

# Interview

## Relational History: An Interview with Dale Tomich

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**Abstract:** Interview with historian Dale Tomich, conducted on May 5, 2019, in the city of Niterói.

**Keywords:** World-systems; Social sciences; Fernand Braudel Center.

*História relacional: uma entrevista com Dale Tomich*

**Resumo:** Entrevista realizada com o historiador Dale Tomich em 30 de maio de 2019, na cidade de Niterói.

**Palavras-chave:** Sistemas-mundo; Ciências sociais; Fernand Braudel Center.

**D**ale Tomich is retired professor in the department of sociology of Binghamton University (SUNY). His writings are widely known in Brazil, especially because of his concept of “second slavery,” first put forward in a 1988 article that was included in the edited volume *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). Tomich also participated in the development of the Fernand Braudel Center (FBC), at the same university, which will end its activities in 2021. The library and network contacts are in the process of being transferred to the recently founded Centro sobre Desigualdades Globais at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF).

1. **The Fernand Braudel Center (FBC) was founded in 1976. Do you think it fulfilled its objectives and original mission?**

Yes, it did become what it was supposed to be. Originally, it was Immanuel Wallerstein who designed both the whole sociology graduate program and the idea of the Center. The deep background of this is that both Terence Hopkins and Wallerstein were professors at Columbia University. Then there was the big 1968 student movement, and Hopkins and Wallerstein were with the students, thus having to leave Columbia. Hopkins went to Binghamton, a very high-quality institution, which was the crown jewel of the whole New York State System and supposed to be the social sciences and humanities campus. He was then able to bring Wallerstein as distinguished professor to found the Fernand Braudel Center.

2. **How did the Fernand Braudel Center operate?**

The Center was a research program, but the research was always organized collectively. The faculty would form teams, their graduate students would be part of the team, and their dissertations were in fact written through the Center and not specific Departments. Wallerstein sometimes came up with a research proposal, sometimes they were collaborative. The idea was to form a group and try to get a grant. Once it turned into a research group, they would work collectively; and there would be students from Binghamton in the research groups, with dissertations often coming out of this experience. One of the big problems was that students were doing magnificent work in the research groups, but other colleagues that didn't want changes and followed an strictly departmental logic would say: they are not taking any courses, how do we account for what they are doing?

Finally, our research project went along with a reform of our graduate program in sociology. Hopkins designed an absolutely brilliant curriculum. We didn't train anybody

to do anything, students were our junior colleagues and we guided them. They defined their own projects and could change their committees anytime they wanted. And what worked really well was that we always had committees of four: there was a titular head, but all the four people on the committee were equal. So the other side of the Center was a pedagogy that Hopkins invented and that in terms of forming people as intellectuals was brilliant. The other people wanted to be bureaucratic, with rules and all that. They couldn't deal with flexibility. It was an absolutely free community of intellectuals through which the younger generation developed, but they could control their own development. It really was a kind of collective experience.

**3. So the students had a really active role in the Center, right?**

The students had real independence. The whole thing was to develop as intellectual worker, not to be trained as whatever; and to be innovative and use this framework [of the world-system perspective] to do new things. As it was not a training thing, but a “work-through together thing,” the students had a lot of input. They could propose stuff. At the beginning, for example, there was no theory course, but the students came and said: we want a theory course. Hopkins said ok, and then they gave it to me. This is a good quality of Wallerstein that people don't know about. Definitely he had his own agenda, but he was very open to working with students that way. He was in a lot of ways tremendously democratic.

**4. How did the research groups work?**

Part of the research groups were often formed to get grants. There was a call open to all institutes and departments saying: we are going to do this. The students who were interested would come to the meeting, they would spend time discussing and formulating the problem, deciding how they would break it out and who would work on what, how they would bring it together and turn it into a grant proposal. Each working group had between seven and eight people. One with fifteen would maybe be a big one. And often there were several groups at once. We also had an administrative secretary who would be involved with all the projects.

5. **And publishing the results on *Review* was an ending point?**

Yes. If you go back to *Review*, there is, for example, an issue on commodity chains. Wallerstein had a paper, Arrighi had another one, and then you have papers by students (Review, 1986).

6. **How many scholars were involved at the same time with the Fernand Braudel Center? How did you bring external scholars?**

If there were eight regular faculty involved in the world-system project, that was a lot. Then we had four to six others, depending on the fluctuations in the international adjunct program. We had this wonderful invention, international adjunct professors, with Wallerstein dividing a one-year fellowship for senior professors into smaller period, allowing us to bring a larger number of scholars to the Center with the same resources. These were people who would come for six weeks every year, so they could be on committees. That is how Aníbal Quijano came, that is how Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch came, that is how Yann Moulier Boutang came. Perry Anderson was also our international adjunct. They wanted to come as visiting professors, but they felt somewhat committed to the project. Why? Not because we had much money, we never had that much money. But because we had a good research agenda. And I think that for you at UFF, internationalization is important. If you internationalize, you can be on the map.

7. **One of the legacies of the Fernand Braudel Center was the creation of a conceptual language that people can share within and beyond academia. This always helps social scientists to go beyond their particular research topics. How hard was to create that common language?**

The Center had two axes. One was long-term large-scale historical change, it was Wallerstein's world-system, which was what we were known for. But there were and there are other views. Giovanni [Arrighi] had a critique (Arrighi, 1998). Terry [Terence Hopkins] at one level was totally supportive but he totally pushed me to write the book on Martinique saying "this is a critique we need" (Tomich, 1990). So, inside it was actually very open, which helped create this shared language.

But the other axis was the idea of an unidisciplinary historical Social Science. This is no abstract methodology. Hopkins was really a brilliant, creative methodologist. He would say: there's no methodology, our courses were called "methods," they were not

about teaching people methodology. Methodology is not interesting, it is a technique, a formalized thing. But methods are always problem-oriented. You have to invent methods as adequate to your problem. Wallerstein invented a method that was adequate to this new object, the analysis of the capitalist world-system, which opened space for research on particular topics using a shared analytical language.

**8. In which ways do you think the world-system perspective challenges the predominant paradigms of Social Sciences?**

All the social sciences and history are pluralist or individualist in approach as well as nationalist. Thus they assume the idea that there are many societies with similar characteristics and that you can compare them. The world-system inverts it. There is only one unit and everything you would take as an independent society is in fact part of that unit in one way or another. Having said that, I would draw attention to three points.

First, if you go back to formal comparison with this in mind - for example, by contrasting the colonization of Brazil and the US and treating each of them as autonomous phenomena, with no connections between them, be them direct or through a world system that envelops both - you'll see that you don't have the conditions for comparison because you can't isolate the cases. Even if they seem to be very far apart, they are all part of the same system.

Second, the point is not to get the profile of the case, like one in Bolivia, another one in Peru. The question is: what are the relations that, for example, produce Cuba. How was Cuba, Brazil, and the United States the expression of global processes that had particular invigoration? If you do comparative work, you have to construct the cases in some way comparable. The beauty of the world system approach is that it gives you different directions and assumptions: what is important is the different, do not try to invent the sameness. How do you explain the processes that create specificity? Then you see time, space, and specification in ways that you don't see if you think you have independent national societies either across time or across space.

Finally, the parts are not epiphenomena of the whole. It is not a question of deciding whether Brazil is a semiperiphery or a periphery. The problem there is that the categories semiperiphery and periphery are already given and you are trying to fit Brazil in them. So I just let go of that. It is a question of trying to historically specify particular relations in time and space as parts of a changing whole. Karel Kosík's idea of the dialects of the concrete helps a lot in this particular (Kosík, 1976).

9. Epistemologically, one of the greatest challenges to social scientists and historians is to understand the notion that there is a spatial-temporal whole like the world economy that is at the same time universal (or self-universalizing) and not homogeneous. How to deal with the idea of a whole that is not equal to itself?

As I wrote the book on Martinique, the big break-through for me was that you could have the world-system as the unit of analysis and Martinique as the object or unit of observation. As I kept this in mind when I came up with the idea of the Second Slavery, I said to myself: it is really a question of specifying what the part is; and by showing how the processes creating Martinique are different from the processes creating Cuba you are also saying something about the character of the world-economy.

Admitting the whole as universal and heterogeneous requires having a clear distinction between the unit of analysis and the unit of observation. You can have the capitalist world-system as the unit of analysis and as the object of analysis. But you need to realize that doing world-system as the unit of observation is not the same as doing world-system as the unit of analysis. Just making explicit that simple distinction, which is also a distinction between history and theory, opens everything up. This is why Kosík was important for me. It helped me construct the dialect of the concrete: how to concretize historically what the world-system is at a certain point in time by concretizing what the second slavery is. It opens up this whole that is completely different from conventional history or social science, and it also changes world-system because you stop imprisoning all historical change in its fixed categories.

10. How to overcome the binary conceptual oppositions that the Social Sciences commonly use: agency versus structures, slave labor versus wage labor, permanence versus change, theory versus history, micro-history versus macro-history? How do the world-system perspective help you reframe and redefine those oppositions instead of being imprisoned by them?

That's going to be a long answer [*laughs*]. Both Braudel and Marx's *Grundrisse* are crucial here (Marx, 1973). The big thing that Immanuel let me see is that: I came out of social history in the 1960s and Braudel was already the enemy, the conservative bad guy with no class struggle and all that. So I had a certain disinterest and antipathy toward Braudel. And then I finally saw it in reading *Capital* when I also said it to the students: "Marx has the famous 'slavery is the pedestal of wage labor'. What he is actually doing is abstracting from slavery and talking about wage labor. He is abstracting from Polish

peasants to talk about wage labor. He is constantly abstracting from the complexity of the historical world to isolate his theoretical subject, the capitalist form.” Then I gradually realize: “Wow, if you want to write a Marxist history you have to turn *Capital* on its head and work back in all the things that he abstracted from.” Then you can see how slavery formed wage labor historically. Then you can see what the servants in Poland have to do with it. Then I said: “if you thought about that for the whole of *Capital*, it would kind of look a lot like Braudel.” That just changed my whole orientation. Besides from disagreements that people have, what I think very few people are clear about is what the relation of theory and history is supposed to be. *Capital* is not a predictive thing, it just gives you categories like Hopkins always said: the method has to be appropriate to the object. *Capital* gives you appropriate categories to think about capitalism as a historical system, and not to universalize and naturalize what you are looking at.

What I liked about Braudel was that structures are historical temporal structures, they change in time, they are not Althusserian structures. It is not that kind of structuralism. You have to deal with it and think of multiple times, multiple levels of the world that have been constructed by human agency, but without a direct correspondence between action and structure. Structures do not deny agency. They help people contextualize agency and specify agency. For me, historical specification is the whole game, both in categories and in terms of space-time relations. That is what we need to do. That comes out of the way the world-system perspective inverted the logics of conventional social science. It is not about getting the static characteristics of things but specifying in time and space why, for example, Martinique is different from Cuba even though in general they look like the same.

II. So Braudel helped you see change in structures. What about the *Grundrisse*? How did it help you escape the opposite dualities of conventional social sciences?

It helped see structure into agency and change. Here the dialogue with Thompson was important. Thompson was such a powerful figure. In 1966 I had him for a semester in the tutorial as I was an undergraduate student at Wisconsin. I didn't even know who Thompson was; and then in 1965 my tutor at Wisconsin, Harvey Goldberg, said: you have to go and meet this guy. He gave me Thompson's *William Morris* (Thompson, 1955). The *Making of the English Working Class* had just come out, it was barely available in Wisconsin (Thompson, 1964). And that was the first serious book that I ever read cover to



cover as a history book. He was tremendously important for me. Thompson always said to me when I was a student: History is the discipline of context. He looked at the working class and I looked at the slaves. They are both workers, they are both exploited, but the context is different, so how do I understand the context?

When the *Poverty of Theory* came out, you could see the places that fall apart for Thompson (1978). He throws out the *Grundrisse*. This is where you lose everything. Markus Rediker actually had a right analysis: Thompson got to this roadblock and Thompson's way of moving ahead was to engage politically in social movements. That's how he got to the anti-nuclear, kind of saying: "I'm not a historian anymore." But I can show you the half paragraph [in *Poverty of Theory*] where he lost it. He doesn't understand how the *Grundrisse* actually opens up *Capital* in the way [Roman] Rosdolsky talks about (Rosdolsky, 1989). That was the point where I could release myself from being dominated by him. I stopped trying to emulate him. His work was not the model anymore.

If you compare me to Peter Linebaugh or [Marcus] Rediker, they look very obviously Thompsonian, and I don't (Linebaugh, 2000). What comes out of me having studied with Thompson looks completely the opposite to Thompson on the surface. My experience with Marx and my colleagues at Binghamton, mainly Philip McMichael, would lead me towards a different outlook on basic things. Structures and properties are preconditions for agency. When I talk about the differences of slave labor and wage labor, I am not denying agency. I am specifying how they are different. If you look at all these guys, the social historians of resistance, it is really about premature agency because they don't work through the mediations that make agency possible. They just go right to the agent when reading their sources and agency comes out of nowhere. It is a characteristic always innately in the agent. There is no history. There is no analysis. Premature agency has always been, in my mind, a wonderful phrase.

12. **Historians and social scientists in Brazil, but also in other countries, usually conflate dependency theory and world system perspective into the same approach...**

True, many people read the world system perspective as a version of dependency theory.

13. **Why are they wrong? What is the difference in your opinion?**

Well, my book on Martinique is totally different from my PhD thesis on Martinique (Tomich, 1976). Parts of it are in the thesis. But the only model I had for my thesis was



dependency theory. Until I came to Binghamton, all I could read, and it was even hard to get, was dependency theory.

And then I found the world-system approach and said: this is a kind of polyvalent way to think about it, it is much better than dependency theory. To replace the dependency theory with world-system perspective in my book, I had to rewrite my thesis three times by doing a self-critique. I wouldn't recommend that to anybody [*laughs*], but I learned a lot doing it. That is how I started to see the difference between dependency theory and world-systems. The problem with dependency theory is that it is always bilateral or bipolar: metropolis versus colony. World-system had just come out when I arrived at Binghamton. I said: that's cool, because you have to see Martinique in relation to Haiti in relation to Jamaica in relation to the British Empire in relation to the French Empire. Everything becomes relational, and relational from various dimensions, with the idea that everything is also specific.

I'll give you another example. I had a student, Richard Yidana, who took that book by Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty*, about cotton in Mozambique in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and did a simple, but brilliant essay on it (Isaacman, 1996). He said: if you read this book, the whole organization is dependency between raw material production in Mozambique and textile industry in Portugal. But if you go further and put the Portuguese textile industry in the context of the world textile production, the whole thing looks completely different. It is not the superimperial power sucking its colony, it is a dying economy that sucks everything out of the colony to survive. It is not a bilateral relation. Multilateral relations were what mattered and intensified the tensions that led to the independence struggle. It shifted the whole framework undercutting the bilateral comparison by historicizing and problematizing Portugal, the whole problem looked completely different from what it did when seen through the metropolis-colony lens. To go back to your previous question: this is another basic conceptual opposite duality of the Social Sciences that the world-system perspective helps you to reframe and overcome. In this way, it is a wonderful perspective to look ahead into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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