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Outflanking world-system analysis: silent struggle over the meaning of centres and peripheries of knowledge production

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	Ben-David	Wallerstein
Socio-historical background	Develops ideas of Shils that were needed for US informal imperialism, and works at Hebrew University, where abstracting from ongoing social struggles is common	Advocates anti-capitalist and third-world liberation ideas, operates in an anti-Marxist context of US academia and the international student organisation (WAY) and mixes vocabulary from many traditions
Defining characteristic	Centres are a crucial source of order, authority, and influence in peripheries	Given region is central or peripheral by its links with capitalist production. Academia 1) supports indirectly by creating liberal geoculture, 2) directly produces commodities, 3) but it is also a site of political struggle
History	The locations change through time, but centres and peripheries are inherent features of any society	Their location changes through time, but centres and peripheries are defined as specific features of the capitalist world-system that had its beginning and may collapse
Stance towards centres	Learn from them through competition	Develop thinking undermining the division on centres, peripheries, and semi-peripheries
Universalism of science and politics	Once achieved, universalism of science is positive. From 1960s it has been endangered by the politicisation of science and nationalisms	Universalism of science is in crisis. Possibility of developing a new, more dialectical universalism

Table 1 Overview of Ben-David's and Wallerstein's understanding of centres and peripheries of knowledge production and their socio-historical background

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Outflanking World-System Analysis: Silent Struggle Over the
Meaning of Centres and Peripheries of Knowledge Production

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Abstract

Demarcating between centres, peripheries and semi-peripheries has always been a challenging task and topic of scholarly debate. Layers of complexity are added when one writes about centres and peripheries of knowledge production. This paper argues that much of this complexity stems from the conflation of two approaches: Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system analysis and Joseph Ben-David’s strongly anti-Marxist sociology of science. First, the paper presents the causes of their ostensible similarity, contextualising the relations of both sociologists with US informal imperialism, which motivated them to outflank each other, rather than attack each other openly. The paper then shows that both Wallerstein and Ben-David describe historical geopolitical inequalities, changes in the position of the centre, and the possibility of multiple centres. However, Ben-David conceptualised centres and peripheries of science as competition without end, ruled by scientific universalism. For Wallerstein, academia plays a supplementary role to the economic system, with universities as places of constant social struggle, and the universalism of science entering a deep crisis. By conducting this detailed comparison, the paper sheds light on substantial differences between Wallerstein’s and Ben-David’s approaches and shows how influential contemporary sociological works either conflate them or outflank world-system analysis by undermining its Marxist roots.

Keywords

Cold War, Immanuel Wallerstein, Joseph Ben-David, Sociology of Knowledge, World Systems

Introduction

It is starting to become common knowledge that writing about science and higher education only from the perspective of the Western centre leads to simplified and Eurocentric narratives. Scholars call for studying the development of science “from peripheries” (Rodriguez-Medina and Vessuri, 2021) and strongly propose new perspectives on science done in Argentina, Ghana, Poland, or Australia (Connell, 2006; Kreimer, 2019; Kulczycki, 2023; Mills et al., 2023; Rodriguez Medina, 2014; Vessuri et al., 2014; Zarycki, 2022). But what do centres and peripheries mean in this context, and what is the relationship between them? Here, there are still academic discussions lacking much clarity. Answers to those questions can vary from simple dismissal of such outdated categories (Anderson, 2009; Marginson & Xu, 2023) to developing new theories of “global system of social sciences” divided into core, semi-

peripheries, and peripheries of knowledge production (Demeter, 2019). This paper will argue that this lack of clarity depoliticizes study of centres and peripheries and prevents us from exploring the relation between science and the capitalist world-system in its complexity.

Discussion of centres and peripheries in knowledge production is emerging across many interrelated academic fields. Science and technology studies (STS) developed a strong tradition of studying the topic through the works of Latin American scholars (Beigel, 2016; Kreimer, 2019; Rodriguez Medina, 2014; Vessuri et al., 2014), with important contributions also from Central and Eastern Europe (Abriszewski et al., 2022; Stöckelová and Vostal, 2017). Simultaneously, within the broader movement of world-system analysis (WSA), originating with Wallerstein's work (Wallerstein, 1974, 2004), Frank (2009), or Amin (1977), there were attempts inspired by Joseph Ben-David's (1971, 1977) sociology of science to study centres and peripheries of knowledge production through bibliometric analysis (Demeter, 2019; Schott, 1998). Further, the centro-peripheral dynamics were also an important part of the critique of the Eurocentric canon of modern sociology, highlighting the need for broader appreciation of "southern theory" including Latin American dependency theory, indigenous sociology, and the African anti-colonial movement (Connell, 2007).

However, many believe that the centre-periphery distinction is simplistic (Marginson, 2022; Marginson and Xu, 2023) or suggest the need to start thinking about the multiplicity of centres and peripheries (Kreimer, 2022). At the same time, the development of the concept is increasingly disconnected from the key features of world-system analysis developed by Wallerstein (1974), Frank (2009) Amin (1977), and Arrighi (2010), namely, the critique of the historical development of the capitalist system. Wallerstein was aware of such a danger. Diagnosing the situation of the development of WSA and its possible demise, he saw that somehow it became even too successful in academic circles:

"we are running the danger of success. It is because of the strength, and not the weakness, of our efforts that our terminology is in the process of being appropriated for other, indeed opposite, purposes. This can cause serious confusion in the general scholarly public, and even worse, may lead to confusion on our own part, thus undermining our ability to pursue the tasks we have set ourselves" (Wallerstein, 1998: 108).

Because of such appropriations, many discussions on the topic often lack theoretical clarity. Especially in studies on higher education, authors often try to abolish the centre and periphery distinction using straw-man arguments or are unable to precisely define the terms that are used (Krawczyk and Gibson 2025). This paper will show that behind many of those confused discussions lies the conflation of two influential approaches to centres and peripheries: world-system analysis by Immanuel Wallerstein and the sociology of science by Joseph Ben-David. Neither of those sociologists openly attacked the other, but we can observe that Ben-David's work could be easily used to 'outflank' WSA and to appropriate it to the politically "other, indeed

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opposite, purposes” (Wallerstein, 1998: 108). Wallerstein (2004) preferred writing about the “core” to suggest a focus on the “multicentric region” (Chase-Dunn, 2024: 524), and other influential WSA scholars, like Andre Gunder Frank (2009), focused on the “centre” to analyse the direct relation between centre and periphery. But regardless of chosen terminology, WSA scholars were often more focused on discussing trade or direct production for the market than the development of science and higher education. That made it tempting to supplement WSA with insights from Ben-David’s innovative works on the history of the centre and peripheries of international science (Ben-David, 1971, 1977). Merging those two perspectives was usually done without acknowledging political differences between Wallerstein and the strongly anti-Marxist Ben-David (Schott, 1991, 1998).

The novelty of the paper lies in exposing and clarifying the conflicting theoretical and political assumptions of Wallerstein and Ben-David. As I will present below, many influential scholars focus on their similarities, combining the two approaches. Lybeck’s extensive comparisons of those two thinkers is symptomatic as it focuses on how WSA similarly to Ben-David: “adheres to a similar ‘global’ model of a single system” (2021: 25). In contrast, this paper will explain the significant differences between these two perspectives on the centres and peripheries of knowledge production. It will also show how clarifying the opposition between them works as a mirror for WSA, highlighting its specificity in approaching knowledge production, with a focus on political conflict, geoculture, and envisioning a new kind of universalism.

The next section will elaborate on the key academic backgrounds of Ben-David and Wallerstein, showing how the context of US imperialism and the Cold War masked crucial differences between the two approaches. Through the metaphor of theorising as “outflanking” one’s opponent, I will explore why both scholars might avoid open confrontation and often use similar language. Then, the next two sections of the paper will provide a detailed comparison of Ben-David’s and Wallerstein’s understanding of centres and peripheries. Finally, I will show that looking at the contemporary debates, Ben-David’s “outflanking” was very successful in many instances, especially in quantitative studies of science and studies of higher education. Clarifying the opposition between WSA and Ben-David’s approach is crucial to move those discussions forward.

The Socio-Historical Background of Theoretical Outflanking

To grasp the importance of the theoretical conflict between Ben-David and Wallerstein, it is important to consider the context and sources of their ostensible similarity. Those two conflicting theoretical approaches emerged during a very specific historical period: the Cold War. It created an environment that pushed Ben-David and Wallerstein towards an outflanking strategy rather than open confrontation. Reconstructing the broader context in which their

theories were developed allows us to see their structural social positions, which were shaping their works in a way that underplayed the differences between them.

This paper will describe this underplaying through Richard Rorty's metaphor of outflanking as a key strategy in philosophical and theoretical discussions. Rorty argues that such discussions are often not won by the "head-on" assault on your opponent, but by a series of small movements that outflank their position. He himself writes how to do it: "things will be largely a matter of redescribing other things, trying to outflank the objections by enlarging the scope of one's favourite metaphors. So my strategy will be to try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head-on" (Rorty, 1990: 44). Without going deeper into the merits of Rorty's philosophy, his metaphor of outflanking can help us to better understand the nature of the conflict between Ben-David and Wallerstein. The next sections will show how they were differently redescribing issues around geopolitical inequalities, but first we need to understand how the realities of the Cold War were shaping them to do so.

To understand the structural conditions for the development of Ben-David's approach, we need to situate it within the wider context of US imperialism. After the Second World War and a worldwide increase in the national liberation and anti-colonial struggle in the Third World, it became clear to the US Department of State that it needed a different imperial model than that of a diminishing British or French Empire (Go, 2008). The war in Vietnam showed that an alliance between the communist and the national-liberation movement was very dangerous for the empires. The US needed to seek alliances with non-communist nationalists and use strong intelligence to influence elections in other countries. Choosing those methods of influence already in the 1940s and 1950s in cases of Iran and the Philippines marked a shift from formal to informal imperialism (Go, 2008), strongly underpinned by the rising power of the CIA, which organised 333 foreign covert operations from 1953 to 1961 (McCoy, 2017). Joining the US war against communism could grant Third World nationalists formal national liberation, though informal economic dependency on the US empire persisted in the new post-colonial settings.

One of the key sociologists engaged in supporting US in those Cold War struggles, was Ben-David's mentor – Edward Shils - whom he first met attending his seminar at the London School of Economics (Shils, 1987), and who pressured Ben-David to incorporate the concept of centres and peripheries into his work (Lybeck, 2021: 30). Shils also had well documented ties with US intelligence, working from 1953 for Congress of Cultural Freedom (CCF), which was secretly financed by the CIA, of which Shils was aware from 1955 (Stonor Saunders, 2000: 246). He was considered the best expert on India within the whole CCF (Sharma, 2020). And later, in 1962, he also received funding from CCF to establish the scholarly journal *Minerva*,

as he sought to push the CCF community toward more scholarly and less political discussions (MacLeod, 2016).

Despite that, Shils and Minerva remained strongly engaged in Cold War anticommunism and anti-Marxism. Moreover, Shils's extensive research on Indian intellectuals was influenced by his connections with the USA's informal imperialism. Shils revealed many shortcomings of Indian intellectuals, including their excessive dependence on the West, a shortage of books, and connections to the caste system that limit further development. At the same time, such a critique was strongly based on the dismissal of indigenous Indian thought, Marxism, and dismissing frequent student protests in India by explaining them as students' lack of education. Shils was harshly criticised in India after CIA funding of CCF was revealed, and he never returned to the country after 1967 (Sharma, 2020).

Ben-David based his work on Shils's anti-Marxist sociology of intellectual dependency between centres and peripheries. Although Ben-David's sociology clearly responded to the need for a new informal imperialism, detailed sources on his political engagement are lacking. From his colleagues' memories, we can see that he not only inherited a theory shaped by imperialism, but that his specific context also led him to support the US's strong global position. He spent most of his life teaching at the Hebrew University in Israel (from 1950 to 1986). He deeply believed in the autonomy of science from politics, but at the same time, was firmly convinced that US support was a key help in the survival of Israel (Collins, 1986).

Focusing on an idealised, depoliticised conception of scientific autonomy enables Ben-David to dismiss social conflicts he does not want to see. His university was an institution strongly linked with building a strong Israeli state that discriminated in education against Palestinians (Wind et al., 2024). However, this fact is absent from Ben-David's writing on the Israeli higher education system. He strikingly states that: 'access to HE has never been a political issue in Israeli society because universities admit all minimally qualified candidates' (Ben-David, 1986: 105). From memories of the first Palestinian students at the Hebrew University just a few years after Ben-David wrote his paper, we can learn the following: "the administration and students overwhelmingly considered themselves bystanders, removed from the violence unfolding daily right outside their campus in occupied East Jerusalem. 'While the Palestinians fought for their liberation,' Gordon writes, 'we continued our classes on Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and G. E. Moore.'" (Wind et al., 2024: 172) It means that Ben-David functioned in an environment highly motivated to focus on the abstract advancement of pure science rather than on political struggle.

At the same time, his writing on centres and peripheries provides language for describing and critiquing (post)colonial dependency. Even if Ben-David is clearly critical of scientific nationalism, he agrees that modes of organising knowledge production should not be uncritically imported from the centre and need to be adjusted to local needs (Ben-David, 1971).

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3 In his memoir of Ben-David, Edward Shils described the international universalism of his
4 approach, feeling a “kinship with men and women of all nationalities and religions as long as
5 they were engaged in science” (Shils, 1987: 203).
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8 To outflank Marxism (and Marxist-inspired theories), Ben-David uses subtle redescrptions of
9 crucial concepts in the discussion. Ben-David does not theorise much himself on the meaning
10 of the concept, relying on Shils's works and, as the next section will show, shares many
11 important characteristics with WSA. Similar to WSA, his approach is highly historical,
12 describes geopolitical inequalities, and even allows thinking about the multiplicity of centres
13 and peripheries. Moreover, Ben-David addresses shortcomings of the broader WSA literature,
14 which rarely examines the geopolitics of knowledge production through concrete studies of
15 how this production was organised.
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18 However, the small movements towards outflanking his opponents are not only exclusive to
19 Ben-David's works. We can also find signs of them in Wallerstein's approach. Despite his
20 Marxist roots, Wallerstein developed an original vocabulary inspired primarily by Fernand
21 Braudel's approach to world history. Throughout his career, Wallerstein made intellectual
22 contributions to discussions of global capitalism and promoted radical non-Western scholars.
23 Akuno (2013) mentions that Wallerstein played an important role in introducing Amílcar
24 Cabral's revolutionary critique of (neo)colonisation to the Black Liberation Movement in the
25 United States by conducting an interview with him in 1965. Wallerstein openly admitted that
26 Franz Fanon and his early studies on African liberation and nationalist movements influenced
27 him (Williams, 2020). Later on, he supported and visited the Zapatistas in Chiapas. So, there
28 is no doubt that Wallerstein frequently used his position in favour of anti-capitalist, Third World
29 liberation movements, but, working at top US universities and important international
30 organisations, he was structurally not in a position where developing an openly Marxist
31 vocabulary would be easy. To understand that, we need to highlight two points: the anti-
32 Marxist environment in which Wallerstein developed his career, and his scholarly approach,
33 which combined the influence of radical anti-imperialist thinkers with that of more acceptable
34 social theorists.
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37 Wallerstein's first scholarly work was his master's thesis on McCarthyism, written in 1954 –
38 just after the peak of anti-Marxist hysteria on US campuses. Wallerstein opposed
39 McCarthyism, but it was also an important part of the social reality that shaped him. Although
40 Wallerstein was criticising McCarthyism from the left, the anti-communist environment of US
41 academia was something he had to take into account for the rest of his career. McCarthyism
42 created a space where identifying oneself with Marxism could seriously jeopardise one's
43 academic career (Badash, 2000).
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46 An important context for Wallerstein's intellectual development is also his involvement in the
47 World Assembly of Youth (WAY). Wallerstein joined the organisation in 1951 (Williams, 2020)
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and became its vice president in 1955 (Wadlow, 2019). Although he mentions in his biographical piece that “this was how I got to know many of those who would later be presidents of many African countries” (Wallerstein et al., 2012: 12), he did not elaborate on the organisation in his scholarly work. Engagement in WAY gave him better insight into the world of politics, but also important scholarly contacts that he has sustained (Rockhill, 2025). Interestingly, from the perspective of time, it is clear that the CIA set up the organisation to create an alternative to the student movement dominated by communist and KGB agents from the International Union of Students (Kotek, 1996), as part of broader international competition between US and Soviet intelligence (McCoy, 2017). The goal was to create a leftist but anti-USSR political space for students, which, however, became problematic for US imperialism when the students from WAY became too engaged in the protest against the War in Vietnam in the 1960s. Regardless of Wallerstein’s full knowledge of WAY’s political background, this situation shows clearly that his theoretical work emerged from the tension between dependency on contemporary US imperialism and a more radical will to oppose it.

Wallerstein radicalised his thinking and politics in the 1960s, but to formulate the bases for WSA, he connected radical anti-imperialist inspirations with frameworks less controversial in US academia. Engagement with African liberation movements in the 1960s and personally meeting Franz Fanon influenced Wallerstein to see the importance of class struggle and to criticise Eurocentrism, which was also present in some Marxist writings of that time. In addition to those influences, Goldfrank lists three other crucial theoretical inspirations: “German historical economy” (especially Weber’s writings on city and countryside), “the Annales school in French historiography, and Marxism” (Goldfrank, 2000: 160). The most cited scholar in Wallerstein’s first book on WSA was Ferdinand Braudel, who was developing a strong framework for studying capitalism that was significantly different from the Marxist language (Goldfrank, 2000). Such attempts could also be generously supported by grants from the US government (often through the CIA), by foundations such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations and were often rooted in anti-Nazi intelligence organisations. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Fernand Braudel are all examples of such new critiques of capitalism that received generous funding from the imperialist centre to create alternatives to forms of Marxism too closely associated with the USSR and perceived as an enemy of the US (Rockhill, 2025). Wallerstein’s fascination with Braudel and his use of Braudel’s works as a basis for developing a vocabulary distinct from traditional Marxist language should be read in this context.

Wallerstein clearly did not choose the strategy of a head-on attack (using, once more, Rorty’s military metaphor) – he did not become the kind of Marxist portrayed as the main enemy of the US-led global order. He clearly criticised “Marxism of the parties” (Wallerstein, 1986: 1302), exemplified by Soviet orthodoxy, which focused on strengthening communist parties

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3 aiming for development within a state. Wallerstein, despite being inspired by Marx, chooses
4 the strategy of outflanking by developing new, interesting academic language drawing on
5 important (and less controversial) traditions:
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8 “I’m perfectly happy with being called a radical, and being called a Marxist depends on what
9 you mean by ‘Marxist.’ And I usually say there are four views of me as a Marxist: there are
10 those who say I’m a Marxist and that’s a good thing; there are those who say I’m a Marxist
11 and that’s a bad thing; and there are those who say I’m not a Marxist and that’s a good thing;
12 and there are those who say that I’m not a Marxist and that’s a bad thing. I can identify with
13 people who have argued all of these things, and I don’t worry about that” (Rojas, 2012: 8; cited
14 in: Williams, 2020).
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19 This passage shows perfectly Wallerstein’s complicated relation with Marxism. He sees
20 limitations in the Marxist tradition but did not choose to develop an openly Marxist vocabulary,
21 and is still accused of Marxism in the context of US anti-Marxist academia. This section
22 presented the historical social positions of Wallerstein and Ben-David as conditioning them to
23 rather outflank each other’s positions than to develop distinct and contrasting vocabularies.
24 However, those interconnections with conditions of the US Cold War do not determine the
25 content of Wallerstein’s or Ben-David’s writings. Anti-communism of the Cold War is rather a
26 “shadow” (Rockhill, 2025) that follows those intellectuals and covers the most important
27 differences between them.
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35 **Ben-David: Historical Centres of Eternal Competition**

36 Having outlined the socio-political context that encouraged outflanking one’s theoretical
37 opponents, now we will look more closely at how Ben-David conceptualises the centres and
38 peripheries of science. Analysing how he defines the characteristics of centres and
39 peripheries, describes their history, his stance towards centres, and his understanding of the
40 universality of science and politics will be crucial to understanding the depth of the theoretical
41 opposition between him and Wallerstein.
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46 Although centres and peripheries are crucial concepts for Ben-David’s original global history
47 of science (1971), when writing about them, he mostly refers to the theoretical definitions
48 provided by Edward Shils (Ben-David, 1971: 19, 1977: 5). Shils’ key text on the topic begins
49 with the sentence: “Society has a centre.” (Shils, 1961: 117) highlighting its highly universal
50 ambitions – although the centres can change dramatically over time, the distinction between
51 them and peripheries seems universal across all known societies and historical periods. Shils
52 elaborates:
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57 “The centre, or the central zone, is a phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs. It is the
58 centre of the order of symbols, values, and beliefs that govern society. It is the centre because
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3 it is the ultimate and irreducible; and it is felt to be such by many who cannot give explicit
4 articulation to its irreducibility" (Shils, 1961: 117).

6 This way, the centre is a source of authority that governs the whole society; it influences and
7 structures its peripheral zones. Science is an important part of this centre because (similarly
8 to religion) it presents itself as having access to the higher order of reality, unavailable to the
9 common people and sometimes even to other intellectuals.

12 For Ben-David, this translates to the network model that explains the whole international
13 development of science: "Science is communicated and learned over a network comprised of
14 intellectuals who serve as role models, and those who carry science to far-away places copy
15 the models." (Ben-David, 1971: 19). Moreover, the concrete location and specificity of those
16 centres can be studied. Ben-David argues that although no method of measurement of
17 scientific centrality is fully satisfactory, we can measure it through quantitative studies of the
18 number of publications, discoveries, or Nobel Prizes, making him a crucial inspiration for
19 further bibliometric studies of science.

22 This understanding of centres and peripheries serves Ben-David in describing a history of
23 science as a history of shifts in the location of international scientific centres. He follows three
24 major shifts in the location of the centre of science: to France in the XVIII century, to Germany
25 in the XIX century, and finally to the US in the XX century (Ben-David, 1971). All those shifts
26 highlight the need for the flexibility of the organisation of science to adjust to the evolving
27 nature of scientific activity and the emergence of new international competitors.

30 Analysing this history also reveals Ben-David's largely positive stance towards competition to
31 become the next centre. Ben-David not only drew on Edward Shils's understanding of the
32 concept but also developed it in a direction that stressed the strongly positive role of
33 competition in science, which was connected to his admiration for Milton Friedman, whom he
34 met during his work in Chicago (Lybeck, 2021). Although, for Ben-David, one should not copy
35 central science entirely, peripheries cannot dismiss it either; they should fairly compete to
36 develop within the international hierarchy. He illustrates it with examples of Germany and
37 France in the XIX century, arguing that although the French system, much earlier, separated
38 science from the humanities and favoured the former, the crucial factor in shifting the centre
39 to Germany was its flexibility. Ben-David sees the source of this flexibility as lying in the
40 competition forced on German universities in the "academic market of the politically
41 decentralised German-speaking areas of Central Europe" (Ben-David, 1971: 123).

44 To this point, we could see how Ben-David directed his main efforts toward redescribing the
45 division between centres and peripheries as a vision of society that is always stratified and
46 developing through competition. However, to understand the real stakes of silent conflict
47 between the two sociologists, it is good to focus on another feature of Ben-David's thought: its
48 engaged anti-Marxism. Despite his historical approach, Ben-David put considerable effort into
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1 distancing himself from the sociology of knowledge rooted in Marxian class analysis. With
2 confidence, he states that there is no strong relationship between the content of scientific
3 knowledge and class or political systems. He dismisses Marx's concept of bourgeois
4 liberalism, suggesting that there is no good evidence that the capitalist system leads to an
5 atomised view of society, and that collectivism and individualism were merely two opposing
6 philosophical traditions adopted by scholars, regardless of their social or political background
7 (Ben-David, 1971: 8–9). That leads him to the strong conclusions about Marxism: it is a
8 pseudo-science (Ben-David, 1977: 123).

9 This anti-Marxism is rooted in scientific universalism. As the next section will show,
10 universalism is not alien to Wallerstein, although he writes about the contemporary crisis of
11 universalism and productive „intellectual turmoil” that follows. Ben-David's scientific
12 universalism, even if achieved through centuries of development of science and its social role
13 (Ben-David, 1971), is unquestionably a positive phenomenon, and it is endangered by
14 nationalism and the politicisation of science. Ben-David sees those dangers emerging,
15 especially from the 1960s' new political movements at universities and from actions for more
16 equal learning promoted by UNESCO (Ben-David, 1977: 152–156).

17 Ben-David's position is internally coherent. If the content of science is not influenced by society
18 or culture in any major way, it becomes possible to assess who is more or less advanced in
19 science. Because the content of science is autonomous, doing science is a transnational
20 activity. Yet, this autonomy serves as a basis for international competition in science, as
21 everyone participates in the same race to become a scientific centre.

22 From this perspective, it becomes clear that political arguments for more equal higher
23 education and any strong critique of the competitive international dynamic endanger those
24 positive universal standards of science. Such understanding of universalism endangered by
25 politics is a deeply philosophical assumption, and a crucial small move in the manoeuvre of
26 outflanking Ben-David's theoretical opponents writing on centres and peripheries. At the same
27 time, this assumption is deeply conforming with the social environment at the Hebrew
28 University, where Ben-David worked - scholars can focus on pure universalist science and
29 dismiss ongoing struggles for Palestinian liberation (Wind et al., 2024).

30 **Wallerstein: Terrains of Conflict in the Centres and Peripheries of Global Exploitation**

31 According to Lybeck (2021: 54), the main similarity between Wallerstein and Ben-David is that
32 they focus on the simplified history of the steady rise of natural science (Ben-David) or
33 capitalism (Wallerstein). While surely both use some historical simplifications, their focus on
34 the rise of capitalism or natural sciences is linked with much bigger theoretical differences in
35 the understanding of the relation between centres and peripheries and science. The previous

section presented how Ben-Davids and Shils understood the division between centre and periphery as a universal multipurpose tool for locating the main sources of authority, order, and influence in societies and international space. For Wallerstein, centres and peripheries (that he mostly names as the core and periphery (Wallerstein, 2004)) mean historically developed centres and peripheries of capitalist accumulation. That means the roles of science and higher education are seen very differently – they are places of building liberal geoculture, but also a terrain of political struggle (Wallerstein, 1969).

It is important to see the specificity of Wallerstein's understanding of the centre, periphery and semi-periphery division. Wallerstein never uses this distinction to name the imbalance of influence and authority in regions of scientific production, as Ben-David and Shils did. Although it is clear that, especially when a centre achieves a hegemonic position in the system (as the Netherlands did in the XVII century), its culture and science can more easily become influential throughout the system (Wallerstein, 2011a). However, this influence is never a defining characteristic of centrality, since the centres are established through the concentration of the central production processes. Centrality in production is achieved through the quasi-monopolisation of production: when peripheries produce mostly raw materials or products for highly competitive markets, centres produce products with almost no competition, and semi-peripheral regions mix those two production processes. Usually, centres produce highly processed or technologically advanced products like ships, machines, or engines (O'Hearn, 2001; Wallerstein, 1974).

Such a definition of centrality is rooted in the deeper theoretical assumption: accumulation of capital is the dominating (although definitely not only) factor in the capitalist world-system. Wallerstein defines a system as capitalist when "the system gives priority to the endless accumulation of capital" (Wallerstein, 2004: 24). He points out that, at least until the moment that the whole system remains intact, actions aimed at accumulating more capital often will lead to the crucial advantage. Such an assumption is much different from the economic determinism where "we are forced to assume that these [capitalist] classes always get what they want" (Skocpol, 1977: 1080), frequently argued by Wallerstein's critics. In many concrete cases, Wallerstein's "systemic priority" of economic factors will not be the final and deciding element. Moreover, it is a law of a historically developing system that experiences a crisis that weakens systemic priority of economic accumulation or may even lead to the system's collapse. Wallerstein writes on that in his later works, predicting that the deepening crisis of US hegemony in the late XX century marked the fatal state of this whole system (Wallerstein, 2006).

That means that culture, science, or politics is neither insignificant nor detached from the capitalist system. Quite the opposite, as structures of scientific knowledge: "are an essential element in the functioning and legitimation of the political, economic, and social structures of

the system” (Wallerstein, 2006: 59). As convincingly put by Williams, Wallerstein’s method is rather the one of the “closed totality” (Williams, 2020: 71) – i.e. it is a holistic approach but focused on the historical system that had its historical beginning and will have a historical end. But what is the place of science and the universities in this totality?

The first part of the answer is provided by the later Wallerstein’s work devoted to building what he terms liberal geoculture. Geoculture for Wallerstein means “values that are very widely shared throughout the world-system, both explicitly and latently” (Wallerstein, 2011b: 277). And from the struggle between conservatives and socialists, it was centrist liberalism proposing egalitarian reforms through long and gradual reforms of the state that reached the status of the geoculture. Finally, such liberalism is a “ideology of the strong state as the only sure ultimate guarantor of individualism” (Wallerstein, 2011b: 10). Education and the spread of Western ‘civilization’ are crucial means of emancipation in liberal geoculture. They led to “controlling the masses” in the core regions and “cultural imperialism” alienating individuals from “uncivilised societies in the peripheries” (Wallerstein, 2011b: 156).

When education helps legitimise the capitalist world-system in society, science (including the social sciences and humanities) develops new sources of that system’s legitimisation. Historians start to play crucial roles in strengthening nation-states (Wallerstein, 1996: 16) and sociologists design new emancipatory reforms for liberal states. Moreover, the process of increased disciplinary divisions further legitimises unequal differences in the world-system.

But one could wonder whether Wallerstein, when writing about geoculture, is actually describing Ben-David’s centres and peripheries, but using different language? For sure (especially with the idea of advanced civilisation), some regions have more authority in the creation of geoculture than others, so to some extent, a similar dynamic to that of centres and peripheries defined by Shils exists. We can see here that Wallerstein does not want to fully negate the existence of more and less influential regions in the international culture, but rather outflank his opponents by redescribing those regions into vocabulary focused on the critique of the capitalist system as a whole.

However, this seeming similarity with Ben-David can hide much more important differences. Firstly, the terms core and periphery already have a specific meaning for Wallerstein, and they are defined by the link with quasi-monopolistic processes of production and not with the scale of influence on international science. Naming inequalities in producing scientific and educational discourse the same terms as the key economic mechanism of the whole system could create confusion and similarly strong ties in this form of intellectual dependency. Moreover, the current stage of liberal geoculture does not have to be its final one, and the work of sustaining and developing capitalist geoculture could become much more equally spread around the world following the spread of higher education. Further, although competition is certainly crucial in capitalist production, Wallerstein does not write anywhere

that it is crucial to the development of science. From the perspective of the analysis of liberal geoculture, intellectuals in various countries collaborate in legitimising the international system based on extreme economic competition rather than competing with each other.

In general, Wallerstein's understanding of the role of the university is much closer to that of Louis Althusser than to that of Shils and Ben-David. Althusser followed closely Marx's terminology and identified education as part of the state's ideological apparatus aimed at reproduction, where: "the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order" (Althusser, 1971: 123). Moreover, for both Wallerstein and Althusser, the university is also a crucial site of social struggle.

In the totality of mechanisms legitimising and sustaining the capitalist system, Wallerstein identifies a tension inside the university that makes it very unstable in its role of legitimising the system. It is a conflict between the idea of the university as a community of scholars working to the benefit of all people, and the university as something serving the national state in which it is located. This reliance on the academic community makes the university a valuable ally in legitimising the capitalist system, but it also makes it very fragile in this role.

The university, in its idea, contains vast potential for movement and political change:

"Thus, the ideal of the university as well as the idea lead to a perpetual tension, more or less well masked. No image of the university was ever more fallacious than that of the ivory tower. No university has ever been or could ever be one. Rather, the university has always been and will always be a terrain of conflict. The work of the university is not peace but combat—intellectual combat and, in one form or another, social combat. " (Wallerstein, 1969: 8)

Surprisingly, it was expressed in the very early Wallerstein's work on the 1968 student protests on American campuses titled "University in turmoil". Although the book is not well-known, the idea of turmoil developed there remains with Wallerstein and returns in his later work, where he diagnose state of contemporary academic knowledge as "turmoil in thinking" (Lee and Wallerstein, 2004: 204), resulting in the need to rethink disciplinary divisions and the separation of science from politics anew.

Although we can see that both sociologists see centres and peripheries as changing over history, the idea of turmoil strikingly contrasts with Ben-David's approach to centres and peripheries as sources of order and authority. For Ben-David (1971, 1977), the politicisation of universities in the US is a danger to proper scientific development; for Wallerstein, it is a source of hope in the broader fight to break free from the oppressive structure of centres and peripheries in the capitalist system. This shows Wallerstein's critical stance towards the centre: universities are not only not the main source of division between centres and

peripheries, but also spaces where this division can be undermined alongside the whole system.

However, before the system will collapse, science and higher education are also sometimes directly involved in the processes of central production. In general, the centres are expected to have their university and state research institutions more involved in central (i.e., quasi-monopolistic, producing very advanced products with little or no competition) production processes. Collaboration with universities can be an important source of technological innovation, which is crucial for developing central economy (O'Hearn, 2001). However, the fact that in the given region, one university very well connected with such production does not make the given region central. According to Wallerstein (2004), the landscape of all processes of production has to be assessed to decide whether the region is central, peripheral, or semi-peripheral. Universities are also important parts of the apparatus of the (central, peripheral, or semi-peripheral) states and specific sites of political struggles. Those two functions clearly do not have any universal transnational measure that would allow for comparing universities regardless of their local political context. Moreover, for Wallerstein, contemporary science as such lost its universalism, entering a state of turmoil.

Here, we touch on one of the biggest philosophical differences between Wallerstein and Ben-David. For the latter, science clearly has universal criteria that have to be historically achieved, but after that remain objectively valid. But in Wallerstein's thinking, we can trace inspirations from the Marxist tradition rooted in Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel (2019) universalism is real but at the same time historical and changing. Because of that, in this tradition of thinking, it is possible to imagine that not only universities as institutions are in crisis, but also scientific universalism itself. Wallerstein sees late XX century criticism coming from the cultural studies as an important, but not final, stage of the history of universalism. For cultural studies, scientific universalism is demasked as mainly a construct of Western white men, which corresponds with the broader systemic crisis of capitalism and US hegemony (Wallerstein, 2006). It is not fully clear what the future of scientific universalism will look like, but Wallerstein put hope in the rise of complexity studies and the possibility of developing more dialectical universalism that will: "universalise our particulars and particularize our universal simultaneously and in a kind of constant dialectical exchange" (Wallerstein, 2006: 49).¹ That means that rather than return to scientific universalism endangered by political crisis around universities, we have to imagine structures of our knowledge anew.

Contemporary Conflation and Reintroduction of the Opposition

A clear understanding of the depth of the theoretical opposition between WSA and Ben-David sheds more light on contemporary debates on the geopolitics of knowledge production and

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helps move them forward. Below, I will use this opposition to reinterpret influential works on the topic as examples of theoretical outflanking of WSA and the disappearance of the anti-capitalist alternative.

Table 1 summarises the previous parts of the paper, clarifying the main differences between Wallerstein and Ben-David. Remembering the socio-historical background of the Cold War helps us understand the similarities in their languages. Ben-David follows line of thought, that fulfils needs of US informal imperialism, trying to reshape the meaning of the centre-periphery division, moving it away from a critique of capitalism. On the other hand, functioning in an anti-Marxist environment of US academia, Wallerstein is anxious in labelling himself a Marxist and develops his work based strongly on Braudel’s vocabulary. Table 1 shows that they also share some similar theoretical assumptions. Both Wallerstein and Ben-David historize the centre and describe power imbalances as part of their defining characteristics. However, Table 1 also helps to look beyond these ostensible similarities and see the main difference: for Wallerstein, centres, peripheries, semi-peripheries, and even scientific universalism are strongly dependent on the development and crisis of the capitalist system. This difference is often lost in the discussions where the two approaches are mixed together.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

The area where Ben-David seems to really successfully outflanked WSA and conflation with Wallerstein is the easiest to observe are journals focused on research on higher education. One of the main causes is the work of a brilliant student of Ben-David and Shils: Philip Altbach. He followed his teachers' approach, focusing on the study of science taking place outside academic centres. His early works were devoted to Indian higher education and academic publishing, and he later became a key figure in higher education studies, establishing the Centre for International Higher Education at Boston College in 1995. Such a position helped him effectively popularise Ben-David’s approach in higher education studies.

In his key text on the topic, Altbach (1981) begins by citing the works of Shils and Ben-David, reproducing their main ways of understanding peripheries in higher education. He describes centres as sources of influence, and peripheries as those that “copy developments from abroad, produce little that is original, and are generally not at the frontiers of knowledge.” (Altbach, 1981: 46) However, while acknowledging the importance of Shils he distances himself from him, mentioning Gunder Frank (key WSA scholar) arguing that they show that industrial centre is largely responsible for neocolonialism sustaining inequities between centres and peripheries. This way Altbach makes a small shift from Ben-David’s and Shils’ approach, yet remains with their understanding of the main concept. When he describes possible solutions to the inequality between centres and periphery, the collapse of capitalist system does not present itself as an option. Altbach argues that his approach illustrates mostly how hard the transition from periphery to the centre is, and that most likely it will be possible

only in a few cases. His later text makes it clear that centre and periphery are timeless, universal divisions that can always be meaningfully applied, as “there will always be centres and peripheries” (Altbach, 2009: 15).

The previous parts of this paper allow us to see that Altbach reproduces the confusion already present at the level of the language of both theoretical approaches and spreads it throughout the literature on higher education. As shown in another study, the concept of centres and peripheries is often used there in a naturalised way (Krawczyk and Gibson 2025). Inspiring insights from WSA on political struggle, geoculture, and the crisis of universalism disappear from the discussion as the distinction between centre and periphery is naturalised as almost impossible to overcome. The conflation of different traditions continues in contemporary papers on higher education; Philip Altbach can be cited as a WSA scholar crucial for studies of higher education (Li and Zhang, 2011). Moreover, recently, a key scholar in this field – Simon Marginson – seeing the issues with the ways in which the centre-periphery division is used in higher education studies, proposes abandoning this division completely and blaming Wallerstein for the limitations of this concept (Marginson and Xu, 2023). However, most of their arguments are better suited to combat Altbach, Ben-David, and Shils’ approach than to Wallerstein’s.

Yet, the conflation of Wallerstein and Ben-David is not limited to studies on higher education, and it also occurs in key channels of discussion about WSA. One of them is the Journal of World-System Research (Chase-Dunn, 2024). Among papers devoted to the geopolitics of knowledge production published in the journal, one of the most influential was authored by the sociologist Thomas Schott in 1998 (Schott, 1998). Schott argued that WSA, represented, e.g., by Samir Amin, is focused on unequal exchange and needs to be supplemented by the study of unequal exchange in science. Then this scientific centrality and peripherality is measured using the number of Nobel Prizes, publications, citations, or students, clearly following Ben-David’s approach.

Schott develops this quantitative analysis of centres and peripheries in a series of publications in important sociological journals. In his earlier publication in *Minerva*, Schott uses statistics of citations from the Science Citation Index to diagnose Soviet science as peripheral in comparison to the US, abstracting from the relation of those countries with the capitalist system (Schott, 1991). The paper in *Science, Technology, & Human Values* clarifies his theoretical background, showing that inspirations from Shils and Ben-David allow him to see science as a separate system from the economy: “Furthermore, the scientific world system can be contrasted to the world system in another institutional sphere. For example, the scientific world system is more hierarchical, but less regionalised, than the world economy” (Schott, 1993: 205). In this way, through utilising the rapidly developing tool of quantitative

analysis and defining a perfect object for its study, Schott opened space for broader development of Ben-David's approach through quantitative studies.

The theoretical clarifications made in this paper show that Schott's presentation of his work as a synthesis between WSA and Ben-David, which focused on unequal exchange in science, is a form of outflanking WSA. More recently, Marton Demeter published another paper in the *Journal of World-System Research* (Demeter, 2019) and later a book (Demeter, 2020) on the topic, following mostly Schott's way of understanding Ben-David, but framing his work as part of WSA. Some of Schott's results could be possibly integrated into WSA, and Chase-Dunn's writings on the multidimensional character of the centre/periphery hierarchy opened space for integrating economic and non-economic factors when assessing centrality (Chase-Dunn, 1993). But so far, writings about "scientific world system" seem to use the same terms (centre and periphery) as WSA to name very different phenomena (e.g., inequalities in citations), creating confusion that undermines the main Marxist theoretical roots of Wallerstein's framework.

This paper enables us to see that WSA still did not find a way to coherently develop its approach to knowledge production in centre and peripheries through extensive quantitative study. Although participation of universities in some central or peripheral processes of production (like selling tuitions for elite certification) can be counted, the role of universities in central or peripheral state apparatus and, more generally, liberal geoculture, seems to be still very hard to calculate. Even harder seems to be capturing the dynamism of observing universities as "terrains of conflict" (Wallerstein, 1969: 8) by quantitative measures.

Finally, clarification of the theoretical conflict between Wallerstein and Ben-David can help us understand the hidden nuances in the wider contemporary discussions in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge. Here, a key example is the sociology of ideas developed by Randall Collins - one of the leading American sociologists and former president of the American Sociological Association (2010-2011). Ben-David is not cited extensively in Collins's major works, but they worked together in the past, and he "pays him respect" (Collins, 1998: XXI) as a teacher. Collins's seminal work on the sociology of ideas provides an overview of over two thousand years of the development of intellectual networks of philosophers (Collins, 1998). Understanding of the centre/periphery division seems to lie much closer to Ben-David's than Wallerstein's, as the centre is a source of new ideas and peripheries are mostly backward followers:

"The periphery is the world of the autodidact, and home of the myth of posthumous glory. [...] Peripheral intellectuals may combine ideas in different ways from what the intellectuals of the current core are doing, yet they depend on cultural capital transmitted from the past, only with a greater lag." (Collins, 1998)

In other texts, Collins argues about the limitations of WSA, but given the clearly conflicting theories of Wallerstein and Ben-David, we can understand these arguments less as pointing out crucial limitations of Wallerstein and more as a redescription of his language. Collins writes that “models such as world system theory encourage the assumption that hegemonic position in the world economy leads to domination of the means of cultural production” (Collins, 2001: 430). Collins argues that economic hegemony not always creates a “center of specifically civilizational prestige,” using examples such as ancient Greece and Rome, or XIX-century England and France. In this way, centres and peripheries of civilizational prestige and intellectual creativity seem relatively independent of the economy. This redescription moves us closer to Ben-David’s understanding of centres as sources of authority and influence, and the issue of anti-capitalist struggle or the connection between capitalism and scientific universalism disappears from the discussion. Exploring all the merits of Collins’ approach is beyond the scope of this paper, but analysing conflicting theories of Wallerstein and Ben-David provides important additional insight into his own position. To paraphrase Rorty: his redescriptions make the vocabulary in which WSA is phrased look bad.

Conclusions

This paper presents the critical comparative analysis of the theoretical approaches of Wallerstein and Joseph Ben-David, revealing a striking difference in their theoretical assumptions. It also explores the causes of conflation of the two thinkers in later discussions, contextualising both thinkers in the era of US informal imperialism.

As presented in Table 1, Ben-David’s understanding of centres and peripheries was characterised by historicising the centres of science as geographically changing sources of order and authority, in contrast to Wallerstein’s approach. For Wallerstein, centres and peripheries (or more precisely the core and the peripheries) referred to the regions of the capitalist system. Universities and science played an important role in legitimising the system through the co-creation of liberal geoculture, but at the same time were unstable sites of political struggle, where, especially since 1968, voices of anti-capitalist critique grew stronger. For Ben-David, centres and peripheries change their location historically, but they are a universal imbalance that is always present. For Wallerstein, they are strongly linked with the international capitalist system, and one cannot be sure if they will still be present when the system is gone. Similarly with universalism of science: for Ben-David (1971, 1977), universalism and objectivity of science should be defended from the political turmoil, for Wallerstein (2006), this universalism itself is in historical turmoil. This difference is subtle and philosophical, but crucial: while Ben-David’s universalism is escaping from politics, giving a basis for worldwide competition in science, Wallerstein embraces a large part of postmodern critique, hoping for the development of a new kind of the universal (el-Ojeili, 2015).

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At the same time, the paper argues that reshaping the meaning of centre and periphery is a key stake in the intellectual struggle that began during the Cold War. Due to the conditions of the Cold War and US informal imperialism, both Ben-David and Wallerstein were outflanking the other's theoretical positions. Instead of attacking each other openly, they were redefining key concepts, using sometimes very similar language. That led to the contemporary conflation of their approaches. Scholars either directly conflate two approaches (Altbach, 2009; Li and Zhang, 2011; Marginson and Xu, 2023), move closer to Ben-David's approach because it allows for easier quantification (Demeter, 2019; Schott, 1993), or underplay the critique of imperialism and capitalism, presenting themselves as alternative responses to the limitations of previous studies (Collins, 2001).

While the Cold War created, for many scholars, favourable conditions for outflanking their theoretical opponents, the current strong decline of US hegemony (Chase-Dunn and Zhai, 2025) might be a good time to revitalise the Marxist roots of the analysis of knowledge production. Wallerstein's approach addresses key questions about the relation between capitalism and academic Eurocentrism, shedding light on the conflicts and turmoil they cause. It offers a path to undermine contemporary Eurocentric culture through shared struggle inspired by global anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles. Such an approach has the potential to counteract the marginalisation of the impressive history of Chinese scientific tradition (Needham and Harbsmeier, 1998) and to follow ideas from Third World liberation movements or "southern theory" (Connell, 2007). Similar to other Marxist perspectives, it can study and support ongoing struggles at universities (Szadkowski and Krzeski, 2025). Moreover, Wallerstein provides a way to envision a new form of universalism, rather than seeking stable metrics that would allow observation of endless competition for authority. Revitalising Marxists' roots of WSA in that context requires first clarifying the theoretical opposition between Wallerstein and Ben-David. Rorty (1990) developed his metaphor of outflanking because he did not believe that the frontal struggle between two philosophical languages could be judged by reason placed somewhere above those languages. For him, reason is deeply embodied in the languages we use, making different languages incompatible and preventing us from truly proving which philosophical assumptions are more rational. This observation shows us the way to reverse theoretical outflanking, and to recognise the traditions developed by WSA and Ben-David, with Shils, as incompatible. It means preserving anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist tendencies in Wallerstein's thinking rather than discarding them in the name of synthesis with other thinkers. It does not mean closing the discussion on the limitations of Wallerstein's conceptualisation of the role of national class struggles or resistance (Gismondi, 1988), but rather critically developing his ideas without easily abandoning his core theoretical assumptions linked to the anti-capitalist struggle.

Notes

1. Cited Wallerstein's vision of new universalism is expressed in Hegelian language as a constant dialectical tension between particular and universal is a central theme of Hegel's Phenomenology (Hyppolite, 1979). One of the main contributions of Hegel's philosophy is showing how universality is itself in historical motion. Universalism changes itself with changes of the world-spirit, as we can see in the example of ancient Greece: "Only in an age of widespread fear and enslavement, yet also an age that's on the whole cultivated, one in which culture has attained to the level of thought, could Stoicism have emerged as one of the universal forms of the world-spirit" (Hegel, 2019: 100). Historical changes of the universal do not lead Hegel to irrationalism, but rather to developing new forms of rationality. That can help to explain Wallerstein's contradictory position where he "attempts to combine sympathy to post-modern with a modernist orientation to the future" (el-Ojeili, 2015: 15).

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