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Book Review by TCHIOFFO KODJO

Book Title : Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms (Second Edition, with a New Preface)

Author: Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein

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Introduction

“Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms” is a theoretical and epistemological assessment of social science written by Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein and firstly published in 1991.

In this second edition, Professor Wallerstein, “one of the twentieth century’s giants in theory, history, and sociology” (Abu-Lughod) and the world systems theory’s founding father, protests against the legacies of the nineteenth (19th) century social science paradigms and preach for a radical “unthink” of its knowledge structure at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This review starts with a synopsis of the author’s arguments and then critically evaluates the rigor of the research, the logic of the arguments, and the readability of the prose. It finally expresses my reactions to the book.

Summary/synopsis of key arguments

Wallerstein sets the scene at the beginning of the book, arguing that one must more than revise, “unthink” fundamentally many of the presumptions that still remain the foundation of dominant perspectives in social sciences today. Likewise, he explains in the introduction the purpose of “unthinking” that is to deconstruct and rework the current premises of social sciences. According to the author, Instead of freeing the thinking and liberating spirits, they have become an obstacle to understand today’s world.

The first part deals with the history of modern liberal epistemology and its current crises/transitions. Here, Wallerstein looks in depth at the French revolution turmoil, explains how its different interpretations have built three pillars of the capitalist world-systems namely the liberal ideologies, the social sciences and the anti-systemic movements. He then argues that the understanding of all its legacies require a new reading of its implications at a world-scale. Finally, he brings that there is a transition “from a capitalist world-economy to something else” (p.23) which needs to be shaped by reorienting the social sciences analyzes and the anti-systemic movement’s actions at a larger scale.

In the second part, the author stresses that the concept of “development” is a social construction which appears now as a barrier to a clear understanding of our social world. He first looks at the industrial revolution questioning its usefulness, its role in the modern mainstream ideologies and conclude that “we must rethink the concepts that we have used to write the history of this “age of revolutions” which were not all revolutionary” (p.50). Afterwards, he dissects the economic theories and historical disparities of development, reveals that they are based on myths and should be therefore reviewed to generate a more prolific foundation for scientific activities emphasising the analyses at a systemic level. Later, he dives into Gunnar Myrdal intellectual legacies assuming his call to go “against the stream” and consider the notions of racism and underdevelopment as products of the modern capitalist system which can’t dump its own babies. Ultimately, he depicts the concept of “development” as an illusion if understood as a national level and extol the fight for an egalitarian redistribution at a global level, the lodestar of anti-systemic movements.

In the third part, the author is more provocative by challenging the mainstream concept of time and space with titles like “A comment on epistemology: what is Africa?” or “Does India exist?” This testifies the questioning of the knowledge epistemology by Wallerstein and reinforces the ideas that time and spaces are socially and historically invented in the modern world-system.

Parts five and fourth are respectively about Wallerstein’s ideological alignment with Fernand Braudel, historian, “homme de la conjoncture” for his intellectual resistance even in difficult times and the raison d'être of his divergences with Karl Marx namely on the way it approaches capitalist class structure which is seen within world-systems analysis to exist at a world scale right from capitalism’s inception.

In the last part, Wallerstein raves enthusiastically about world-systems analysis, calls for a debate about existing fundamental paradigms in social sciences inherited from the nineteenth (19th) century and asks for the substantial reorganization of the knowledge production in the universities especially in the field of historical social science at large. After the “unthinking” of nineteenth-century social science, Wallerstein ultimately proposes a second phase which endorses the world-systems as the suitable “unit of analysis” (p. 267) and bifurcates from the existing to generate a new theoretical and methodological framework in social science based on world-systems analysis. He even looks forward to a third phase which would imply the complete reorganization of the knowledge production arenas in social sciences.

Critical Assessment & recommendation

In shaping my analysis of this book, I looked for a clear, comprehensive thesis, a fluid writing style, whether or not the sources were useful and relevant and finally the targeted audience.

From the beginning, Wallerstein's clear, engaging and readable writing style makes this book very accessible, even to those who are not scientifically literate. "Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms" provides an insightful theoretical framework to reformulate the social sciences in a world-system's perspective. Throughout the book, Wallerstein persuades his readers to face the problem of "unthinking" their fetters and adopt world-systems analysis to meet the challenge of understanding the system in a broader, global scale.

Referencing more than one hundred and twenty-five (125) sources, the book draws on prolific authors and thinkers such as Braudel, Prigogine, Myrdal and Marx. It was originally written as separate articles between 1982 and 1991 and then assembled in a consistent set of twenty (20) chapters classified in six (06) coherent parts.

Sometimes provoking consciously (with chapter 8 "A comment on Epistemology: What is Africa?", Chapter 9 "Does India exist?" and Chapter 14 "Capitalism: The Enemy of the market?") to trigger reactions and captivate the reader, this book is highly recommended to social science theorists and scholars who are faced with the challenges of understanding intertwining social processes unfolding at the world scale. It might also help international advisors and counsellors to formulate global answers to

problems entangled across regions borders and beyond. This is also a “must” for students and researchers which seek to be familiar with an engaged and fruitful theorist.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Wallerstein suggests a new-fangled paradigm for knowledge production in social sciences. This can engender a radical shift in the assessment and the organization of the disciplines. The author seems confident enough about his premises and subsequently pushes forward with an agenda on how to achieve his ideal. With a comprehensive, teasing and challenging writing style, Wallerstein’s arguments are substantive, constantly fluid and logic. This book is a major epistemological reference for those, who confronted to the restrictions of usual categories in social analysis, seeks insightful enlightenments to look more widely, “out the system”. That its *raison d'être*.