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# Wallerstein's world-systems analysis in comparative education: A case study

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**Abstract** Since the 1970s, using his world-systems analysis, Immanuel Wallerstein has developed a wide-ranging framework for the social sciences, with potential applications for comparative educational research. In this paper we outline key aspects of Wallerstein's theorising, and then analyse the uptake, understandings, and applications of his analysis in the field of comparative and international education, through a case study of the *Comparative Education Review* (CER) journal from 1980 to 2008. This paper examines how, and how widely, his analysis has been adopted and interpreted. Our analysis highlights significant and—given the broader emphasis in comparative education on questions of education and development—surprising absences in the application of this approach. We conclude by arguing for the use and development of three critical features of his analysis in comparative work, as relevant and timely interventions in the field.

**Keywords** World-systems analysis · Wallerstein · Comparative education ·
Mass education

## World-systems analysis and comparative education

Thirty years ago Arnove (1980) published a call to use world-systems analysis in comparative education, arguing in part that such an approach could "capture the position of a country within the international system" (p. 50). He presented the move beyond the nation-state as essential to better understand and explain the educational phenomena under investigation in comparative research. Thus the "global perspective" he outlined could advance explanatory accounts of the content and timing of educational reforms across

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diverse political contexts, both national and local. In the wider field of the historical social sciences, Wallerstein (2004a) has led a self-described "knowledge movement" critiquing established approaches and epistemologies in the social sciences in favour of one that begins by understanding the rise and demise of the capitalist world-system and locates the study of nation-states and their multiple political systems within this framework.

This paper brings these two phenomena together in a case study of the way Wallerstein's world-systems analysis was taken up within a major, international, comparative education journal, *Comparative Education Review* (CER). In particular, this case study responds to three key research questions: (1) What has been the take-up of Wallerstein's world-systems analysis? (2) How has this analysis been interpreted and appropriated within this work? (3) And what key aspects of his theorizing have been under-utilized to date, and ought to be taken up in contemporary analyses of educational phenomena? As a prestigious international comparative education journal, CER provides a solid case through which to gain insights into the ways Wallerstein's analysis has and could still be applied to comparative research.

## Wallerstein's world-systems analysis (WSA)

Wallerstein's world-systems analysis centres on the historical development of the capitalist world-economy, with a single division of labour stretching across multiple states or polities interacting via an inter-state system. Emerging as an historical world-system over the 16 and 17th centuries, he argues, by the late 18th century the capitalist world-economy had incorporated the whole world geographically, with a division of core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral zones and associated economic activities that maintain inequalities within the system (see for example Wallerstein 1974, 1983). As this particular world-system has spread across the globe, driven primarily by the ongoing search for lower labour costs to maintain profits, surpluses have been transferred at a world level, from peripheral and semi-peripheral to core zones, supported by the differential strength of state structures and processes of unequal exchange. Two key aspects of this historical account stand out. First, the single economy and the division of labour across multiple political systems are defining characteristics of world-systems. Second, Wallerstein argues for the need to make this single historical world-system—the capitalist world-economy—the primary unit of analysis for understanding contemporary social reality.

Wallerstein's world-systems analysis has its roots in the developing critiques of modernization theory, and in the elaboration of the alternative dependency theory, which identified the systemic structures that constrain the possibilities for economic development in peripheral, dependent countries (see for example Frank 1966; Amin 1976). Here we also find the roots of Wallerstein's critique of Marxist currents that made wage labour a defining feature of capitalism, and his related critique of the associated stages through which each nation-state is said to pass on the road to socialism and communism (see Wallerstein 1974). Wallerstein's analysis insists, instead, that historical capitalism be understood in terms of the global division of labour and transfer of surplus. He argued, for example, that "Capitalism was from the beginning an affair of the world-economy and not of nation-states" (Wallerstein 1974, p. 401), and that multiple forms of labour control have historically been, and continue to be, part of the capitalist world-economy (Wallerstein 1974).

Taking the world-system as the primary unit of analysis means using this lens to view developments within the nation-states under investigation, including their location within

the world-economy, their hierarchical positioning, and their efforts to maintain or improve their relative position (see for example Wallerstein 2005). It also involves contextualising improved living conditions within a particular nation-state against increased inequality and immizerization at the global level, with the nation-states and interstate system acting to support this system with a promise of national development for all. On this question Wallerstein (1992, 1995) has argued that an ideology or "geoculture" of liberalism developed and came to be shared by the multiple polities of the world-economy, including those that were ostensibly opposed to each other ideologically. This account cites the emergence of three competing ideologies following the French Revolution—conservatism, liberalism, and socialism—and argues that these effectively merged into a common geo-culture or ideology of liberalism across the capitalist world-system. The common ground centred on a shared belief in developmentalism (Wallerstein 2005). That is, they shared a belief in the universal validity of scientific knowledge and technological advances and their capacity to underwrite linear and seemingly endless economic development and progress when directed by rational policy makers within strong, sovereign, nation-state structures. Wallerstein (1995) encapuslates this thesis as follows:

> The possibility of the (economic) development of all countries came to be a universal faith, shared alike by conservatives, liberals, and Marxists. The formulas each put forward to achieve such development were fiercely debated, but the possibility itself was not. In this sense, the concept of development became a basic element of the geocultural underpinning of the world-system. (p. 163)

Seen through this lens, the anti-systemic socialist movements of the 19 and 20th centuries, from their beginnings, shared key aspects of the national development project, effectively adopting and endorsing a "two-step strategy" of first achieving State power and then legislating to transform the nation or world (e.g. Wallerstein 2002, 2010). This is not to say that differences over the path to achieve State power were irrelevant—they were clearly consequential for the movements in many and complex ways—but it does acknowledge some important and equally consequential similarities in their strategy and programmatic agenda. The promise of every movement once in power, including the non-socialist parties, was the vision of progress, development, and with it increased consumption and improved living standards for all, at some point in the future (see for example Wallerstein 1998).

The world-systems analysis of how the capitalist world-economy developed historically includes the argument that the system in which we currently live, like any other historical system, will at some point come to an end and be replaced by an undetermined and therefore, uncertain alternative. Wallerstein argues that the current world-system entered into a period of transition in the latter decades of the last century, as reflected in a set of tensions that are impacting on capitalism's imperative to maximize the accumulation of capital and are now reaching their structural limits or asymptote. Three of these tensions are: (1) the need to increase wages to increase and maintain demand, and the simultaneous need to increase prices and lower wages to increase profits; (2) capital's search for lower taxes to boost profits, while states raise spending to subsidize production costs, including externalised environmental costs; and (3) the structural and geographical limits on relo-cating capital to secure lower labour and other production costs (these are elaborated in multiple essays, including Wallerstein 1995, 1998, 2010). Central to his argument here is the falling legitimacy of the nation-state in terms of its capacity to deliver the promised progress and national development, contributing further to the structural crisis given how important the sovereign nation-state is to the effective functioning of the world-system.

Another major thrust of Wallerstein's world-systems analysis involves the historical construction and divisions of knowledge within the social sciences, shaped by the nomothetic and idiographic epistemologies, associated, respectively, with the sciences and humanities. He sees the disciplines within the social sciences as having split across these two epistemologies, and says that the general dominance of scientific universalism gives higher status to the sciences (Wallerstein 1996, 2004b). In general terms, the disciplines of sociology, economics, and political science then sought to achieve scientific status and generate universal laws, leaving the disciplines of history and anthropology focused on idiographic understanding of particular events, places, and peoples. Critical here is the argument that this separation of knowledge in the social sciences has worked against our understanding of contemporary reality (Wallerstein 2004a). Hence he calls on academics to overcome "false debates" about the "antinomies between universalism and particularism" (Wallerstein 2004b, p. 147) in favour of new approaches, including "the social scientization of all knowledge" (Wallerstein 2006, p. 70), that reunite the search for truth and beauty.

We bring to this paper a belief that Wallerstein's world-systems analysis has significant potential to inform and direct particular lines of comparative research. As a framework for understanding the development of modern nation-states and the broad trajectory of their policies, we argue that it can account for policy convergence across diverse political contexts in a way that offers an alternative both to world-culture explanations and to the broader concept of educational transfer. As a "knowledge movement" intended to help academics rethink epistemological and disciplinary divisions, and linked to normative political objectives to influence the shape of the future world-system in progressive directions, we highlight its potential to focus educational research and reforms on such issues. We return to these points below, elaborating an argument for the greater use of Wallerstein's world-systems analysis in comparative research. To underpin this argument, we first review its take-up through a case study of research published in *Comparative Education Review* from 1980 to 2008.

## The *Comparative Education Review* (*CER*) case

In our case study of how Wallerstein's world-systems analysis was taken up in CER, we identified articles for analysis through word searches of full-text articles in two sites—JSTOR and the online CER archive—using the following search terms: world system, world systems, world-system, world-systems, and Wallerstein. This search produced a sample of 90 articles that referred directly to world-systems research (by naming it explicitly in the text of the article) or drew on it in some way. This sample consisted of articles that referred to the analysis in an in-text discussion or references to it, as well as those where such references were limited to footnotes or reference lists. The time frame for the search extended from Arnove's (1980) call through to the end of 2008. Three of the identified articles were extended bibliographic listings (e.g. Epstein 1991), which we excluded from the content analysis, leaving a total of 87 articles that we reviewed to identify the nature of the take-up of Wallerstein's world-systems analysis, and from this to identify fruitful areas where the approach was further applied to comparative research.

It should be noted that world-systems analysis is labelled in different ways by different authors. We are aware of debate about the terminology, including the use of a hyphen in world-systems, whether to refer to a single or plural system(s) (Wallerstein 1991a), and the question of whether to call it world-systems "theory" or "analysis" (Wallerstein 1999). In

**Table 1** Categorization of sample articles

| Category | Description | No. of articles and % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| 1. World-systems theory building | Articles in which the sole, or a major, subject of analysis was WSA itself, directly contributing to world-systems theorising for comparative educational analyses | 4 (4.6%) |
| 2. Applications of WSA | Articles that sought to apply WSA to at least some part of the research problem or question under investigation | 26 (29.9%) |
| 3. Background references to WSA | Articles in which references to the search terms were present but not directly applied to the analyses or arguments being advanced within these articles | 57 (65.5%) |

this paper we use the term "world-systems analysis", which Wallerstein favours, and its acronym WSA, as an overarching identifier for the multiple terms used in the sample. Our content analysis of the sample began with two hypotheses based on our prior reading and research in the field: 1) that the substantive take-up of WSA generally has been limited; and 2) that this is particularly true with respect to Wallerstein's WSA. With these hypotheses in mind, we independently reviewed and categorized the articles based on the substantive nature of the engagement with or use of WSA. We then refined our categories to better represent the content and nature of the identified sample, as summarized in Table 1.

## World-systems theory building

Our sample contained only four articles advancing world-systems analysis theorising for comparative research. Within these a major subject of analysis was WSA itself, contributing directly to the development of theory with associated recommendations for the theoretical approach, its utility, and further application in comparative research. The first of these, by Fiala and Lanford (1987), focuses wholly on the neo-institutionalist/world-culture approach to national educational systems, as advanced by Boli, Ramirez and Meyer (1985), who describe the rise in worldwide educational enrolments between 1950 and 1970. After discovering no significant relationship between the endogenous characteristics of countries and their educational expansion, the neo-institutionalist school hypothesized that world-level cultural and organizational factors played a crucial role in promoting common conceptions of "progress" that in turn facilitated the expansion of educational systems. What separates this theoretical perspective from Wallerstein's theorising is the centrality of global social, cultural, and ideological forces to the progress of countries through the development of individuals and institutions. Fiala and Langford examined the formal educational aims of national education systems in 1955 and 1965, in a bid to provide empirical evidence for the neo-institutionalist theoretical position. They found evidence to support "the existence and intensification of a world-level development account" (p. 332), and use these findings to support the perspective of the world culture theory.

Second, Ginsburg et al. (1990) discuss world-systems analysis as part of a wider exploration of theoretical approaches used to understand educational reform. They make a

clear distinction between national and world-level explanations of reforms, and then between explanations based on equilibrium and conflict paradigms. In their critical review of four analytic perspectives, they explicitly seek both to develop theory and to elaborate relevant issues in order to promote informed reflection and progress in the area of educational reform generally. They identify the neo-institutionalist approach as a world-system-level equilibrium perspective. They also identify several approaches to conflict at the world-system level, which are connected to Wallerstein's theorising, and pay greater attention to economics, specifically the capitalist world-economy and the division of labour both within and between countries, creating core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral states. Arguing that this paradigm has greater explanatory power than previous efforts they emphasize the dialectic between educational reform and broader national and contradictory global forces and, therefore, the relative autonomy of local actors and their potential to influence social transformation through "educational reform", as well as through struggles in other domains.

Two articles by Clayton (1998, 2004) follow these, and engage directly with the theoretical and methodological concerns of WSA, and especially of Wallerstein's perspective, in comparative research. In the first of these, Clayton (1998) refers to world-system theory rather than analysis, singling out Wallerstein's work for critique. He does this by characterising Wallerstein's work as an example of "orthodox Marxism projected to the global level" (p. 488), citing Wallerstein's economic determination "in the last instance" (p. 481). Clayton goes on to argue that, in comparative education, world-systems theory has simply replaced economic with ideological determination, drawing on Gramsci to characterize the approach as invoking images of subordinate groups who "mindlessly internalize dominant ideologies" (p. 489). In this account Clayton criticizes the way that peripheral states are said to "uncritically accept" educational prescriptions from the core via "educational assistance" programs (p. 485), as a way of critiquing the limited or entirely absent local agency within such accounts, and hence raising questions over the extent to which opposition to existing world-systems relations is possible.

At least two aspects of Clayton's (1998) characterization of both Wallerstein's work, and WSA in comparative education more generally, warrant further consideration. The first and most important is his limited reading of Wallerstein's world-systems analysis. He overlooks, for example, the crucial conception of the capitalist world-system in transition and the corresponding heightened human agency to shape its trajectory (e.g. Wallerstein 1998), and the extensive historical argument about the rise and demise of liberalism as the dominant ideology of the world-system (e.g. Wallerstein 1995). Critiques of economic determinism in Wallerstein's early work (e.g. Skocpol 1977) respond in part to arguments that present modern nation-states and the interstate system as the "political superstructure of the capitalist world-economy" (Wallerstein 1984, p. 50). Balibar (1991) argues that Wallerstein's analysis substitutes determinism for a dialectic of capitalist accumulation and its contradictions in a way that is closer to "Marx's authentic thesis", being a critique of economism (p. 3). In addition, we note an emphasis on the capacity of human agency to influence systemic change in subsequent work (e.g. Wallerstein 1992, 1994, 1998). We see this in the work of researchers like Ginsburg et al. (1990) cited above who, rather than being locked in deterministic frameworks, highlight the need to examine the complex interactions between policy makers and practitioners, at multiple levels, as policy is imposed, actively borrowed, and transferred across sites.

The major limitations of Clayton's (1998) constructions of WSA are addressed in his later article, where he calls for greater use of the historical dimension in a comparative world-systems approach as a way of bringing it together with globalization approaches.

Here Clayton (2004) acknowledges that Wallerstein's WSA moves beyond "state centrism" as the unit of analysis, and emphasizes the "substantially more complex understanding of capital flows and capitalist relations in the world than that presented in dependency theory" (p. 281). More importantly, he looks for points of connection between WSA and contemporary globalization theory, citing Wallerstein's conceptualization of the "economy-polity contradiction" and its intensification in recent years as one such crucial point. Clayton's later paper offers a substantially more complex and nuanced account of WSA in comparative education, engaging with critiques of WSA by globalization theorists, and in turn, critiques of globalization theory. He includes a partial account of Wallerstein's concept of liberalism as a shared ideology across multiple polities in the world-system, and singles out ideas of states' movement within the world-system, and the contradiction between these multiple polities and shared ideology within the hierarchical structures of the capitalist world-economy, as important innovations in WSA over dependency theory. He concludes with a call for more theoretical work, bringing in historical perspectives, to resolve the tension between the world-systems and globalization approaches and to move toward "some critical mass of profundity or persuasiveness" that will underpin researchers' efforts to "understand the world in which we live" (p. 294).

## Applications of WSA

In addition to the work on WSA theorizing, about a third of the articles we identified in CER involved some explicit application of world-systems analysis, in some form, to some part of the research being undertaken. Some of these applications represented only part of the whole article, but they did use WSA to provide an explanatory account of an aspect of the educational phenomenon they were investigating. We identified two sub-categories, which we describe below, to characterize how these authors applied WSA and how their applications connect with Wallerstein's world-systems analysis.

Unequal development in a single, capitalist world-economy

Some of the general applications of WSA in our sample drew directly on the unequal location of different nation-states within the capitalist world-economy to explain or account for findings in a single site or across multiple sites. For example, Demerath (1999) analysed educational change in Papua New Guinea, and argued in part that local agency was conditioned by global pressures, in this case at the level of local villagers' "perception of the constraints imposed on their lives by the world system of incommensurate differences and their marginalized place within it" (p. 192). In another example, Choi (1999) echoed the analysis by Ginsburg et al. (1992) of the stratification of knowledge production and distribution by arguing that "the hierarchy of the international scientific community is parallel to the uneven status of nations in the world economy" (p. 215). Ginsburg and Gorostiaga (2001) also take up the question of unequal knowledge production in a section of their paper, in which they highlight "from a world-system perspective the material differences in the research experience between those based in institutions in the center and those situated in the periphery" (p. 181). The application in this case extends the influence of this hierarchy to the question of the relationship between educational researchers and practitioners, arguing that the dynamic of this sort of structural hierarchy across the world-system should inform analyses of these two groups.

Arnove and Dewees (1991) examined the role of education within the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, 1979–1990, based on a "world-systems and historical perspective… to understand the sources, trajectory, and fate of reform efforts in revolutionary societies" (p. 96). More specifically, they draw attention to the importance of a country's relationship to the world-economy, and to world and regional powers, influencing the possibility of local educational change both by constraining or conditioning possible reform, and by providing opportunities for change in particular directions. Similarly, Dewees and Klees (1995) ground their study of street children in Brazil on an understanding of the "integration of national economies into a world system where wage labor is the principal means for generating income" (p. 76), which in turn accounts for the "harsh or hazardous physical labor" (p. 76) that children perform in some parts of the world.

As discussed above, central to Wallerstein's approach (e.g. Wallerstein 1979, 1995) is this concern for the location of a nation-state within the hierarchy of core-semiperiphery-periphery of the capitalist world-economy, with the consequent forms of production and unequal exchange between states transferring surplus to the core. This concept is most thoroughly applied by Prokou (2006) to the comparative analysis of higher education reform in France, Germany, and Greece. This section of her analysis draws directly on Wallerstein's concept of unequal exchange, and its impact on economic activity in Southern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this analysis, Prokou uses Greece's location within the semi-periphery of the capitalist world-economy to explain "a kind of peripheral, underdeveloped capitalism … radically different from and much less autonomous than that of the West" (Prokou 2006, p. 212). She uses this in turn to explain identified differences in higher education policy and reform in Greece compared with the core states of France and Germany, with the Greek State focused on attracting foreign capital in a bid to advance core-like activity as part of its integration into the European Union, in the process working against "a pattern of indigenous development" (p. 215).

## Unthinking social science: Epistemology, liberalism, and the search for truth and beauty

Another major application of Wallerstein's WSA, again within a limited number of articles, connects to his rejection of the division of the social sciences into separate disciplines based on nomothetic or idiographic epistemologies, effectively separating what he refers to as the search for the truth from efforts to identify the good and beautiful (Wallerstein 2006). In this analysis, Wallerstein presents the existing division of knowledge as part of the dominant ideology of liberalism across the capitalist world-system, and thus supporting the inherent inequalities within and between states. Torres (1998), for example, draws on the critique of the separation of disciplinary knowledge in the context of rejecting extreme relativistic positions in the social sciences; he argues, like Wallerstein, that some explanations of social reality are better than others. In this case he applies the logic to the question of citizenship education, citing Wallerstein (1997) to conclude that competing accounts of social reality should be judged against their ability to explain and help construct a more rational society:

> […] the third implication of Wallerstein's analysis—that the notion of the truth and the goodness in society are intimately and inextricably intertwined. Hence, a more constructive, useful rational society refers to Wallerstein's suggestion of looking at the social sciences as part of the quest for a just society. Wallerstein thus is proposing a categorical imperative of justice and goodness to inspire, if not to guide, the analytical endeavour. (Torres 1998, p. 443)

Marginson and Mollis (2001) pick up on this theme as they elaborate a framework for qualitative research, citing Wallerstein (1991b) and Braudel (1972) on the need to bring together historical and sociological work, characterized as "the science of particularities" (i.e. idiographic) and "the science of regularities", (i.e. nomothetic) respectively, in an interdisciplinary project. In a less elaborated way, Teodoro's (2003) review essay of three books on Paulo Freire connects his concept of utopian possibilities to Wallerstein's (1998) concept of *utopistics*. This forms part of Teodoro's argument for the project of thinking about and constructing historical alternatives to capitalism, and for the capacity of human agency to have an impact on such developments.

## Background references to WSA

Approximately two-thirds of the articles in our sample made only what we describe as background references to world-systems analysis. We briefly review these below within three sub-categories, elaborating in most detail the first, which covers references to WSA as part of a theoretical review.

WSA as part of a theoretical review

Of the 57 articles making background references to WSA and/or Wallerstein, 37 did so as part of a review of theoretical positions, and their use in comparative education histori-cally, as part of the background to the study being reported. This occurred in three main ways, which offer some insight into the ways that Wallerstein's work was taken up and interpreted within CER in the 1980–2008 period. First, WSA was frequently cited to indicate a general shift in the unit of analysis from the local or nation-state level to the global or international level. Here we find citations to work elaborating particular world-system level approaches to the social sciences generally, and/or to the field of comparative and international education specifically. For example, Epstein's (1990) editorial identifies "world system explanations" of educational phenomena as a counter to or binary opposite of national-level explanations. Wilson (1994) cites Arnove (1980) to highlight how WSA restores "the international dimension" to the field of CIE, while Morris et al. (1997) cite Ginsburg et al. (1990) as advocating efforts to account for the location of nation-states within a world-system. Some authors explicitly connected this shift from the nation-state to the global or world level to theorising about globalization. For example, Assié-Lumumba and Sutton (2004) cite and situate Clayton's (1998) work in a section reviewing trends within globalization and education. In a more nuanced review, Welch (2002) begins with Sklair's (1999) typology that identifies WSA as one of four principal approaches to globalization, but acknowledges that WSA "precedes the current crop of globalization debates" (p. 435).

In a second way of positioning WSA and/or Wallerstein in these reviews, some authors foreground the contribution it has made to the critique of the formerly dominant paradigm of modernization theory, and hence WSA's challenge to the idea that all nation-states were on a similar trajectory, albeit with different timelines, moving through universal stages of development. Illustrative examples here include Torres and Puiggros (1995) who refer in a footnote to Wallerstein's (1979) foundational work as emerging from dependency theories, and Gopinathan and Shive (1987) who position WSA alongside Marxist approaches as a way of explaining the phenomenon of underdevelopment in some nation-states. Carnoy and Rhoten (2002), writing on globalization and educational change, situate WSA as part

of a wider movement in the social sciences, arguing "that economic imperatives on a global scale were a major force in shaping education world-wide" (p. 1). In his argument for postmodernism as a central approach for comparative work, Rust (1991) acknowledges the contribution of world-systems analysis to the critique of modernization theory, but predictably goes on to critique WSA as being "committed to the basic language and assumptions of the modern age" (p. 612). On the other hand, in a review essay of post-modernism in comparative education, Mehta and Ninnes (2003) position WSA as working beyond the boundaries of the modernist tradition.

A third interpretation of WSA and/or Wallerstein acknowledges his move beyond modernization theory, but then argues that as a macro-level approach it does not adequately account for the effect that local influence or agency can have on policy reforms and practices. For example, Ayres (2000) acknowledges WSA's advance on underdevelopment theory, but using the case of Cambodia argues that primary explanatory status must be given to local influences, in this case the weight of tradition, in order to understand educational developments. Shavit (1989) highlights the failure to specify the local mechanisms through which policies at the world-system level are translated as a "major theoretical deficiency" (p. 217) in world-system level approaches. From a different perspective, DiBona (1981) positions neo-Marxist and world-systems approaches as promoting universal conceptions of modern education for economic development, at the expense of diverse indigenous cultures and forms of education, particularly in developing countries. In another example, Stoer and Dale (1987) foreshadow concern for the complex interactions involved in the process of educational transfer. They argue that Wallerstein's world-systems approach

> […] still fails (in common with most of that work) to give due weight on the one hand to forces internal to developing societies and their capacity to defy, deflect, resist, absorb, or transform the demands of neocolonizing states or multinational companies and, on the other, to the constraints on the autonomy of advanced industrial countries that flow from their positions within both the world economy and the international system of states. (pp. 400–401)

It must be noted that only a few of the reviews of WSA theory included direct references to Wallerstein. Two of those cited a central concern of Wallerstein's WSA: the need to "unthink" our taken-for-granted categories of understanding and analysis in the social sciences. Epstein (1997), for example, refers to Wallerstein's critique of the International Sociological Association's "international" status, asking whether the same argument applies to the international CER journal. Cook et al. (2004) note that "a few scholars, such as Immanuel Wallerstein, even advocate breaking the barriers separating academic disciplines" (p. 124), positioning WSA as one of a series of approaches that seek to fundamentally alter our understandings of the field of social science research.

While we have categorized these papers as making background references to WSA and Wallerstein's work, in the sense that they do not adopt or apply the WSA approach, they do illustrate an understanding of WSA generally and Wallerstein's WSA in particular, as part of the linear development of social science theorising and its application to comparative research. This, we argue, further indicates the limited application of Wallerstein's approach. By limited we mean that they position the theoretical approach as having played its part, historically, in moving analysis beyond modernization theory, but see it as having since been surpassed in favour of approaches presented as better engaging with the contemporary complexities of global-local dynamics.

WSA as a proxy for global systems

Another sub-category included papers in which the term "world-system", in its multiple variations, was used as a generic label for phenomena operating at a world or global level. These ranged from an un-substantiated world-system as in the title of Torres' (2001) paper, to a paper examining United States allegations about UNESCO activities that set these "against the background of the role of international organizations in a modern world system" (Hüfner and Naumann 1986, p. 120). In other examples, Psacharopoulos (1990) refers to a general "world system context" for his elaboration of what holistic educational planning ought to involve, whereas Broaded (1993) and Carl (1994) make passing reference to an implicit hierarchy and imbalances between nations within an unspecified world system. Mundy and Murphy (2001) go slightly further to cite the centre-periphery relations of the world system in their analysis of the emerging role of transnational NGOs in educational reform, but do not move beyond the general reference to an unequal global system.

Incidental references to WSA

In a few articles the term "world-system" appears in the title of an article or book as part of a footnote, but in a way that is not substantively linked to the concept of world-systems analysis. In one illustrative example, Fuller (1986) cites Meyer and Hannan (1979) to support a claim about a world-level expansion of enrolments in primary education. His focus remains solely on the empirical reality of the expansion, and not on the mechanisms by which this occurred as a world-system level phenomenon. Two references to Wallerstein similarly fall into this sub-category. First, Mukweso et al. (1984) refer to a 1965 text that predates both the publication of Wallerstein's world-systems work, and Arnove's call for world systems analysis within the field of CIE. Second, Dolby (2004) cites Balibar and Wallerstein's (1991) volume, alongside other texts, in the context of discussing the socially constructed nature of national identities.

## Discussion

The analysis above demonstrates the varied and limited way in which Wallerstein's work has been taken up and applied to comparative educational research. At one level, it could be argued, the references to WSA indicate that this theorising had a significant impact on comparative work, perhaps most evident in the heightened attention given to the global or world-system level as a necessary unit of analysis for understanding national and local educational phenomena. This is apparent even in what we identified as background references, which acknowledged in their theoretical review WSA's critique of modernization theory, the historical link between WSA and Dependency and neo-Marxist theory, and the need to consider the hierarchical locations of nation-states within the world-economy. Authors like Steiner-Khamsi (2010) continue to call for research that explores the complex mechanisms by which such global trends are received locally (resisted, adapted, reconstructed), building into their analyses consideration of this global-local dialectic; arguably they reflect the impact of this long-standing call for a shift in the unit of analysis to the world-system.

However, the explicit take-up and application of such interpretations of WSA remain limited. As noted, multiple reviews of the field acknowledge Wallerstein and WSA's critique of modernization theory, by incorporating the international dimension and the

hierarchical locations of nation-states within the world-economy. These articles refer to the structural location of nation-states within the single capitalist world-economy and its division of labour, but they rarely move, for example, into the territory of seeking to explore, and account for, global convergence in educational structures, purposes, and reforms. It is apparent from our analysis that the published work of comparative researchers in CER over the 1980–2008 period has rarely elaborated, and even less frequently applied, Wallerstein's WSA. When it has, it has done so in ways that miss some of the crucial aspects of Wallerstein's work that we elaborated at the beginning of this paper.

Our findings illustrate that there is significant scope or space to engage with Wallerstein's WSA and its application to comparative theorising and research. We see multiple potential layers to this work, drawn from Wallerstein's extensive and ongoing corpus. Here we briefly discuss three interrelated areas where Wallerstein's WSA has been largely overlooked, and where it could immediately, and fruitfully, be taken up. These areas, we argue, can provide improved understandings of the nature and global spread of mass educational systems and reforms. Further, they offer a useful framework for our times, by responding directly to questions of inequality, justice, and democracy at a world-system level, and the actual and potential role of education in advancing such ideas.

Wallerstein (2004a) identifies WSA as a "knowledge movement" that elaborates a comprehensive critique of the historical division of the social sciences, and its functioning with the capitalist world-system, privileging scientific universalism over the humanities and their idiographic epistemology. This critique highlights how scientific universalism was constructed as somehow existing outside of culture, and thus beyond question, and makes the political response of calling for an end to the existing divisions of knowledge and the construction of a *unidisciplinary* approach to knowledge (Wallerstein 2006). This historical account of knowledge connects directly with, and can add to, established analyses of how curriculum content can reproduce inequalities, but in a way that goes beyond identifying and naming the particularist quality of high-status curriculum knowledge within education systems. Here Wallerstein (2006) rejects the idea of replacing one particular set of knowledge with another, an idea common to such critiques, in favour of a "multiplicity of universalisms that would resemble a network of universal universalisms" (p. 84). Applying this analysis to the study of curriculum reforms, particularly efforts to (re)design national curricula and attend to the balance between core and diversified content, can offer new perspectives in comparative research. For example, while clearly connecting with the recent debate over the tension between constructivist and realist conceptualizations of knowledge (see Young 2008), a world-systems perspective draws attention to the curriculum content and the multiple power struggles behind them (Wallerstein 2003), and to the potential for alternative, universal configurations of knowledge to respond in particular ways at both the national and world-system levels.

Given Wallerstein's (1996) historical work on how the knowledge disciplines were created within the universities, an approach that is both world-systemic and inter-disciplinary could provide the basis for comparative work on curricular content and structures. For example, Wallerstein (2006) speaks of the "new epistemological centripetal tendencies" represented by the knowledge movements of cultural studies in the humanities and complexity studies in the natural sciences. These movements reject the historically dominant position within their respective domains, and indicate the possibility of an epistemology that overcomes the nomothetic and idiographic division. By systematically analysing curricular systems and reforms for evidence of such tendencies, researchers could contribute directly to world-systems theorising, and to critical work focused on imagining and designing curricula that can support transformational political projects at the

world-system level. Using these more practical applications, we can begin to design curriculum frameworks that embody epistemologically unified, unidisciplinary understandings of knowledge, with an explicit view toward enhancing students' capacity to understand social reality and imagine alternative realities.

Another application of Wallerstein's WSA that is under-utilized in comparative research uses the theorising as an over-arching framework with the power to explain educational phenomena globally and their national or local expressions. This draws on his detailed historical argument that a single "ideology of liberalism" emerged out of the once competing ideologies of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism, and was shared in key ways amongst historical socialist and capitalist nation-states (Wallerstein 1991c, 1995). As we outlined earlier, he saw this shared ideology as part of the "cultural-intellectual scaffolding to make [the world-system] work smoothly" (Wallerstein 2006, p. 54), incorporating understandings of knowledge like the epistemological dominance of scientific universalism and conceptions of linear and unending economic development and progress in all states. This ideology, underpinned by multiple modern and sovereign nation-states operating within an inter-state system and single world-economy, promised ever greater levels of material wellbeing. The promise of a better life for all, at some point over the horizon, was and remains a common motif for polities with ostensibly competing ideological claims. The potential application of this type of theorising in comparative research is compelling, offering an alternative, and/or complementary, world-system level account for the convergence of educational systems, structures, content, and pedagogical practices across diverse historical and political contexts (for an application to the case of revolutionary Cuba, see Griffiths 2009).

Neo-institutionalist theorising about world culture has arguably dominated the research accounting for educational convergence globally (for a recent example see Ramirez 2006), despite Wallerstein's substantial work on the complex links between the capitalist world-economy, culture, and ideology (e.g., Wallerstein 1988, 1990a, b, 2003). Instead, understandings of Wallerstein have tended to over-emphasize how dominant powers have directly imposed policies within a hierarchical world-system, which is at best a partial representation of this work and its explanatory power. Wallerstein's geocultural analysis of the world-system can add in significant ways to work examining how international institutions have imposed policy prescriptions over peripheral states. It can also contribute to and intervene directly in the current and multi-faceted work on "educational transfer". The approach involves systematic analysis of how the concept of the "geoculture of liberalism" underpins the ideologies of nation-states within the world-economy; thus it can also operationalize frameworks for identifying such features within diverse political contexts and the ways they influence policy making, responses, and practices across particular historical contexts. The world-systems approach offers a distinct explanatory level for identified educational convergence, highlighting connections to the development and operation of the capitalist world-economy through hierarchically organized nation-states. It also brings a distinct perspective to the potential of local and national responses to not just resist or reshape such universal tendencies, but to advocate and project alternative universals as part of a normative political project to construct an alternative world-system.

Wallerstein's analysis of contemporary conditions, always within the historical framework of the capitalist world-system's emergence and development, stresses the declining legitimacy of the shared geoculture or ideology of liberalism, beginning with the "world revolution" of 1968 and compounded by the collapse of the communisms in 1989–1991 (e.g. Wallerstein 1994). The result, he argues, is that liberalism has lost more of its legitimacy amongst populations and social movements as a central structural feature of

the capitalist world-system. In parallel, the modern nation-state has also lost legitimacy, as evident in a growing "anti-statism" that places further pressure on the system (Wallerstein 1999). This connects directly with a third and essential component of Wallerstein's corpus: the understanding of "a world"—the capitalist world-system—which will meet its demise and be replaced as a historical system by something else. This historical approach involves a rejection of theorising on globalization, insisting instead "on seeing all parts of the world-system as parts of a "world", the parts being impossible to understand or analyze separately" (Wallerstein 1995, p. 195). The analysis views current events and crises not as part of a recent shift in the relationship between nation-states and global influences, and capital and institutions, but rather as a foundational aspect of the long development of the capitalist world-system.

This long-term historical understanding of the current world-system points to its bifurcation as it moves into an uncertain future, one in which human agency can have a heightened influence over its trajectory. Wallerstein's WSA rejects teleological analyses of the historical trajectory of capitalism, pointing consistently to uncertainty about future developments, and about the shape of the world to come. To highlight the point, he argues that "the holders of current power" are seeking "to change everything so that nothing changes," and that this is one of several possible outcomes (Wallerstein 1988, p. 81). The normative call then, to which world-systems comparative research might contribute, is for intellectual work that will better support our understanding of the current system (what is), our thinking and elaboration of more just, democratic, and equal alternative arrangements (what ought to be), and our political interventions to move the transition in such directions. For comparative research, this framework has the explanatory power to account for existing educational arrangements, and their structure, organization, curricular content and operation, coupled with a normative project of building education systems to support the broader project of the world-system in transition.

In an essay responding to the multiple emergent social movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Wallerstein (2002) argued that "We need to stop assuming what the better (not the perfect) society will be like. We need to discuss it, outline it, experiment with alternative structures to realize it" (p. 39). It is this political task, central to the perspective's historical development and the functioning of our current system, which connects directly with the contemporary agenda of comparative education. For example Klees (2008) recently affirmed the link between comparative research and "the central dilemma of our time (what to do about poverty, inequality, and development) and for our field (What is education's role in all this?)" (p. 303). This highlights the potential of Wallerstein's WSA over the more apolitical perspectives that have dominated the field. At a time when discourses about globalization have effectively become normalized, and with comparative education as a field arguably entering a renaissance amidst ever-increasing amounts of comparative data, comparative research of this sort can maintain our focus on the central unit of analysis—the modern world-system—but also on its potential transition toward a more equal, just, and democratic future.

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