

# An Afrocentric Criticism of World Systems Analysis as a Critical Theory in International Relations

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## Abstract

In this research paper, authors provide a comprehensive overview and criticism of the World System Analysis (also read as World System theory). This central focus is driven by the need to bring about a fair and justifiable explanation of the theory and appreciation by examining the work critically as the most persuasive theory in international relations. The aim of this paper is to bring about world system analysis as the best tool in analysing the world politics, understanding world history and key reasons for imperialism, and why core countries such as the United States of America (USA), China and others, often intervene in world crises through grants and other forms of aid. The authors argue that the world system theory, unlike the dependency theory, is broader in perspective and place the world as a centre of attention in the analysis of the world economic distribution instead of the nation-state. Equally, it can also be deployed in understanding global inequality, dependency and power. The above argument which is achieved through the use of a qualitative approach that has taken the form of the adoption of secondary materials and the Afrocentric paradigm.

**Keywords:** World System Analysis, Dependency Theory, International Relations, Afrocentric paradigm.

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## Introduction

Methodologically, this research paper has solely depended on secondary sources such as relevant journal papers, periodicals, books, and websites. The write up is made up of intellectuals' arguments and the authors' opinions. The latter's importance in studies of this nature finds an expression in the Afrocentric paradigm which is a theory that explains every aspect of research and/or education from the perspective of Africans as active participants rather than observers (Asante 2003), which is dismissive of the empty perceptual space between the researcher(s) and the researched (Shai, 2021). Despite the fact that there are multiple theories the authors could have chosen from, Afrocentricity was deemed the most suitable so to co-exist with its counterparts in explaining and analysing the subject under study.

However, there have been limitations during the operationalisation of the research for this paper. This should be understood within the context that in order to access some journals one needs to pay for subscription, and most of the existing and accessible written materials were vague. Thus, this hinders the progression of the reviewed literature. International Relations (IR) is an academic field of study which deals with the study of the interactions and relationships between actors (or participants) in the international system. These actors include states as principal actors and non-state actors including not limited to multinational corporations and non-governmental organisations (Danziger, 1997). Central to the study of IR are theories. A theory can be referred as

a well-crafted and relatively dependable set of ideas which is observable and is built on both logic and empirical grounds. IR as an academic discipline, employs many theories to analyse and/or make sense of different phenomena in the international political and economic system. These theories include but are not limited to: Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, Feminism, and World Systems Theory (McGowan, 2002).

For this paper, we restrict our focus on the World Systems Analysis, also called World Systems Theory. We use relevant examples to provide a criticism of the theory. There is no theory that is free from criticism as long as academia is concerned, thus, the World-system theory is not an exception. Criticism is the systematic approach in which a work is examined or assessed using critical lenses. Thus, the word criticism simply means to appreciate and examine critically a literary work, and it does not have to be 'to criticise'. This paper is aimed to provide fitting definitions of the theory by scholars; the key assumptions or arguments of World Systems Analysis, the main features of the theory, and to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the theory. For us to enhance a better picture of the theory, we compare it with another Critical Theory (which means any approach to social philosophy that places attention on reflective assessment and criticism of culture and society) of IR, the Dependency Theory. Additionally, we look at the scholarly criticism of the World Systems Theory. Furthermore, we examine the theory in IR by looking at its implications in the field. To conclude, we take positions on the key arguments of the theory.

Before we can delve into the gist of this paper, we deem it necessary to give a disclaimer that we (authors of this paper) are all Africans by blood and by geographic location. We unapologetically enter into this discourse as Africans and our understanding of the phenomena studied herein is in a way affected by our identity. We do not seek to present our word on this subject as the last one. Ours is one among many voices and it should be allowed to co-exist with others if epistemic justice is to be realised (Shai, 2021). While critics of this paper may regard this disclaimer as an act of intellectual arrogance, the basis for this epistemic and ontological standpoint has been echoed by many decolonial Afrocentric scholars including Asante (2003), Mazama (2003), Shai and Zondi (2020).

### The Emergence of International Relations (IR)

IR as an academic discipline emerged out of the aftermath of the first World War in Europe. All the notable European intellectuals went on to explore the causes and repercussions of the most catastrophic war ever encountered. Most of them were oriented historically such as David Wight, FH Hinsley and Edward H Carr whom all argued that the international society notion had long been held by major European powers although had been disrupted in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that has been the cause of the war (Bull 1977). Overcoming the isolationism and idealism that characterised the United States of America (USA) during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American scholars started to produce scholarly works that initiated the classics of IR genre in the 1940s and 1950s. Both Internationalism and Realism became the central modes of American international affairs and thinking by the 1940s. These scholars include Hans Morgenthau, Arnold Wolfers and George Liska who were the first representatives (Morgenthau 1978, Wolfers 1962 and Liska 1977). This time characterized the production of empirical and system examinations of IR. The study of IR did not only cover inter-state relations but also anything that took place outside the USA. All in all, Americans did dominate the IR field during in the 1950s (Hoffmann 1995). The dominance of Americans was shown by the salient throughout the world of the USA publications *World Politics* and *Foreign Affairs*; journals which represented the policy-oriented establishment and academic establishment unitarily (Hoffmann 1995). The following section of the research paper focuses on World Systems analysis.

## The World Systems Analysis

This analysis is derived from several disciplines to try to examine world history and the underpinnings of social change. It is centered on the entire world as a unit or world-system but not individual states for its analysis. However, Cartwright (2018: online) argues that “both imperialism and World System Theory involve a state-capital nexus or some kind that places states in the centre of the analyses.” According to Cartwright, they both describe a territorial division of the world based on an order of local economies. To the World Systems theorists, there exists a world economic system in which some countries gain benefits while others are being exploited. It is basically a political approach which tries to solve the economic developmental problems found in the developing countries. It suggests that wealthy countries benefit from other countries through exploitative means, without which, they (the wealthy nation-states) will not reach their levels of development (Shai, 2016).

The World Systems Analysis originated from Immanuel Wallerstein, a sociologist. Wallerstein (1974) quoted in Martinez-Vela (2001:4) who defines a world-system as a “multicultural territorial division of labour in which the production and exchange of basic goods and raw materials is necessary for the everyday life of its inhabitants.” For him, a country’s economic development is determined by how it is integrated into the capitalist world system. According to some scholars, World Systems Analysis is a theory (Danziger, 1997; McGowan, 2002). But Sorinel (2010) opines that “World-systems analysis is not a theory, but an approach to social analysis and social change developed, among others by the Immanuel Wallerstein.” The author went further to explain the three domains of world-systems analysis Wallerstein relays and they are: the historical development of the modern world-system; the contemporary crisis of the capitalist world-economy; the structures of knowledge. Wallerstein, in his interviews and publications, has shown contention against the concept of a “Third World”, and he claims that there exists only one world connected by a complex network of economic exchange relationship (Sorinel, 2010).

Wallerstein quoted in Sorinel (2010:221), posits that:

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A world-system is a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence. Its life is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remold it to its advantage. It has the characteristics of an organism; in that, it has a lifespan over which its characteristics change in some respects and remain stable in others...

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From the foregoing, one can argue that the world-system is just like the human body. It has numerous parts that have to work together to sustain a balance. All the parts depend on one another for survival. For Martinez-Vela (2001: online), “There are three major intellectual building blocks of world-system theory as conceived by Wallerstein: The Annales school, Marx, and dependency theory.” The theory gets its historical approach from this school, which had Fernand Braudel as its key proponent. He as well gets methodological strategy from the school. From Karl Marx, Wallerstein learned five important issues: the basic reality of social conflict among materially based human groups; the concern with a relevant totality; the transitory nature of social forms; the centrality of the accumulation process and competitive class struggles that result from it; a dialectical sense of the notion through conflict and contradiction (Martinez-Vela, 2001). To the dependency theory, the author argues that, World Systems Theory is an adaptation. According to him, Wallerstein draws a lot from the dependency theory, especially its focus on understanding the “periphery” and “core”.

Authors gave a historical background of World Systems Analysis (also called a theory by some). Chase-Dunn and Grell-Brisk (2019) say that, “The world-system perspective emerged during the world revolution of 1968 when social scientists contemplated the meaning of Latin American dependency

theory for Africa.” They give credit to Immanuel Wallerstein, Terence Hopkins, Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and Giovanni Arrighi for having divergent views about the world system perspective. For them, the modern world-system is a self-contained unit based on territorial differentiated division of labour and joined together by a world market. This world market is designed, controlled, and dominated by technologically advanced states (core states) who exploit poor states found in the periphery. Subsequently, the states in the core do employ all means necessary to maintain the status quo (Shai 2016).

World-system theorists do not refute the existence of divisions in the world, however; they believe the best way to understand the world’s divisions is by looking at them as a unit. They opine that the most significant primary unit of social constraint and social decision-making is their theory instead of the traditional modes of analysis.

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The term world-system is synonymous with the term ‘capitalist world-economy’. Based on the German word *Weltwirtschaft*, it refers to an entity within whose boundaries there is a single overarching division of labor but which in fact includes a number of separate state structures. This entity, according to world-system theorists, is a historical system whose structures operate at different level from any existing political unit (Griffiths, O’Callaghan, & Roach, 2014:372).

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The trio also relay that the World-systems theorists were by radical dependency theorists and Immanuel Wallerstein, the theory’s pioneer, located its origins in what he called ‘the longest sixteenth century’ 1450 to 1670.

The main area of focus of World Systems Analysis is the world economy which is dominated by rich, powerful, industrialised and technologically-advanced states. The theorists divided the world into three groups: the *core*; the *periphery*; the *semi-peripheries*. According to Griffiths, O’Callaghan & Roach (2014: online),

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The core of the world-system refers to those regions that benefited most from change. In the initial expansion, this included most of northwestern Europe (France, England, and Holland). The region was characterized by strong central governments and large mercenary armies. The latter enabled the bourgeoisie to control international commerce and extract economic surplus from trade and commerce.

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Essentially, the core countries used their mercenary armies to advance their expansionists agenda to control more territories and use those territories for trading activities (Shai, 2016). One would realize that most of those states that were conquered for more markets were found in Africa and Asia. Capital is always located within the core of the world-system and core countries benefit the most from the capitalist world economy. Basically, core countries are dominant capitalist states that exploit peripheral states for labour and raw materials. For instance, the United States of America (USA), Britain, France, and Germany exploit African countries. This is because these core countries do not only own most of the world’s capital and technology but they also have a lot of control over world trade and economic agreements (e.g. GATT). They are also the cultural centers which attract artists and intellectuals from different parts of the world (Shai, 2021).

Like the dependency theory, world systems analysis has a second group called the periphery. Peripheral countries are largely dependent on core countries for capital, and they have underdeveloped industries to produce commodities for the global market. A very good majority of peripheral countries are in Africa and Asia. These countries have low wages, are less industrialised, poorly urbanized, have low literacy rates, not technologically-advanced, and are usually agrarian.

For Griffiths, O'Callaghan and Roach (2014: online), the periphery refers to “regions lacking strong central governments, dependent on coercive rather than wage labor, and whose economies depend on the export of raw materials to the core.” European imperialism and colonialism created these peripheral states. They killed, enslaved, and exploited people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By and large, the destitution, poverty, underdevelopment, and plight of countries in the periphery are caused by the core countries that cannot maintain their economic dominance in the world without their exploitative agenda (Shai 2016). Despite the fact that these peripheral countries own most of the world's natural and mineral resources, they lack the industries to process them. All they do is provide the raw materials and cheap labour to the core countries. Sorinel (2010: 222) records that “The core expropriated much of the capital surplus generated by the periphery through unequal trade relations.”

Immanuel Wallerstein, the foremost proponent of the World Systems Analysis, gave *semi-peripheries* as his third region. Countries found in this zone can be geographically located in the core but are on the process of relative decline, or they can include rising economies in the periphery (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, & Roach, 2014). Like the peripheral states, semi-peripheral states are also exploited by the core states. However, the semi-peripheral countries in turn take advantage of the periphery. It is like the game of the jungle, survival of the fittest. Generally, the semi-periphery serves as a buffer between the other two regions (core and periphery). Countries that rose from the periphery to meet the standards of the semi-periphery include: Russia, Brazil, Brussel, Malaysia, China, Singapore, South Korea (which are said to have advanced to the Core), and South Africa (Dunn, Kawana & Brewer, 2000). Portugal and Spain are amongst the few that lost their positions at the core. Thus, this shows that the permanent seats in the Core are reserved only for countries that maintain their economic power and influence.

The World Systems Analysis also talks about *unequal exchange*, as coined by Wallerstein. To him this term refers to “the systematic transfer of surplus from semi-proletarian sectors in the periphery to the high-technology, industrialized core” (Sorinel, 2010: 223). As a consequence, this leads to capital accumulation at a global scale. The surplus or profit provides the necessary finance required to enhance development in the core countries.

The world system theorists also maintain that the capitalist world-economy is characterized by four key contradictions. For them, these contradictions will eventually lead to the demise of the capitalist world-economy though it has global dominance after the collapse of USSR and the end of the Cold War (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, & Roach, 2014). These contradictions are so serious that they will exterminate the world capitalist economy. The trio state the contradictions as: a continuing imbalance between supply and demand leading to perpetual mechanization and commodification; a further production of surplus requires a mass demand that can only be met by redistributing the surplus; there are limits to the extent to which the state can co-opt employees to maintain the legitimacy of the capitalist system; it impedes attempts to develop greater cooperation to counter systemic crisis. These contradictions may be plausible but the capitalist world-economy is stronger than ever. Today, the capitalist world-economy is more global than ever before (Shai, 2016).

### World Systems Analysis and Exploitation in the Market-Economy

For the world systems theorists, the world market-economy is all about exploitation. They are of the belief that, the core countries such as USA, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, etc. are exploiting the natural resources of peripheral countries like The Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Ghana, Chad, Cameroon, and all other poor developing states, mostly found in Africa and Latin America.

Core countries also use their control of international law and international financial institutions like World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to advance their economic policies in both peripheral and semi-peripheral states. While the IMF mainly give excruciating and high interest loans to peripheral countries, the World Bank give conditional grants to these countries. By and large, the core countries use the very financial institutions that they designed and established to promote their economic policies and financial interests all over the world. One must not view these international institutions to be independent from the control of powerful states; rather, they are used as vehicles to implement the national interests of these powerful core countries. According to Cartwright (2018: online), we have:

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an international economic order governed by rules established by states, and which benefit commercial interests. These interests are highly profitable and located in the most powerful states. This creates a hierarchy, or world system, concentrating high-value add, profitable and innovative industry in the core.

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The current international economic order is said to be dictated by the so-called core countries, who use them to exploit the peripheral countries. Thus, these so-called core countries own all the industries that control the global economy. Without any doubt, the IMF and World Bank are subjected to the dominance of the great powers, the USA and Europe who are core exploitative countries. For many years in the past and even in present times, the relationship between the core and the periphery is that of the exploiter and the exploited. Cartwright (2018: online) argues that “The economies of the core specialize in heavy manufacturing, whilst those in the periphery supply the core with raw materials and commodities—which provide low returns and few prospects for industrialization, maintaining periphery economies in a state of underdevelopment.” This is the point, peripheral countries such as South Africa (diamonds), Ghana (gold), Guinea (uranium) and Nigeria (oil) have the minerals resources needed to industrialize and develop their countries. However, all they do is extract the raw materials and export to manufacturing core countries who process them with added value.

Furthermore, Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Transnational Corporations (TNCs) are also used by core states to promote their financial interests. For example, Apple, Samsung, Toyota, Techno, BMW, Mercedes Benz and other MNCs and TNCs are not as independent as they pretend to. Their states use them to implement their economic policies abroad (Shai, 2016). For Cartwright (2018: online), “it does not make sense to think of MNCs and states as working independently towards distinct international interests. States want to help their MNCs be globally dominant and will seek to set the rules of the international order to facilitate this. Implying that the core states host MNCs and industries that dominate world markets and concentrate wealth in their host states.”

This exploitative relationship does not stop at the core and periphery. There is also an exploitative bond between the semi-periphery and the periphery. Semi-peripheral countries like China exploit peripheral countries like Zambia, Kenya, The Gambia, and Ethiopia. For the past many years, the Chinese have been exploiting the natural and mineral resources of peripheral countries, particularly those in Africa (Rapanyane & Shai 2019; Rapanyane & Sethole 2020). China’s exploitative engagement could be attested in the case of Sri Lanka. The latter lost her port to China; thus, many other African countries are highly indebted to China. Through their concessional loans and benevolent grants, they are able to – through their companies – extract priceless resources in the continent. In addition, the Chinese has infested Africa with their low-quality commodities (Rapanyane & Sethole 2020). Today, Chinese businesses virtually dominate all African countries. The same exploitative trend is followed by other semi-peripheral countries like India in Africa.

It is also important to emphasize that the core countries developed and industrialized their economies through protectionism and subsidies. Despite their campaign for liberal economic practices, these core states protect theirs (Shai, 2016). Economic core powers like the USA give huge protections to their technology companies thus giving them an edge over others. The EU provides subsidies to its farmers which give them a competitive advantage. Therefore, the produce of European farmers become cheaper compared to others. The core states employ the very rules they crafted at the levels of World Trade Organization (WTO) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to manipulate and exploit other semi-peripheral and peripheral countries of the world. These rules were programmed to benefit these core countries. Consequently, the peripheral countries are at a disadvantaged position as far as international trade is concerned. Recently, we have seen the huge trade war between the USA (core) and China (semi-periphery) due to alleged unfair trade. The WTO which is supposed to adjudicate the trade war is controlled by core countries led by the USA (Vlados, 2020).

### Strengths of the World-Systems Theory

There are various positively praises given to the theory. These praises portray the strengths of the theory. Amongst them are:

- For instance, according to Gowan (2004), the theory of World-System Analysis is significantly pivotal in understanding world history and the key reasons for imperialism and also why core countries such as USA normally intervene in world crises through grants and other forms of aids.
- Unlike the dependency theory, the world-system theory looks at development in a broader perspective, and also it makes the world as the centre of focus in analysing the world economic distribution rather than the nation-state. Thus, it can be the best theory to use in explaining global inequality, dependency and power.

### Weaknesses of the World-Systems Theory

In Wallerstein own words, he had said in one of his pieces, there are four major categories of schools of thought that are used to critique the world-systems approach and these are: the positivists, the orthodox Marxists, the state autonomists, and the culturalists. (Wallerstein, 2004).

- As for the positivists, their position against the world-system theory is its deficiency such as having no systematic approach, being qualitative and not being quantitative, and being too general. This criticism does not hold in an Afrocentric paradigm, which rejects the binary standing of knowledge as either qualitative or quantitative (Maserumule, 2011)
- The orthodox Marxists has criticised the world-system analysis for ignoring the importance of social class, which is a key principle of the Marxists, thus to them, this has made Wallenstein and other proponents to be too far deviating.
- The third one is the autonomists; they believe that, Wallenstein, in the theory of World-systems, has blurred the boundaries between state and businesses.
- In addition, the culturalists also criticised the World systems for making little or no consideration about culture, but solely concentrates its argument or discourse on economy. Even though these theorists have critiqued and criticised the World system theory or analysis, according to Wallerstein, these theorists are rather myopic, limiting and defective (Wallerstein, 2004).

The world-systems theory has been criticised for its explanation about the relationship between the core and the periphery. According to Wallerstein and co-proponents, the periphery is responsible for supplying raw materials to the core which makes the core get economically stronger and the periphery economically weaker. It is argued that, the core did not exploit the periphery but it developed more sophisticated machine and technologies which merit them for a better products and stronger economies. This can be attested in (Chilot, 1982), he argued that, ‘the development of the West (core) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based more on research labs than in law materials or labor in the colonies (periphery).’ From the above assertion, the authors are directly indicating that the position made by Wallerstein is incorrect and illogical.

Furthermore, in another voice of Trinchcombe (1982), he argued that the World system theory is rather ambiguous and vague in argument. He further stated that Wallenstein has not done much in explicitly explaining his concepts such as core, periphery, and semi-periphery; thus, making the theory too general. He said, “it is not clear that there is a coherent and determined pattern of growth toward a final world system with defined characteristics so that one could have a theory of the growth of world capitalism.”

### Differences Between the Dependency Theory and the World-Systems Analysis

Though the World-systems theory or approach is said to be inspired by the dependency theory, there are various differences between the two theories based on how they believe development should be approached. The lenses they use in analyzing differ even though there are similarities in terms of concepts. According to Reyes (2001), there are five main differences:

- According to the dependency theory, the unit of analysis is the nation-state level, whilst the world-system analysis looks at it in a different perspective, as for them, the unit system of analysis is the world.
- Secondly, looking at their methodologies, the dependency theory employs the structural-historical model, whilst the world-systems analysis deploys the historical dynamics of world system in its cyclical rhythms and secular trends.
- Another explicit difference is that, the dependency theory uses a bimodal (core and periphery) as its theoretical structure, whilst the world-system theory uses a trimodal (core, semi-periphery, and periphery) as its theoretical structure.
- In addition, the dependency theory opines that, the direction of development is hazardous as the core exploits the periphery, whilst the world-system theorists differ in opinion, they believe that there is a chance for the periphery to grow to the level of semi-periphery and the semi periphery to reach the core; this can be realised in the case of China.
- Finally, the dependency theorists focus mainly on the periphery during their research; unlike the dependency theorists, the world-system theorists look at the relationship between the core and the periphery and also the semi periphery and the periphery. Therefore, the dependency believes that the core exploit only the periphery, but the world-system theorists argue that the core exploit both the periphery and the semi periphery, and in turn, the semi periphery also exploits the periphery and that can be realized in the aspect of China in Africa.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that the world-system analysis is the best tool we can use in analysing the world politics and the most persuasive theory in IR. It can be best used in explaining global inequality, dependency, and power. The theory is a trimodal: the core, semi periphery, and the periphery. Unlike the dependency theory, the world-system theory looks at development in a broader perspective, and it makes the world as the centre of focus in analysing the world economic distribution rather than the nation-state. The theory has also demonstrated the uneven distribution of wealth or development in the world. It shows that even though the periphery can break through, but the periphery has to depend on the core for economic support like a father and a child. Of course, this form of dependency has threatened the so-called peripheral states' sovereignties, which can be evident in the Gambia when it withdrew from the Commonwealth of Nations, it was economically sanctioned by United Kingdom of Britain (UK), and this is a threat for most African countries. Thus, the relationship between the core and the periphery only mirrors exploitation and coercion.

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