the existence, or coming into existence, of such values. The result was the creation of a sort of chronological pecking order of the march of progress. Which country was the first? Which came next? Which would now come next? And as a derived question, what did a country have to do now in order to come next?

I sought to challenge that narrative in several ways. First of all, I was insisting that this process could not be examined country by country, but only within a larger category that I called a world-system (the word *world* not being synonymous with *global*)—a world, not *the* world, as Fernand Braudel would phrase it.

Second, I suggested that the values in question *followed* rather than *preceded* the economic transformations that were occurring. I suggested that it was only by placing the various states in their relation to each other that we could understand why it was that some became the leaders in productive efficiency and the accumulation of wealth.

And third, I was rejecting the principal antinomy of the post-1945 Weberians, that of modern versus traditional. Rather, I shared the evolving arguments of the so-called *dependistas* like Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank that the “traditional” was as recent as the “modern,” that the two emerged in tandem, so that we could speak, in Frank’s famous phrase, of “the development of underdevelopment.”¹

I expected to be denounced by the post-1945 Weberians. While they tended not to accept what I was arguing, they also tended by and large to receive my arguments civilly, despite what they seemed to think was my resuscitation of Marxist arguments (which they believed had been abandoned,

¹Andre Gunder Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment,” *Monthly Review*, XVIII, 4, Sept. 1966, 17–31.