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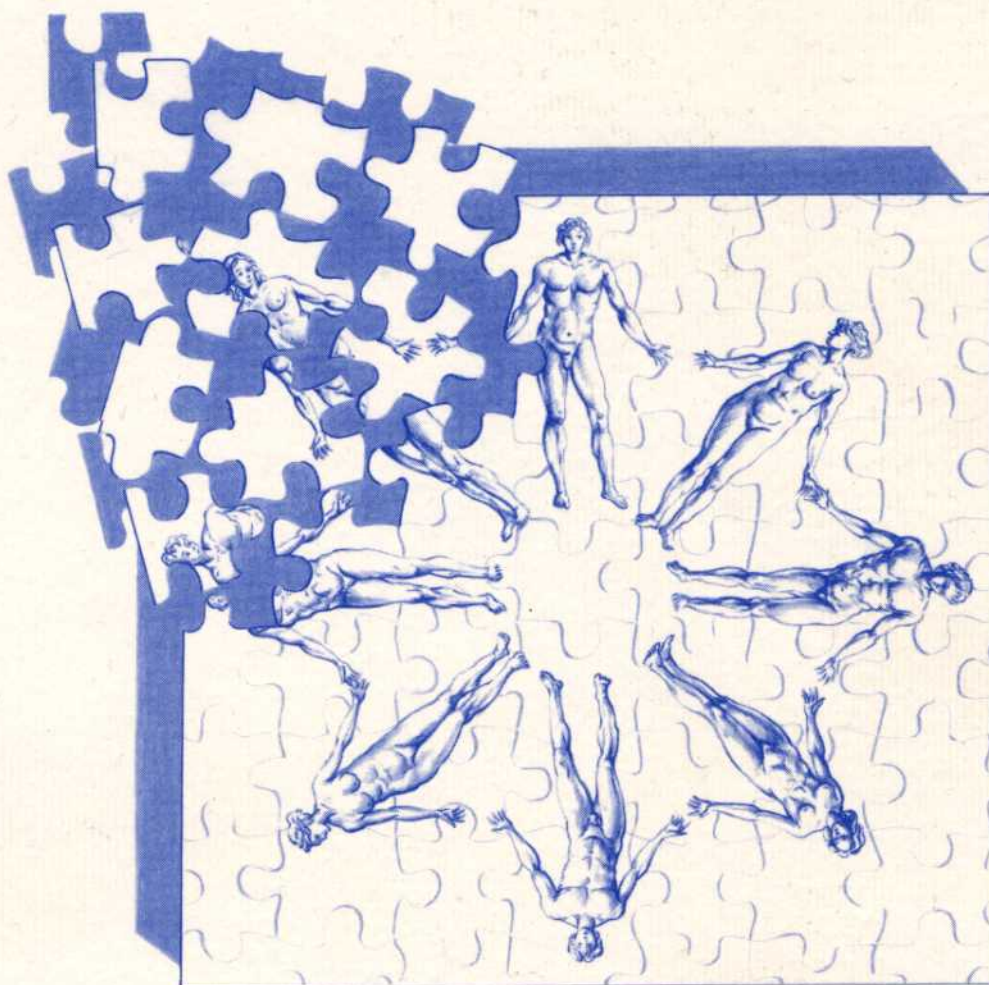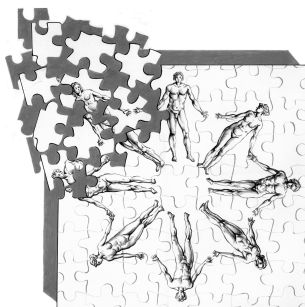
DELLA FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE DELLA FORMAZIONE
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI CATANIA

2006

A N N A L I

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CULTURE AND THE WORLD-SYSTEM THEORY
SOME REFLECTIONS FROM WALLERSTEIN'S PERSPECTIVE
by
Augusto Gamuzza

1. *Introduction*

How can we understand and interpret culture today?

This concept – often referred to as the 'centre of gravity' of the cognitive strategies developed by human sciences[1] to analyse phenomena such as the dynamics of social interactions, the performances and functioning of the political-economic systems, grand and minor historical transformations, appears to be facing a theoretical identity crisis [Santoro, 2000].

This paper aims to consider the possible destiny of the concept starting from Immanuel Wallerstein's article "Culture as ideological battleground in the modern World-system"[1990]. In this article Wallerstein put forward a very interesting and 'alternative' approach to the definition of culture as determined by the *theoretical glasses*[2] of World-system theory. This very vision represents the starting point of this paper which is structured in three parts. Each part is connected and logically consequent to the preceding in a propedeutic fashion. Such structuring aims to achieve a 'comprehension path'– which starts by analyzing the 'toolbox' used by Wallerstein, then it passes on the analysis of what culture means in such perspective, so to finally discuss the validity of this concept and of its use in today's sociological debate.

2. *The World-system theory: describing the glasses*

World-system theory is a macrosociological perspective seeking to explain the dynamics of the "capitalist world economy" as a "total social system". Immanuel Wallerstein in 1974 published what still today is regarded as a most influential paper: "*The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis*". In 1976 Wallerstein published "*The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*". This is Wallerstein's landmark contribution to sociological and historical thought and it triggered numerous reactions, and inspired many others who further developed the ideas and stimuli rising from this work.

Where does world-system theory locate in the intellectual world? It falls, at the same time, into the fields of historical sociology and economic history. In addition, because of its emphasis on development and unequal opportunities across nations, it has been embraced by development theorists and practitioners. This combination makes the world-system project both a political and an intellectual effort. Wallerstein's approach is one of praxis, in which theory and practice are closely interrelated, and the objective of intellectual activity is to create knowledge that uncovers hidden structures and allows oneself to act upon the world to change it: «Man's ability to participate intelligently in the evolution of his own system is dependent on his ability to perceive the whole» [1974, 10]. Wallerstein's work developed at a time when the dominant approach to understanding development – modernization theory – was under attack from many fronts, and he followed suit. He himself acknowledges that his aim was to create an alternative explanation [Wallerstein 2000]. He

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[1] I use this term in accord with Raymond Aron and Franco Ferrarotti considering that the French locution *sciences humaines* fits better than the Anglophonic *social sciences* to all the disciplines that have for object the human being. Cfr. R. Aron (1965) *Main current in sociological thought*. Basic Books: New York. Trad it. *Le tappe del pensiero sociologico*. Milano: A. Mondadori 1989; F. Ferrarotti (1981), *Introduzione alla Sociologia*. Editori Riuniti: Roma. (quoted from II ed. 1997).
[2] I use this metaphor to indicate the theoretical perspective remembering that every scientific activity is *theory laden* [cfr. Giglioli Ravaioli 2004, 286]

aimed at achieving «a clear conceptual break with theories of 'modernization' and thus provide a new theoretical paradigm to guide our investigations of the emergence and development of capitalism, industrialism, and national states» [Skocpol 1977, 1075]. Criticisms to modernization include (1) the reification of the nation-state as the sole unit of analysis, (2) assumption that all countries can follow only a single path of evolutionary development, (3) disregard of the world-historical development of transnational structures that constrain local and national development, (4) explaining in terms of a-historical ideal types of "tradition" versus "modernity", which are elaborated and applied to national cases. In reacting to modernization theory, Immanuel Wallerstein. outlined a research agenda with five major subjects: the functioning of the capitalist world-economy as a system, the how and why of its origins, its relations with non-capitalist structures in previous centuries, comparative study of alternative modes of production, and the ongoing transition to socialism [Wallerstein 1979].

3. *Using World-System glasses to 'discover' the meaning of Culture*

Starting from a typical[3] – but crucial – thought about the wideness of the concept of culture that «embraces a very large range of connotations, and thereby it is the cause perhaps of the most difficulties»[Wallerstein, 1990: 31] Wallerstein "read" this idea, and its social implications, with the glasses of world-system theory. In fact, as he says at the beginning, from an anthropological perspective (the author probably starts from there because of the role cultural anthropology played as human sciences reference in cultural studies) the notion of culture is used – creating a sort of "theoretic confusion" – at the same time to «summarize the ways in which groups distinguish themselves from the other groups» so defining all the fixed peculiarities that differentiate a group from all the other (first usage) [ivi, 32]. On the other hand, the concept of culture is used to define «certain characteristics within the group, as opposed to other characteristics within the same group» in order to identify some internal peculiarities of the members in contrast with the rest of the group (second usage) [ivi, 32]. This confusion is, for the author, a sort of intellectual springboard to start his critical consideration about this deliberate mystification. In fact, as Wallerstein scathingly states, if the 'oversight' would not be accidental, then, it could hide an «ideological weapon of control» [ivi, 34] used to justify and cover the interests of the dominant classes inside a 'group' or a 'social system' against the legitimate interests of the lower strata within the same group. In fact, the first definition identifies culture as the complex of distinctive elements that separate a group from another and the second definition – focusing upon the internal peculiarities of the group – justifies the inequities of the system attempting to maintain them in a world constantly 'menaced' by change.

In order to reconstruct or, at least, demonstrate the rightness of his assumptions Wallerstein starts to analyze the development of the wide and confused concept of culture setting it into the theoretical context of the world-system theory. In particular the historical reconstruction, using the world-system theory glasses, is used to underline that «six realities which have implications for the theoretical formulations that have come to permeate the system (capitalistic world-economy, ndr)» [1990: 35].

The evolutionary realities considered are:
–   The capitalist single "division of labour",
–   The capitalist world-economy functioning pattern that leads the system to overlap modernization and westernization,
–   The endless accumulation of capital,
–   The need of change 'structurally' required by capitalist system,
–   The polarizing function of the system,

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[3] Many authors emphasize the polysemous and evolutionary nature of the concept. Cfr. D. Mamo E. Minardi (1987) *Cultura.* in: *Nuovo Dizionario di Sociologia.* Edizioni San Paolo: Cinisiello Balsamo.

–   The historical nature of the system that implies its 'natural' end.

These evolutionary realities codetermined the evolution of the concept of culture, instrumentally used by upper strata, in order to solve the contradictions, the ambiguities, the complexities of the capitalist system [ivi, 38].

In this way the concept of culture becomes the historical result of the tension between these two definitions and the principal ideological battleground for conflicting interests in the capitalist world-system. Using two interpretative categories contained in a previous work [Wallerstein,1988] about the principal ideological elements raised in the history of capitalistic world-economy – the universalism and the racism-sexism – Wallerstein, sharply, considers that these two elements are not antinomies but, in reality, their 'right dosage' [ivi, 39] permitted the capitalistic system to maintain itself in a sort of continue ideological zigzag. This ideological zigzag is at the base of this deliberate confusion in defining a unique and 'real' meaning of culture and these two false antinomies (universalism and racism-sexism) have been used to justify and solve all the contradictions, ambiguities and complexities in the socio-political realities of the modern capitalistic world-economy.

This 'intellectual target' is achieved by demonstrating that all contradictions of the capitalistic world-economy are explicable in the light of universalism and racism-sexism. In this way the author designs a 'mathematic demonstration' of his thesis that develops from the weaknesses and the contradictions that the system contains[4]. Bearing in mind these premises universalism justifies a precise hierarchy within the interstate system created by the contradictory coexistence of a single division of labour [ivi, 43]. At the same time this antinomy, and the consequent interstate hierarchy, is explained by the couple racism-sexism. The racist justification is used, for example, when a group is considered «genetically or 'culturally' inferior to another group is such a way that the group said to be inferior cannot be expected to perform tasks as well as the presumably superior group» [ivi, 43-44]. Wallerstein comes to similar conclusions using sexism to analyze world-system hierarchies. In fact, in western countries women have gained more rights, in the 'inferior' realities (e.g. Muslim countries) these rights are not recognised by the law and civil society demonstrates negative cultural differential between modern and non-modern realities. A similar explanation is given for the second evolutionary reality. In fact, the overlapping between modernization and westernization is 'used' *ad hoc* to demonstrate that this kind of evolution concretize a universal culture by affirming that a social reality is not modern if it is not "westernized". The same process can be explained using the racism-sexism category. Wallerstein demonstrates that assimilation-westernization may «take the form of legitimating indigenous ideological position (a so called revival of tradition) that include blatantly racist and sexist themes. At this point, we have a renewed justification of the world wide hierarchy» [ivi, 45].

By the same token, universalism legitimize hard work too since the "culture of work" is considered the pivot of modernity; this notion hides however, beneath the universalism of work's ethic , all sorts of existing inequalities between countries (confirming the interstate hierarchy) and the unequal distribution of the rewards. Even this time racism and sexism are used to complement the proposed arguments. In fact, such elements create a very high correlation between low income and low group status identifying that 'culturally' weaker groups (as people of African origins or women) are «paid less because they work less». [ivi, 46]

The last aspect of Wallerstein's article considers the "presumed opponents" of the system: the anti-systemic movements. Even here the position taken by the author is very analytical. In fact, these movements result 'imbued' by all the contradictions and structural inequalities that the capitalist world economy carries out in its evolution: such changing agents are a 'product' of the system itself. Paradoxically, using the author's words: «what that the antisystemic movements have done […] has been essentially to turn themselves into the fulfillers of the liberal dream while claiming to

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[4] I will take only few examples to avoid a *résumé* of the article but to explain some steps that represents its "theoretical skeleton".

be its most fulsome critics» [ivi, 52]. The war against the system has been lost in two strategic point: the initial exaltation of the spread of science , a sort of fetishism, into the economic life; secondly, on the political corner the principal problem was 'translated' by the fight against exclusion. These two points require further explanation. For the first one, the illuminate confidence – imbued with Enlightenment trust in science – leads early anti-systemic movements to consider that the spread of the scientific truth in all over the world would have been the panacea against inequalities of the system towards social investments in science. At the same time, on the political side, the fight of the anti-systemic movements against the exclusion of lower strata realized the opposite outcome. Inclusion policy leads anti-systemic movements to support an indiscriminate assimilation of the weaker to the model of the stronger creating an indiscriminate and clumsy social equalization. Here too, using an evolutionary-historical perspective, Wallerstein observes that the new anti-systemic movements – sons of the cultural revolution of '68 – criticized the rightness of these two points (science and assimilation) as effective 'goals' of their action. But, and this point appears crucial for the author, their action remained far from the real 'battleground'. In fact, criticizing the other movements or dividing from inside the movement itself, they have played a marginal and not incisive action against the system and this «tactical ambivalence» was at the base of their failure ceding the cultural high-ground to their opponents.[ivi, 53]. In this way the anti-systemic movement played an inverse-game and the cultural trap – prepared by the 'priests' of culture – became stronger and stronger.

Wallerstein's hope is that science «will be ready to reconcile itself dramatically with the humanities, such that we can overcome what C.P. Snow (1959) called the division of the two cultures […] I have the sense that in cultural terms our world-system is in need of some 'surgery'. Unless we open-up some of our cherished cultural premises, we shall never be able to diagnose clearly the extent of cancerous growths and shall therefore be unable to come up with appropriate remedies».[ivi, 54].

Closing this 'medical' metaphor, Wallerstein delivers a complex and problematic conceptualisation of the modern culture which let us start in our reflections about 'how' and 'why' the world-system glasses observe culture in this way.

4. *Culture: a complex concept to scrap?*

We can divide the main ideas suggested by Wallerstein's article reflecting on culture in two groups: methodological and theoretical.
These two aspects have been summarized by Roy Boyne [1990, 61-62] when criticizing the world-system theory 'outcome' of culture underlines that:

> What Wallerstein does is to provide a framework of understanding. But a framework is all that it is. World-system theory is like a house without glass in the windows […] Even if we grant the status of incontestable reality to the main supports of the structure, and we should not do so lightly since we would be saying thereby that the human sciences have arrived at a shared epistemology in regard to which we can expect no radical shifts, it does not follow that the understanding of culture will be exhausted by providing an account of the main way that it keeps the structure from breaking apart. Few would contest that some aspect of culture can be analysed in that way, but is far from all there is to it.

For the first aspect, as emphasized before [infra, §2], it is obvious that a macro perspective – as World-system theory– involves almost *structurally* a 'reduction' of social reality and its complexity in the attempting to see the historical-evolutionary trajectories that characterize and formalize a concept. Boyne underlines that the 'mechanistic' perspective proposed by World-system theory is theoretically ineffective to explain a complex concept as culture which«[…] needs to be described, that which cannot be anticipated on the basis of some theoretical premise» [1990, 64]. Many other

authors, especially on the anthropological side [Geertz 1987; Featherstone 1987; Hannerz 1992; Elias 1997 and 1998], underline that complexity is an element not to be set aside when we want to interpret present time and in particular when we're talking about culture. It seems to be true. But Boyne's critics are directly linked, in my opinion, to a typical point of view that privileging a 'deep' analytical perspective is naturally incompatible with the 'wide view' of the World-system theory. This epistemic point of view (Boyne) founded upon the division between different 'compartments of competence' to interpret and understand social reality, has been heavily criticized by Wallerstein [2001] that proposed to 'unthink' social sciences in a conventional way substituting an *unidisciplinar* approach to exceed all the limits imposed by the legacy of XIX century and sublimated by the functionalistic and approach[5] . Considering these elements, what is criticized by Boyne appear not so 'grave' considering that the epistemic project proposed by Wallerstein is clear, ambitious and obviously difficult to realise without creating some reductions.

So it is important to underline here that the perspective introduced by Wallerstein is useful to define another way to understand social reality, although in a critical way, about the total empirical adherence of the outcomes. In spite of these critics we can paraphrase Howard S. Becker remembering that the target of social sciences is not to give answers but to promote new questions arising by doubts[6].

Boyne's critics to Wallerstein – fundamentally based on the 'reduction' imposed by World-system theory to culture– lead our discussion to reflect about the second 'problem' arising from the article. The question here is on the 'destiny' of culture as a concept. This problem – widely debated in literature – is, in my opinion, a question that many social scientists resolve taking a position that can hide an hasty and dangerous misinterpretation.

Starting to analyze the contemporary concept of culture, we fully agree with Giglioli and Ravaioli [2004, 267] that emphasizing the theoretical tendency of many contemporary social scientists who consider culture a concept too 'aged' – and thus incapable to fit present times [Geertz 1973; Ortner 1984; Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1989; Appadurai, 1991; Abu-Lughod 1991]. The two authors start their argumentations underlining that we must consider two levels when talking about culture: the validity of the concept and the relation between culture and social action. Considering this two points we try to respond to Boyne's theoretical critics attempting to 'defend' Wallerstein position (even though with all the 'limits' imposed by his interpretive paradigm) in relation to the heuristic validity of culture and its weight as determinant of the action.

As an analytical category culture has still a precious heuristic power; in fact, too many times there's a theoretical overlapping between "culture" and "cultures" that lead the discussion to errant conclusions. In fact, the first term identifies culture as a concept, characterised by an high degree of generality, aiming to define a phenomenological class of facts that are considered connected both with the goals to explain both as the explicative causes of other phenomena. In this way, considering the conceptual dimension, as Marradi [1984] points out, a concept is not true or false but it's useful or not to explain an ordinate and linked series of phenomena. The second term (cultures) is situated on a completely different analytical level: it is referred to a particular instance of the concept representing a concrete situation (i.e. the Italian or French culture, high or low culture, the young culture and so on). Bearing in mind these assumptions, a confusion between these two levels lead to wrong conclusion when culture is considered inadequate to explain present times because of the progressive transformation in contemporary cultures. This a typical case of what Withehead called *the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.*

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[5] It's interesting to underline that Wallerstein's education was directly influenced by the 'weight' of Parsons, Merton and Lazarsfeld. In fact, Wallerstein studied at Columbia University the most "American" between the American universities. It's important to underline that, during the apogee of structural-functionalistic approach, the most influential scholar in Wallerstein's formation was Wright Mills. In this way is very interesting to observe how the biographical elements are particularly useful to understand the evolution of Wallerstein's positions.

[6] This very evocative image for the real task of human sciences was proposed during a lecture at University of Bologna (department of sociology).

So more modern and 'fashionable' terms – as *discourses* or *ethnoscapes* – represent, in reality another way to 'interpret' the *old concept* of culture. In other words «the concept of culture remains an indispensable tool for social theory provided that it is correctly formulated […] it's useful because indicates what (and how) to see when we want to study a concrete culture»[7] [Giglioli and Ravaioli 2004, 269].

The second point – culture and its relation with action – re-calls the definition of culture as a symbolic system proposed by Parsons [1951]. Culture, interacting with the social structure but remaining at the same time independent, bring us to a multidimensional conception of social action in which the symbolical meanings have been created by social groups. Even in this case the contemporary validity of this concept appears not to be surpassed by times considering that culture and society live in symbiosis and they are reciprocally constituents of social reality. Even this argument is very useful to propose many questions to social scientists who want to 'eliminate' culture remembering that the complex times and multidimensional analysis seems to be a very powerful theoretical key to analyse this times.

Even if we came back to Parsons to defend the arguments proposed by Wallerstein (proposing a sort of Dante 'counterbalance law') about the heuristic validity to consider today the concept of culture and its social determinants and implications, what appears very important, in conclusion, is to underline that contemporary social reality needs to have renewed, transformed or re-founded some 'interpretive keys', which however, at the same time, will remain coherent and ready for discussion within the scientific community.

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[7] The translation is mine.

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Abstract

This paper aims to propose some thoughts about the concept of culture starting from Immanuel Wallerstein's article "Culture as ideological battleground in the modern World-system". In this article Wallerstein put forward a very interesting and 'alternative' approach to the definition of culture as determined by the theoretical glasses of World-system theory. Analyzing the 'toolbox' used by Wallerstein to criticize the 'ideological' evolution of the concept, the paper passes on the analysis of what culture means in such perspective, so to finally discuss the validity of this concept and of its use in today's sociological debate.

Riassunto

L' articolo qui presentato propone alcune riflessioni sul concetto di cultura proposto da Immanuel Wallerstein nel suo "Culture as ideological battleground in the modern World-system". In questo lavoro, l'autore propone una visione molto interessante ed 'alternativa' della definizione di cultura riletta attraverso la 'lente teorica' della teoria del sistema-mondo da lui elaborata. Partendo dall'analisi della 'cassetta degli attrezzi' che Wallerstein utilizza per criticare l'evoluzione 'ideologica' del concetto di cultura, l'articolo si sofferma sulla stringente validità del concetto nell'attuale dibattito sociologico.