



## Review article

# The return of historical sociology

*Dennis Smith*

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*The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant 1789–1914*  
Immanuel Wallerstein, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2011, £47.95,  
paper £21.95, 377pp.

*Power in the 21st Century: Conversations with John A. Hall*  
Michael Mann, Polity, Cambridge, 2011, £50.00, paper £14.99, 179pp.

*The Sources of Social Power, Volume 3: Global Empires and Revolution, 1890–1945*  
Michael Mann, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, £62.00, paper  
£23.99, 516pp.

*The Sources of Social Power, Volume 4: Globalizations, 1945–2011*  
Michael Mann, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, £60.00, paper  
£22.99, 496pp.

### *The big tradition*

Twenty years ago there was a thriving ‘big tradition’ of comparative macro-historical sociology sustained by several major scholars. Where are they now? Theda Skocpol is now director of the Scholars Strategy Network,<sup>1</sup> Tony Giddens is in the House of Lords, Perry Anderson interrupted his production of large volumes some years ago,<sup>2</sup> Barrington Moore, Eric Hobsbawm and Charles Tilly are no longer with us. Meanwhile, both Michael Mann and Immanuel Wallerstein have remained for decades several volumes short of completing their promised major works. The third volume of Wallerstein’s *The Modern World-System* appeared in 1989, twenty-four years ago. The second volume of Mann’s *The Sources of Social Power* came out in the same year. They have not been idle. Other books have leapt from the press.<sup>3</sup> But their multi-part series were interrupted. Or, at least, such was the case until some months ago. Now, out of the blue, we have three new instalments: one from Wallerstein and two from Mann plus a short book of interviews.

*The waning of historical sociology*

The recent publication of the books under review reminds me that when I wrote *The Rise of Historical Sociology* (Smith, 1991) over twenty years ago, the object of my analysis seemed to have risen successfully from the ashes of fascism, state socialism and McCarthyism. This rugged hybrid discipline drew not only on sociology and history, but also on anthropology, international relations, political studies and social theory, to name only a few. As an intellectual field it was constructive, critical and thickly populated. Elias, who had died in 1990, was being rediscovered by a new generation. Braudel's latest work had just been published, albeit posthumously. Hobsbawm was still in full swing. Historical sociology attracted talents such as Wallerstein, Mann, Anderson, Skocpol, Goldstone, Giddens, Runciman, Moore, Tilly, Calhoun, Savage and Smith.

I have continued carving out my own contributions to historical sociology, responding to the shifts in *mentalité* within the West that followed two linked crises: the politics-driven crisis of 2001 following 9/11, leading to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the economics-driven crisis of 2008 following the bankruptcy of Lehmann Brothers, producing intense turbulence in the Eurozone. The first crisis was the catalyst for the book *Globalization: The Hidden Agenda* (Smith, 2006). The second project is ongoing.<sup>4</sup>

I mention this because working on these projects has made me aware that the intellectual climate has profoundly changed since the late 1980s; in fact, it was already changing throughout that neo-liberal decade. Since those days the intellectual scene in the social sciences has been awash with talk of individualism, identity, the self and social fluidity, all a tribute to the push-back of market forces against the state. It is almost as if the collapse of the Soviet Union removed 'big structures, large processes [and . . .] huge comparisons' (to quote Tilly, 1989)<sup>5</sup> from our shared consciousness and turned our world into one big virtual swimming pool. In 2013, the macro-historical sociologist who wields his or her sword against the half-truths of this conventional wisdom may sometimes feel they are slicing air.<sup>6</sup>

Two decades later, we may ask: what went wrong? Has the scourge of 'presentism' transmitted from business and politics overwhelmed academe? Has the rise of historical sociology been halted by a mixture of narrow disciplinary specialization and intensifying competition for diminishing resources? Is it wilting under pressure to demonstrate the 'impact' of research, and withering in the face of increasing preoccupation with methodology at the expense of sociological meaning and historical significance? Perhaps the answers lie in the very questions. However, all signs of renewed life are welcome, so what do Wallerstein and Mann have to say?

*Wallerstein on liberalism*

Wallerstein's fourth volume, entitled *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant 1789–1914* (Wallerstein, 2011) is a bit of a surprise. The

previous three volumes gave readers horizon-to-horizon guided tours across core, semi-periphery and periphery since the fifteenth century but the fourth volume suddenly narrows the focus, devoting its attention to Great Britain and France, albeit with glances at other parts of Europe and the English-speaking world. In fact, two surprises: a narrowing of focus and a foregrounding of ideology rather than economic relations.

This latest book takes off from the first chapter of Wallerstein's third volume on the expansion of the capitalist world economy between 1730 and the 1840s. There Wallerstein asked two questions: whether or not Britain experienced a 'first industrial revolution' (no, says Wallerstein); and whether or not the French Revolution was 'bourgeois' (no again, says Wallerstein). For Wallerstein, events in France hold the key to how we conventionally view the modern world. Like Anderson, Wallerstein believes that because of the French Revolution (along with the American one) 'the whole ideological world of the West was transformed' (Anderson, 1980: 36).

Wallerstein's volume on 'centrist Liberalism' sets out to explore how this happened and draws deeply on the scholarly secondary literature. The six chapters may be summarized in pairs. Centrist liberalism, we are reminded, was flanked by socialism and conservatism, its rivals and, sometimes, its collaborators. Over time, they overlapped and partially merged with each other. The 'gospel' of all three ideologies was 'progress via productivity' (Wallerstein, 2011: 18). By 1830–1832, liberalism and this gospel were well established at the world-system's core: in Britain, France and Belgium (Chapters 1 and 2).

By 1875, these liberal states had strengthened and consolidated themselves, extending citizenship and giving enhanced protection to the weak. The key political moves were made in the late 1860s and early 1870s by conservative elites whose evident commitment to property and hierarchy gave them their license to pacify and appease the 'dangerous classes' (p. 137). Disraeli showed how to reinforce social deference by giving the people imperialism. Meanwhile, citizenship was made less dangerous to the haves – for a while, at least – by excluding many of the have-nots such as women, ethnic/racial minorities, and those without property and literacy (Chapters 3 and 4).

Before summarizing his argument, Wallerstein argues that the liberal model of a compartmentalized social structure was paralleled by the development of three specialized social science disciplines intended to explain each of the compartments: economics for the market, political science for the state, and sociology for civil society. Each was to have its own realm and style of analysis because 'the three departments were quite different from each other' (p. 243). The implication is, presumably, that citizens were inhibited from making potentially radicalizing intellectual connections across disciplinary boundaries. So, professionalization of the disciplines led to their political neutralization (Chapters 5 and 6).

*Commentary on Wallerstein*

This book should be seen in the context of Wallerstein's long-term intellectual and political concerns. Wallerstein has been and remains a determined activist, dedicated to understanding the 'world-system', keen to install himself in interesting positions within it, and closely involved with anti-systemic movements across the world. Wallerstein is also a survivor. He has outlived Karl Polanyi's student, Terence Hopkins, with whom he developed the analysis of world-systems, and Giovanni Arrighi, whom Wallerstein first met in Africa, and whose book *The Long Twentieth Century* (Arrighi, 1994) was a highly influential interpretation of the transformations of global capitalism.

Like Fernand Braudel, whose name graces the centre at Binghamton University, Wallerstein has combined two things: stamina in the detailed elaboration of a particular model of transnational capitalism, and considerable ability in marshalling and deploying resources. In Wallerstein's case, these have included scholarly resources (his footnotes are prodigious), the intellectual resources of himself and his collaborators, and the material and organizational capacities of bodies such as the World Assembly of Youth (eight years as vice-president in the 1950s), the African Studies Association (president, 1972–1973), the Braudel Center (director 1976–2005), and the International Sociological Association (president 1994–1998). This list hardly scratches the surface.

Wallerstein has helped create a safe space on the US mainland for deeply critical analyses of global capitalism. The Braudel Center has done for our unequal and exploitative world order what the Chicago School between the two world wars did for the unequal and exploitative city. Each of these two academic schools made it easier for academics and other intellectuals in America to shoot stinging barbs deep into capitalism's head and heart, and yet survive, and even prosper, professionally.<sup>7</sup> Both ventures avoided the deadly epithet of being 'un-American' by making their formal object of attention either smaller than the American nation-state (the city) or greater (the capitalist world-economy). Like Chicago, Binghamton has been a broad church. It has allowed wide variation within and around the main world-systems thesis, encouraging debate and permitting creativity.

Still to come in Wallerstein's projected fifth volume is coverage of 'the scramble for Africa and the rise of movements of national liberation; the US-German economic and political rivalry for succession to Great Britain as the hegemonic power, and the ultimate triumph of the United States; and the incorporation of East Asia, its peripheralization, and its resurgence in the late twentieth century' (Wallerstein, 2011: xvi).

Wallerstein confidently asserts, in line with Ilya Prigogine,<sup>8</sup> that all unstable systems enter a phase of bifurcation, and this will lead the world-system either towards a non-capitalist system of inequality and exploitation or a more equal and less exploitative set of socio-political arrangements. Volume 6 will be about the coming 'structural crisis of the capitalist world-economy', which is

intimately connected to ‘the decline of American power’ (to cite another Wallerstein book).<sup>9</sup> As Michael Mann puts it, the American empire ‘has lost ideological legitimacy and political support among those it can conquer. It hasn’t declined yet. But it will decline, especially when the dollar is no longer the world’s reserve currency. World systems theorists who have predicted its decline for decades will be right eventually’ (Mann, 2011: 41).

### *Mann and the road to 1914*

Like Wallerstein, Mann is energetic, engaged and keen to contribute to debates within the social sciences and the political world.<sup>10</sup> Like Wallerstein, Mann has moved away from the nation-state as the key analytical focus. Wallerstein shifted ‘upwards’ to the capitalist world-economy, or modern world-system. By contrast, Mann turned both ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ to an array of intertwining power networks enacting the potential of political, military, economic and ideological resources. Through the interstices of this dynamically morphing cat’s cradle emerged modern states, modern nations, and modern capitalism.

Volume 1 of *The Sources of Social Power* (Mann, 1986) which brought Mann to prominence, is the most rewarding to read, mainly because vast stretches of time and space had to be gulped in and summarized, making his empirical generalizations prominent and easy to grasp. One example is his distinction between multi-power actor civilizations (eg ancient Greece) and empires of domination (eg ancient Persia).

Volume 2 (Mann, 1989) is a strenuous read. It deals with the rise of classes and nation-states between 1760 and 1914. Five leading nation-states, mainly from Europe but including the United States, are dragged onto the dissecting slab and taken apart with determination and precision. We learn that economic, military and, increasingly, political power ‘generated emergent, interpenetrating collective actors – classes, nations, and modern states’ (p. 737). This collective power over nature and other nations expanded rapidly and with unpredictable results such as World War I.

In this second volume, Mann displays a prodigious talent for précis and tight narrative. He puts before us a whole library of analytical reports not only theorizing the modern state but also comparing different national experiences of class – and nation – formation in the nineteenth century. In fact, this is a virtual ‘boxed set’ of monographs focusing on, respectively, the infrastructure of the modern state; the revolutionary origins of liberalism; the geopolitics of international capitalism; and the dynamics of class struggle in Europe and the United States. The value of these analyses lies in the dense interweaving of empirical data and theoretically charged categorizations, and the virtual absence of sleight of hand or curve-fitting in the presentation.

The exhilarating global feel of Mann’s first volume is replaced by a much more limited ‘Western’ emphasis in the second, which ends with the outbreak of World War I in Europe. Some readers are likely to get a shrinking feeling as

the boundaries move inward. This is in marked contrast to Wallerstein who in his second and third volumes (1600 to 1840s) takes us outwards from north-western Europe across the Baltic, Mediterranean and Atlantic and towards Russia, India, Africa and the Ottoman empire.

*Empires, wars and revolutions*

Nevertheless, Mann's third volume, *Global Empires and Revolution, 1890–1945* (2012) is undoubtedly a good read for several reasons: because Mann gives full weight to the fact that many of Europe's capitals were the headquarters of empires, not only on their own continent but also in Asia and Africa; because the contest between capitalist democracy, state socialism and fascism introduces a dynamic comparative element; because two major wars and the Great Depression were all global in their reach; because a proper balance is maintained in his account between contingency, structural tensions and system breakdowns as they played their parts within complex, interacting historical processes; and because he is able to tell a story that has a clear end-point in 1945.

More specifically, this volume begins by surveying the colonial empires of Britain, the United States and Japan with a side-glance at China. Attention then turns to World War I, summarized in six pages (is this a record?) but analysed over many more. The war provides an initial context for examining the Russian revolution and the proletarian revolutions more generally. A similar approach is taken to the inter-war period: first, explaining the onset of the Great Depression, locating the New Deal in that context, then exploring the development of social citizenship in other capitalist democracies. Chapters follow on the alternative forms of national polities that developed between the wars in Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan and, finally, China, leading on towards the Chinese revolution and the 'last inter-imperial war, 1939–1945'. The book is crammed with tightly packed intellectual structures, sitting side by side like ornate villas in a world city. A good strategy for readers is to start with Mann's concluding chapter, which draws the argument together. Having done this, they must, like tourists in Venice, make their own way through several dense and crowded passages. However, Mann is an informative tour guide, available on every corner.

The final volume, *Globalizations, 1945–2011* (Mann, 2013) is thoroughly Americo-centric: beginning with the transition from a declining British empire to a US-dominated global order; analysing class conflicts, civil rights and identity struggles in post-war US; tracing US imperialism and hegemony across Eurasia and the Americas; and delineating the 'rise and faltering' (p. 129) of neo-liberalism. Following an interlude during which the Soviet collapse and Chinese reforms are examined and a theory of revolution presented (pp. 179–267), we are back to America and the world America has made: its empire at the turn of the twenty-first century (pp. 268–321), the 'great neoliberal recession' (pp. 322–360), and the global crisis of climate change (pp. 361–399).

In his conclusion, Mann foresees three possible futures: globally negotiated reforms that will resolve or ease the contradiction between capitalist mass consumption and global warming; the ‘collapse of much of modern civilization’; or, perhaps, ‘muddling through sundry disasters towards an intermediate solution’ (p. 403). Mann hopes for ‘a more socially regulated democracy, though this time on a global geopolitical scale’. He adds: ‘There is, of course, no guarantee that this will happen. It will have to be struggled for’ (p. 403). This is not unlike Wallerstein’s conclusion, although, as has been seen, the latter rules out the ‘muddling through’ option. Wallerstein, like Mann, argues that fundamental contradictions are making current politico-economic arrangements unsustainable, and assumes that a democratic world-order will not emerge without a struggle, which may be unsuccessful.

Mann disagrees with Wallerstein about how we have got to this point. While Wallerstein draws on Kondratieff and Polanyi, Mann is ‘sceptical of cycles’. His empirical analyses lead him to the conclusion that ‘Each phase of capitalism has a different logic of development, different institutions, and different contradictions’ (p. 359). Mann, unlike Wallerstein, does not have an overarching model that subsumes different phases of global history, treating them as successive manifestations of specific structuring relationships and processes that persist through all phases (eg, the exploitation of a ‘periphery’ by a ‘core’). Instead, he has a set of analytical tools that provide a framework for categorizing and comparing aspects of socio-political and cultural arrangements, one that is applicable across wide stretches of time and space. Using these tools he isolates various ‘crystallizations’, for example expressions of class, nation and race / ethnicity, occasionally missing what is right before his eyes, for example European empires, largely forgotten in Volume 2, but remembered again in Volume 3 (Mann, 2012: vii).

### *Commentary on Mann*

How does Mann decide where to apply his analytical tools? Mann’s implicit answer is not ‘follow the money’ but, instead, ‘follow the power’. However, his strategy is inconsistent in one respect. Let me explain. In the last third of his first volume he abandons the stimulating global conspectus that makes the first two-thirds of the book so interesting. He suddenly narrows the focus and puts his energies almost entirely into investigating ‘The European dynamic’ from 800 AD onwards. That means abandoning vineyards, rice fields and silk markets and instead following the muddy furrows that lead to the brute, provincial court of Charlemagne. In 800 AD the world’s brightest and best were not in little Aachen but in the much more impressive imperial capitals of Constantinople (Byzantium), Ch’ang-an (China) and Baghdad (the Abbasid Caliphate). In the ninth century Baghdad, one of the world’s biggest cities, was the leading centre for Islamic science. Looking ahead from that date, these cities may have been medium-term losers, for a few centuries at least, but they have always been in

the game and are now making a notable comeback, even though Baghdad has recently been comprehensively wrecked by two US-led invasions.

Why neglect these cities and civilizations in Volume 1?<sup>11</sup> The answer, presumably, is that Mann took into account that north-west Europe was the future, even if few people believed that in 800 AD. But if that answer ‘works’, why not adopt the same strategy in the later volumes? In other words, why not give much more substantial attention in Volumes 3 and 4 to ‘the Asian dynamic’, the rise of South and South-East Asia, especially since 1945? After all, is it not now generally thought at least possible that China might well overtake the United States at ‘the leading edge of power’ in the foreseeable future, say, during the next half century? Japan and India also have to be reckoned with, especially if they find ways to live comfortably alongside a strong China.

However, a rough calculation of the amount of space devoted to China, Japan and India in Mann’s two newly published volumes suggests that in Volume 3, subtitled *Global Empires and Revolution, 1890–1945*, he devotes little more than a fifth of the text to those three countries, while in the final volume, *Globalizations, 1945–2011*, they claim about one-sixth of the text. But the logic followed in Volume 1 could easily have permitted Mann to shine his spotlight for longer and with greater intensity upon the rising East in his last two volumes.

The omission is partially remedied by *Power in the 21st Century* (Mann, 2011), a series of edited conversations with his long-time associate, John A. Hall. The book is nicely informal, easy to read, and covers many themes from *The Sources of Social Power*. On China, see pages 21–24 and 89–93 (there is no index). Mann sees there the ‘capitalist party-state’ (Mann, 2011: 23), a politico-economic approach that is likely, he suggests, to dominate a fifth of the world economy by the 2030s. Party control has taken a relatively decentralized form, emphasizing order and unity, and operates within a literate, highly civilized and ethnically cohesive society whose inhabitants are assiduous savers. The highly entrepreneurial overseas Chinese provide investment and technology transfer. Sounds reasonable.

The conversations in this short book are edited into chapters that cover different types of power (economic, military, etc.), various middle-range theories or notions (eg ‘caging’, the ability or inability of states to capture social actors of various kinds), and different aspects of social change including the part played by contingencies such as war, and the threat of environmental crisis. It provides a handy warm up before (or, if you are feeling overwhelmed by the challenge, instead of) plunging into the longer texts.

From where I stand, Mann’s analysis leaves two large gaps unfilled, perhaps conveniently, since I am working in both areas on my own account. The first concerns Mann’s treatment of Europe in the last two decades. He misses the big story. Like the United States, the European Union was beset by *hubris* following the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Washington got the ‘empire’ bug, tasting afresh the victorious breeze of 1945, Brussels gave itself the



multiple missions of expanding rapidly eastwards, turning itself into a highly digitalized growth-producing machine, and providing a post-humiliation polity for all citizens. Their experiences post-9/11 and post the 2008 credit crunch have brought both Washington and Brussels down to earth with a bump.

For its part, the EU is now discovering that three possible futures await. One is disintegration, a fate that was on the cards once before, in 1989, when France and the UK looked in horror at the prospect of German reunification. The second possible future is a more centralized European polity, coordinating the political economies of at least eighteen countries in the Eurozone. A third possibility is a radical weakening of social citizenship throughout the EU as the public sector, already bereft of the competitive example provided by state socialism and now stripped clean by austerity, becomes comprehensively privatized. The situation is complicated further by the fact that different member states within the EU have varying approaches to property rights and human rights, and differing conceptions of the relations between government, business and the rule of law: a tangled situation that bears comparison with the United States during the 1850s and 1860s, although, hopefully, the outcome will be less bloody. Whatever happens, the European world will be transformed.<sup>12</sup>

The other requirement unmet by Mann's analysis is the need to factor in more systematically the dynamics that underlie 'emotional fears for status and security' (p. 34) and 'relevant emotions that enter into decisions – [eg] not losing face, not backing down' (p. 137). These are the dynamics of displacement and response, including the dynamics of forced displacement, that is, humiliation. They extend far beyond war and operate at all levels of the socio-political order. Such factors are massively at work in colonialism, anti-colonial resistance and the pursuit of liberation, in the run-up to World War I, in the revenge-seeking conditions of the post-war Versailles Treaty in 1918–1919, in the rhetorical appeals of Hitler to the German people, in the bombing of Dresden, at Suez in 1956, in the Tet offensive of 1968, the shock of 9/11, and in the very logic of the market that creates 'losers', imposes the Washington Consensus, and sends economic migrants into scenes of degradation and despair. The dynamics of displacement have identifiable mechanisms – of withdrawal, challenge, escape, revenge and resistance, actions driven by fear, anger and sorrow – and these patterns are well worth noticing and taking into account within our social science.<sup>13</sup>

A final point: unlike Wallerstein, Mann has not institutionalized his approach in the form of a school. This makes the construction of vast intellectual pyramids such as the four volumes of *The Sources of Social Power* an important exercise. In the short term, these books make useful contributions to our debates about the shaping of our modern world. However, their long-run social-scientific importance does not reside in the specific empirical analyses they contain. The point is that Mann's empirical conclusions will become outdated soon enough, but the conceptual tools for dissecting power networks – distributive/collective, authoritative/diffuse, extensive/intensive

and so on – will have a longer shelf life and, who knows, may be improved still further in later years. Sometimes, the most interesting things to be discovered inside an excavated pyramid are the tools with which it was built.

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## Notes

- 1 See [www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org](http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org)
- 2 Anderson's *The New Old World* (2009) is substantially a collection of previously published essays.
- 3 Mann (2003, 2004, 2005); Wallerstein (1998, 2003).
- 4 See Smith (forthcoming a and b).
- 5 This is the title of Tilly's book. See Tilly (1989); Smith (2010).
- 6 I agree with David Inglis's recent call in *Cultural Sociology* for 'a kind of sociology (not simply an institutionalized 'historical sociology') as attuned as possible to the complexities both of human history and of the multiple means of conceptualizing it' (Inglis, 2013). Such a historical sociology should be at home in all parts of the discipline, not forced to rely upon the few welcoming 'safe houses' to be found amongst specialists in, say, international relations, post-colonial studies and cultural studies, important and welcome though those sanctuaries are. I should add that apart from the groups just mentioned, some exceptional individual scholars have acted as beacons, helping to set or shape our agendas, including writers such as Chris Bayly (2004), Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) and Dominic Lieven (2001).
- 7 On the Chicago School see Smith (1988).
- 8 See, for example, Prigogine (1997).
- 9 Wallerstein (2003).
- 10 Mann (2003); Wallerstein (1995, 1998, 1999). See also Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989).
- 11 Compare the approach taken by Charles Tilly in *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990 to 1992* (1992). He tracked both city states and nation states across a whole millennium in Europe, knowing in advance that the former were eventual losers in the power game.
- 12 See, for example, Smith (forthcoming a and b).
- 13 See, for example, Smith (2012, 2013a, 2013b).

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