

“WE ARE IN THE SITUATION OF RELATIVE FREE WILL”

An Interview with Immanuel Wallerstein

We are sitting here almost 30 years after our first interview in 1981 in Budapest and it seems to me that most of your predictions and analyses concerning the change in the upcoming world system proved to be right. You forecasted that the world system is in a transition phase which would take several decades. In one of your books you suggested this would take place between 1945 and 2025. Elsewhere you talk about a longer period of transformation. We are getting closer to 2025, even if we take it as a metaphor. Where are we now? Are we really heading towards a new system or further into chaos and disruption?

We are further into chaos and heading towards a new system, but the date I usually use these days is 2050 as the likely point when things will settle down into a new system. But we are definitely into chaos and have been for a while and this becomes more and more visible all the time. That is to say, the chaos has been there for a while, but now people are noticing the chaos. That’s the difference.

Do you see any light at the end of the tunnel? What are the positive perspectives? People everywhere in the world are very interested in alternatives, also in Hungary.

The basic analytic model is on the side of complexity. The argument is that systems, all systems of any kind, at some point always move away from equilibrium, but there are structures within the system that keep moving back to equilibrium. When a system moves further and further away from equilibrium and reaches a point where the structures that bring it back to equilibrium are no longer sufficiently strong, the system begins to fluctuate enormously and there is what we call

a bifurcation. Technically a bifurcation, in terms of what a chemist or physicist means, is a situation in which for a given equation there are two possible solutions which is not normally the case; but if you translate that into social science language, a bifurcation means that there are two alternative outcomes to the chaotic situation. There is a struggle, a social struggle as to which outcome will prevail. So there is a light at the end of the tunnel, but it depends on what you mean by light. If you mean by light “order” it is clear a new order will emerge out of this chaos. The question is which order and whose order and there are two alternatives. I think of these two alternatives as a better one and a worse one when looking at the current situation. That is to say, sometimes I have used lately the language of the “Spirit of Davos”, *vis-à-vis* the “Spirit of Porto Allegre”.

“The Spirit of Davos” is to replace the present capitalist system with another system “X” which shares some crucial features with the capitalist system. That is, it would be like the capitalist system, hierarchical, exploitative, and polarizing. But it could be a structure quite different from capitalism. That is one alternative. That’s the Spirit of Davos.

The “Spirit of Porto Allegre” is to have a relatively democratic, relatively egalitarian system. One could be much worse than the existing system. It is intrinsically and principally impossible to predict which of these outcomes will occur. The reason is that the outcome is the result of an infinity of actions, by an infinity of actors, at an infinity of moments, and an infinity of decisions. This is impossible to predict, but what one can say, and this is the positive way of looking at it, is I can translate the scientific language to the classical, philosophical language of the Western world. This is a situation usually described as the alternative of determinism, or free will that has been debated for several thousand years as alternative appreciations of how the world operates. I want to historicize it. I want to say that when a system operates normally it’s relatively determinist. That is to say, there is a lot of effort to change things, but the system pushes you back to equilibrium, so in a sense, you have very little input. In a chaotic situation, when the system breaks down, it’s actually quite the opposite. A little input can yield an enormous amount of change. That is the situation of free will and we are in the situation of relative free will at the moment. That means that you, I and everyone else affects the outcome. People who deal with issues of chaos talk about the butterfly effect. The butterfly effect is that the butterfly flaps its wings at one end of the world, and at the other end of the world the climate changes as a result of this. One little butterfly affects an enormous change at the other end of the world. One has to think of all of us as being in every instance a butterfly. In that sense, what we do matters, social action matters, because it contributes to the likelihood of positive change; but you have to do it with the knowledge that you do not know who wins. You have to be willing to continue to operate and at some point, that is the logic of this

system. Enough actions tile it in one direction or the other and we get a new order. Things calm down again, and we're into a new system. That, metaphorically, is where we will be in 2050.

I understand that you are pushing the time limits further away; but I also understand that you see some hope for social progress. I know that you are yourself an activist and attend the meetings of the World Social Forum.

I am asked all the time whether I am an optimist or a pessimist and I always answer it's 50/50; but 50/50 is a lot, not a little. The point is, provided we put in enough energy in the right way, the likelihood increases for a call to action. That is certainly true, but it's a call to action knowing one has to do without a sense of certainty.

Basically, I see the fundamental political struggle of the present and coming decades as a struggle not of over capitalism but what will replace capitalism as a world system. There are two basic alternatives, but actually it is more complicated than that. It is more complicated than that because neither side is unified. On the one side are the people who want the Spirit of Davos and there are two quite different alternatives. One version emphasizes a strong force used to oppress all kinds of opposition. I do not want to use the term fascism, because that has particular historical connotations, but it would be a group that would feel that the way to run a system is with the heavy hand. I think of Dick Cheney as representative of this point of view.

On the other hand, there are those who think that the way you create this new hierarchical system is through employing a much softer line which attempts to co-opt people. It is a meritocratic approach to who would be accepted. They might even present themselves as very progressive in the changes they propose. They would be in favor of environmental sustainability. However, it would still be a system that would be highly unequal and highly polarizing. So they are fighting amongst themselves. They're not unified. We don't know whose view on that side will prevail.

On the other side, there are deep divisions in what we might call the World Left, or the social justice movement or whatever name you want to give it. There are those who visualize a kind of very horizontal bottom-up world in which there are many different versions of the Good Life. It emphasizes what the Latin Americans would call "buen vivir", a world which manages a just distribution of wealth among generations to maintain the Good Life.

One the other hand, there are others who really envisage this as a New International, not the Second, Third, or Fourth, but a New International which would be top-down where cadres would still make decisions on behalf of others. Anyone

who goes to the meeting of the World Social Forum hears that debate and that debate occurs all over the place.

What I envisage politically is that there are not really two sides, but four sides, and that is, of course, a very confusing situation. One has to navigate this very difficult situation in order to come out with the best possible new system that can be constructed. One cannot work out the details of what a new system will look like. There's no way of suggesting the exact institutions that one would need to construct because it's so uncertain. I often give the analogy if you were to imagine in the year 1450 a group of people sitting around in Western Europe saying "Oh feudalism is collapsing and we want to create a new system called capitalism. What kinds of institutions should it have?" Who could possibly have dreamed up the very complex set of institutions we have today in the capitalist world economy? Nobody, because they evolve through praxis, through the development of ideas. There are certain basic principles, and that is all you can say for our future system. I summarize those basic principles as relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian.

Let us go back to the roots of the present uncertainties and fragility of the world we are living in. In your previous interviews and lectures you elaborated '68 as a world revolution and '89 as a kind of conclusion which opened the door for a whole set of transformations. In '89, however, we entered a completely new period. The logic of the relatively stable bipolar system was over. For many in this part of the world, who were actively fighting against the Soviet type of totalitarianism, it was the moment when illusions about the future arose, and these illusions are of course today over. Some people understood this earlier, while others insist that the problems we face today are temporary in nature.

We have to talk about the basis of those illusions. The basis of those illusions was in the first statement of what was happening. You are saying that we are moving from a relatively stable bipolar situation into a different one. That is not how I would describe it. We are moving from a relatively unipolar situation into a multipolar situation. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a collapse of the US geopolitical power structure. The Soviet Union, its mere existence, provided two fundamental things that were stabilizing for the world system from the point of view of the US. The first thing it provided was an enemy that you could use to convince Western Europe, Japan and other people that they couldn't stray too far from US leadership. Once that disappeared, they no longer had that argument. Ever since then, the US has been searching for an alternative to the enemy lost. That is the whole business about Islam and terrorism which do not replace in the minds of people around the world the Soviet Union as the enemy. That is the first thing the US lost.

The second thing that they lost, is that part of the deal with the Soviet Union was that they would control the people belonging to their sphere of influence, while the US controlled their people so there would never be a nuclear war. So we lose the Soviet Union's power to control "its people".

I have long argued that, take the first Gulf War, take Saddam Hussein invading Kuwait, it had been Iraqi national policy from the 1920s that Kuwait was part of Iraq. So why only in 1991 do they invade Kuwait, because they were released from the Soviet sphere of influence. They no longer had to worry about that and Saddam Hussein thought he would get away with it. The point is, the war breaks out precisely because the Soviet Union lost its power in the region. That's what has happened now everywhere. There is no constraining force and that is what the US is facing. So we move from the unipolar world which we had before, to a multipolar world. A multipolar world which was not in the interests of the US.

Going back to the illusions, many people in Hungary believed that there would be a new world order, as President Bush senior suggested.

That was not the only illusion. The other illusion was that the US would guarantee that Hungary and all the other East Central European countries would raise their standard of living and overnight reach the living standards of Western Europe.

These illusions are more or less over but there are still intellectual and academic struggles. There are still people who believe that the transition of East and Central Europe is a historic success on a world scale. They question that we are in a deep and multiple crisis or whether it is a sort of complex crisis. But what is more important is that the fundamental illusions are broken, transition theory is itself in crisis. Now there is a kind of hopelessness and helplessness even in the intellectual arena. On the other hand, it is an interesting and challenging period. We can ask fundamental questions we could not ask in the last 20 years – profound and even basic questions, reflecting that we are approaching a new beginning. For example, what would you do if you had the chance to influence decision-making in Hungary, or in East Central Europe, after it is recognized, almost officially that we have taken the wrong path?

You are asking me to become the Minister of National Economy of Hungary and I give you Paul Sweezy's answer. You know the story of Paul Sweezy? In the 1950s Paul Sweezy was asked by someone: suppose the president of the US named you the head of the Federal Reserve Bank of the US, what would you do? And he said, "RESIGN". It's an impossible situation. I don't know what I would do if I were the Minister of National Economy of Hungary. I don't think the Minister of National Economy of Hungary has much leeway. What I generally say, now, not only about Hungary but even about the US, about every government, is the

choices are extremely constrained in the economic arena and I hold the following short run and the middle run views.

In the short run, you should do things that would minimize the pain; that is to say, whatever does most to help people at the bottom of the ladder in your country is a plus. That may mean more social welfare expenditures; it may mean all sorts of things. That depends on the local situation, but you should minimize the pain or try to minimize the pain because at an immediate level there is lots of pain. On the other hand, you should not have any illusions that minimizing the pain solves the problem. It doesn't, and it may even make the situation worse. In the middle run, we have to move towards doing whatever we can to transform the system in the right direction. So in the short run, minimizing the pain may require, for example, always supporting the lesser evil. There are always lesser evils. It's a myth to think you can ever be in a situation in which there is no lesser evil. The question is who is the lesser evil in a particular situation and that really depends on the details. It's different in Hungary from Romania. It's different in Romania from France, etc., etc. So the matter of what is the lesser evil and what is the immediate relationship of political forces in the country is a very local decision, so I can't give advice. I don't know Hungary well enough to give advice to Hungarians. I have to worry about what is the lesser evil for the US. Still, you have to proceed without the illusion that supporting the lesser evil is solving the problem; it's not solving the problem it's merely minimizing the pain. I use that as my mantra: "Minimize the pain!"

We previously spoke about the life chances at the end of the tunnel, and what civil society can do. I would think there are more opportunities. Can you give me some positive examples, like from the US, about how people are mobilizing themselves? What are the new attitudes, ways of thinking which provide some hope?

The problems of the old left, over 100–125 years old, is that they constantly have narrow visions of who are people of good will and good faith. What one has to understand is that there are multiple movements representing multiple and different problems: environmentalist movements, minority, ethnicity movements, there are endlessly specific kinds of movements. They all deal with some aspects, some immediate aspects of the problem. It seems to me very important to understand that the condition for moving in a positive direction is the same for all of them: a mutual tolerance between these movements and an attempt to understand the logic of each other while stopping egotistic rivalry. There is a tendency to create hierarchies among those movements, to say "my pain is worse than your pain" or "do my thing first and then we'll solve your thing". The answer is you have to solve everything simultaneously. If they conflict, then we have to work out compro-

mises because we're all basically on the same side. In this, I think we have made a lot of progress since '68. '68 marked the downfall of the exclusivist version of left mobilization. "This is the only form, all else must wait". Ever since then, and it has been a slow progress, we have become more and more tolerant and we have expanded the number of groups which we want to include in this tolerance. I was just reading this morning something that was sent to me by a Peruvian friend, discussing this issue of mutual tolerance *vis-à-vis* indigenous movements, who is an indigenous movement and so forth so. He was arguing with an important structure of indigenous movements in Peru who wanted to define the situation more narrowly. He stated it extremely well, the way I feel about these movements.

I have been studying civil society for more than 20 years and it seems to me that in the case of Hungary and East Central Europe, the project of civil society has been fading away in the last 10–15 years. It has either become an appendage to or part of rhetorics of political parties or governments, or been completely marginalized. My colleagues and I began a new type of dialogue which I would not call a social movement. We call it an initiative for "reinventing" the country in terms of a new reform age. We conducted some basic research in Hungary. We approached grassroots civil society organizations and it turned out that even in the last few years, tremendous energy and organizing capabilities can be observed at the grassroots level. Many have changed their attitudes towards authorities. They are less afraid than they were years ago of local authorities and political parties, but they do complain about the lack of cooperation. They feel isolated. This is our political culture.

This is one of the things, organizationally, that the Social Forums have done when they are organized at more local levels. They allow people to talk to each other. All of the individual movements feel helpless, small and isolated and even collectively may feel weak, but they get some kind of energy from this interaction with each other. They begin to do things at a local level, at a regional level, at a national level – and all the levels matter. You might think of organizing a Hungarian Social Forum meeting.

We began to speak about a New Social Contract, the possibilities of putting together a real social contract which did not happen in '89. There was agreement about the peaceful transformation of political power among self-appointed activists and the former powerholders but it was not a real social contract. Now the need is great, but whether we can succeed or not is a question. Returning to the old left and the old vocabulary, with the fragmentation of the world, becoming a real multipolar world, institutions are also delegitimized, like many of the institutions of the nation state. The whole political set up we call democracy is brought into question. Some in the social sciences talk about the death of democracy as we know it, or about a post-democratic constellation. You were also uncertain about the progressive alternative saying it

would be a “sort of” or “some kind” of a democracy. What do you think is going to happen to democracy?

What does one mean by democracy? Relatively, “democratic” means more rather than less. First of all, I think it comes back to the political theory that you have got to both simultaneously have the ability of the majority to make decisions and have minorities protected against these decisions, as oppose to cadres making decisions. Obviously, the decisions of the majority can be terrible decisions, too. What we are witnessing as right-wing populism in the US today is a terrible force. If you read some of the things they say and do it’s terrifying. So the question is how can you break through that? Basically right-wing populism is always a constricting idea; it always says “yes” for us, but “no” for them. The idea of including “them” in the “us” is, I guess, left-wing populism. I don’t have any magic formulas, but generally what is more open is better. What is more free of constraint is better, but only if it is free of constraint of the people of the bottom. I mean the people at the bottom have to be free of constraint.

When I say relatively egalitarian, what can that mean? What was “equal” was already an issue that Marx had to deal with, and it was each according to his needs – and needs vary, and that is reality. The needs of a child are different from the needs of an adult; the needs of a disabled person are different from the needs of a person that does not have disabilities, etc. To make what one gets more equivalent depends on the assumption that there is some kind of solidarity and some kind of evaluation. It doesn’t mean that everybody gets exactly the same amount, but it takes into account the reality of differences. What I mean by relatively egalitarian, relatively democratic, is really the same thing. One cannot be democratic if it is not an egalitarian system, because if it is inegalitarian there are differences in real power. You cannot be really democratic if some people have more power than others. I cannot say what is the difference between a little more and significantly more power. I have the feeling that these things need to be analyzed and reanalyzed, discussed and rediscussed. It is a constant attempt to attain a balance. It is as though you have a balance wheel and when it gets a little heavier on the one side you have to put a little more on the other side. It is a never ending job trying to get a reasonable balance.

Another issue I would like to ask you about is knowledge and knowledge production, knowledge structures. Moving from one system to another, transformation provokes a need for new knowledge. As you, in many of your writings mention, this is a field of contest, and there are different schools and different approaches. Certainly universities as we knew them are under huge pressure. They do not deliver the kind of minds we need to understand, analyze and change the world we live in. This is an immense

problem in Hungary. From my experience at different European universities, I think it's a problem in many places in Europe.

It's a problem everywhere. First of all, there are several different problems. One problem is that more and more people are going to universities. We certainly don't have universal university education, but we are definitely moving in that direction. That is to say, already in certain countries you have large percentages of the population, of different age groups going to the university. This makes for very large institutions or for very many institutions and it means the costs of university education go up. The overall costs that pay for this means a much larger bill from the point of view of the state. Then various kinds of pressures come to reduce the expenditure. How do you reduce the expenditure? You reduce the expenditure by reducing the teacher–student ratio. You reduce the expenditure by having multiple categories of teaching personnel, paying more to one and less to another. You do all sorts of things which undermine the quality of the education. I call this in my writings the “highschoolization” of the university. What does that mean? Well, of course the highschools themselves, if you look back 50–100 years, were much more exclusive institutions. Highschools have become more like primary schools, while the universities have become more like highschools. One of the things that happens, of course, is that this pushes scholars out of the university so there is the emergence of other kinds of institutions – institutes of advanced study, structures run by corporations and so forth. The whole future of the university as an institution is an open question.

If you became the Minister of Education and Culture in Hungary or in any country, what would be your future university model, what would be an ideal type of university? Money is an important concern, but so is structure. There is also the lack of vision and methodology that we face today.

From my own experience, I think a good university model requires lots more money than is presently spent. I have no objection to the concept of large, lecture structures. They play their role in the university system, but you need lots of small classes – small classes run by senior people. You need a lot of people to do this and it costs a lot of money. I had a university education in an institution that, at that time, emphasized the principle of classes of 25 run by full professors. It makes a great deal of difference in terms of what you can learn. I would insist on tripling or quadrupling my budget. Then, of course, I think it's very important that we rethink the structure of the university system itself and the departmental structures. I think we have to reinvent the categories within which people are grouped, and this requires both energy and willingness. One of the sociological problems of doing this is that power within the existing university system rests heavily on peo-

ple who are approximately between 45–60 years of age. After 60 years, people tend to pull out of the administrative positions; before 45 they don't get into them. So the people who chair departments, who are deans, who are in a position to manipulate decisionmaking, are in this 45–60 year range. They are intrinsically intellectually the most conservative. You would be telling someone who has achieved their status precisely within the categories that we now use that these categories need to be thrown out. Therefore, power rests with those most resistant to change. How do you overcome this? Well, it's not easy. You can try mechanisms. One of the mechanisms is to dilute the power of these people. How do you dilute the power? I had the theory of mandatory double appointments. Everybody has to be in two departments. That means that in any given department there are a lot of voting members who are not committed to that definition of the department. If this is mandatory, there is no option. You create a bit of havoc, and you have to get a university administration or maybe a minister of national education to mandate this first.

You would approach people to choose a second department, not the other way around where a department chooses you, otherwise the game is played to get people that are too similar together. Let us say you are a professor of Political Science and you are asked which second department do you want to be in. You can say French Literature, or you can say Sociology, or you can say Physics. You can do whatever you want. Then you are a voting member of that department. That's a scheme. It's a bit mischievous as a scheme, but it's one way of breaking through the crust of the conservative core of the university system. Then these now reconstituted departments can discuss things like their curriculum, their requirements for their students, etc. Obviously, they're going to come up with different answers. An Economics Department, a third of whose members are historians, is going to come up with a different answer as to what the economics curriculum should be than if they didn't have those people there. It will all begin to fudge and maybe something creative will come out of it. They will have to come up with some very good structures. Of course, you also have to have a system, which we do have in the US but some countries do not, in which students can wander between departments. If the student is stuck within one department it doesn't work; but if he can wander then the student will wander to places that are more interesting. Some departments will loose out and then they will have to find ways to attract students back. If that were done for 10–15–20 years we would come out with some interesting realignments which is what I'm looking for.

I also think that perhaps one can work out the idea of basic courses which people have to have. I had the idea that maybe the first year you should have a course called Social Sciences before you can take courses in Economics and Sociology

and Anthropology. Again that would change things. I'm struggling for mechanisms which would enable us to obtain a more complex view of things.

Of course, people are also opening questions of methodology and so forth. I think methodology with a small "m" and epistemology are important topics for discussion. These are not closed questions. They should be open questions and if they were dealt with openly, we might emerge with structures of knowledge which are more meaningful. It is also true that you can't separate that from what I was saying about what is going on in terms of the transformation of the system, because there is no question that the present structures of knowledge reflect the present, existing world system in which we live. As we move towards a different kind of world system, the structures of knowledge will be under pressure to move in that direction. Then a professor who is also involved in social movements will be able to incorporate the knowledge he acquires there into his thinking about social science or, generally speaking, knowledge.

It seems that we have a long way to go here, maybe longer than you in the US. We still struggle with the academic and university bureaucracy that insists on the rigid system of pure disciplines at a time when there is a need from the outside world, from civil society, politics and multinational companies to local and national governments, for people who understand complexities is growing. There is a large and growing gap between institutional construction, abstract or theoretical knowledge, on the one hand, and reality on the other.

Yes, the pressure to change these things is coming not only from within, but from outside. The fact is that most of what we teach in university does not really prepare people for jobs and what they need to learn for jobs they usually learn in 6 months on the job training. What they need to learn at the university is something about the world. The whole idea that the university prepares people for jobs is so false and irrelevant that we have to attack that and there are people from companies and so forth who are saying similar things.

To sum things up, we very often use Marc Nerfin's metaphor of the Prince, the Merchant and the Citizen. The Citizen has become more aware of its own voice and that what we do counts. This was felt in Eastern Europe in the '80s. This is how the promising notion of civil society was reborn. What would you suggest as the new roles for these players – for states, market forces, and for citizens? Do you see a chance for cooperation among these actors?

If you put it in terms of those three categories, they each represent very special interests and they are interests within the existing structure. Princes wish to retain their power; Merchants want to make money; and Citizens want to be included,

but to exclude non-citizens. I am suspicious of all three categories. I certainly don't want to suggest that the three should meet around a round table and make some kind of deal with each other because that's what happens now. You see, basically that's the way the capitalist world economy operates. The Princes, the Merchants and the Citizens and non-citizens are in fact constantly negotiating deals with each other. That is part of the world capitalist economy. That is, in a sense, what isn't working at this point, so I'm not sure I want to use that framework, that imagery, as a way of suggesting what we want to do.

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