

Editor's Introduction: Utopias and the Politics of Dispossession

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"It is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."
-- Slavoj Žižek

The survival of the global capitalist order depends upon its ability to convince people who are disempowered and dispossessed by this system that there is no alternative. Thus, utopias are defined as impossible and nonexistent. Yet Erik Olin Wright's *Real Utopias* project upends this dominant logic and highlights actually existing alternatives to capitalism that have been essential to the very survival of many. The deepening global financial crisis heightens the urgency that these real utopias become more widely known and practiced.

World-systems analysis has long urged people to imagine the world before, after, and beyond capitalism. Among scholarly traditions, world-systems stands out for its perseverance in helping people think creatively about the limits and boundaries of the dominant capitalist system. For without a sense that another world is possible, people will not come together to resist this system. Thus, our collective work to imagine the end of capitalism is vital to realizing a more equitable, humane, and sustainable world-system.

This issue of the *Journal of World-Systems Research* highlights some of the best of this work. Drawing from feminist research's wisdom that the greatest insights about the operation of power come from those most exploited by it, we sought out three leading women scholars and activists – Ariel Salleh, Rose Brewer, and Marina Karides – for a symposium on the theme of this year's American Sociological Association conference, "[Real Utopias.](#)" Their contributions explore both the particular ways capitalism marginalizes women, Indigenous and rural peoples, Africans, and nature, and the resistances to such dispossession and exclusion. With lenses fine-tuned to see who and what is relegated to the most exploited peripheries of the world-system, these analysts show us "utopias" that are emergent or enduring amidst the multiple crises of global capitalism. Together these pieces offer compelling ideas about how power and exploitation perpetuate a failing system and about how such a system could be –or is in fact being--transformed. They suggest innovative avenues for thinking about "utopias" and understanding the kinds of conceptual and social innovation necessary to move us from a world-system based in exploitation of people and the environment to one that is in harmony with the earth. They draw from ancient yet marginalized wisdom to suggest concepts such as *buen vivir* (living well), *filoxenia* (hospitality and generosity), and *kerasma* (gift-giving) that can orient non-capitalist social orders and sow the seeds of system transformation.

In 2009 we lost a leading thinker who helped build and shape the world-systems tradition and the *Journal of World-Systems Research*, but we continue to learn from the words of Giovanni Arrighi. One of his former students, Kevan Harris, has transcribed an interview he did with Arrighi in 2008 which explores themes quite timely to our work today. Arrighi's reflections

on the decline of U.S. hegemony, on his book, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, and on related themes strongly resonate with the issue's other contributions as well as contemporary debates.

In the wake of the Rio+20 conference's failure to offer effective responses to global climate change, we are pleased to be able to offer two articles that shed light on the reasons why international environmental politics has not only failed to curb environmental degradation but allowed it to expand to new territories and intensities. Eric Bonds and Liam Downey provide a compelling case against the technological optimism that is seen as panacea to our environmental woes. They test the "ecological modernization" thesis against evidence from the automobile industry, showing that key "environmental innovations" such as biofuels and hybrid vehicles actually do more harm to the environment by displacing rather than eliminating environmental costs. This article reinforces the notion that what we're seeing in the contemporary period is *systemic crisis* ([Wallerstein 2009](#)): that is, a situation where the solutions that worked to solve short-term crises in the past are no longer effective and in fact exacerbate social and ecological crises.

Brian Gareau's analysis of the failures of the Montreal Protocol – a treaty deemed among the most successful of environmental agreements – shows how the structure of inter-state environmental politics and US hegemony account for these failures. His account reveals how the efforts of powerful industry actors exploited the inequities of the hegemonic world-system to undercut their competition while selectively resisting environmental regulation. Even where environmentally friendly technology exists, the capitalist world-system reproduces destructive practices that privilege prevailing holders of power. Gareau looks to China to find the emergence of practices reflecting a "green hegemony" that may be a key element of any subsequent world-system.

The contribution by Alexander Thomas offers ideas about how world-systems analysis can be refined to better account for the meso-level processes and social relations that help reinforce and reproduce this system. Thomas looks to ancient Mesopotamian cities to argue that processes inherent to urbanization predate the capitalist world-system but set the stage for its advance. He connects the development and expansion of trade networks to the creation of cities and the emergence of divisions of labor that generated gender-based and other forms of social stratification. He challenges conventional thinking about cities as privileged units of analysis and encourages analysts to focus on the underlying processes of cities and systems.

Jason Hall and Loretta Bass contribute additional insights into the connections between global integration and poverty. They distinguish factors related to more- and less-extreme poverty and find that global integration is less effective at reducing poverty than World Bank officials and other proponents of neoliberal globalization have argued, and they suggest domestic policies that better account for variations in poverty levels within countries.

Finally, we are very pleased to publish Salvatore Babones and Robin Farabee-Siers's research note and data on trade partner concentrations over recent decades. For many scholars, assembling relevant measures of complex world-systems concepts is a time-consuming and thankless task, and too often we settle for less than ideal proxies. Babones and Farabee-Siers have generously offered these [data](#) to other scholars, and their contribution presents a preliminary analysis that illustrates the advantages of these data over common substitutes. The new editorial team at the *Journal of World-Systems Research* will be working to expand our relationship with the [World Historical Dataverse](#) project to make datasets relevant to world-systems analysis, including those upon which *JWSR* articles are based, available to a larger public. We invite readers to explore this rich resource on world-historical processes.

With this issue, we introduce our new editorial team at *JWSR*. But first a word of thanks to Andrew K. Jorgensen and Edward Kick, along with book review editor Tom Hall and technical editor Greg Fulkerson, for their editorial leadership.¹ We will strive to maintain the high standards they helped to set. I am grateful to our managing editor, Brittany Duncan, for her close attention to the many details involved in editing the journal. Jennifer Bair is taking the lead as our book review editor, and she invites readers to suggest books for review and to volunteer to serve as reviewers. Scott Byrd, our technical editor, has been hard at work this summer building our new website. His experience with open source software and his commitment to expanding the knowledge commons will help us ensure that *JWSR* remains a free online journal with worldwide access. We look forward to many exciting issues ahead, and we hope you'll help us spread the word about *JWSR* through your virtual and real social networks. We invite your feedback: jwsr@pitt.edu or on [Facebook](#) (PEWSJWSR).

Reference

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2009. "[Crisis of the Capitalist System: Where Do We Go from Here?](#)" *Monthly Review* 61.

¹ This leadership includes work to help bring this issue of *JWSR* to fruition: articles by Babones and Farabee-Siers, Bonds and Downey, Hall and Bass, and Thomas were reviewed and accepted under the previous editorial team.