Q1(b)

Explain the central tenets of the World-Systems Theory.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Approaches to the Study of International Relations

Approaches to the Study of International Relations: Idealist, Realist, Marxist, Functionalist and Systems theory.

Core demand of the question

- State Wallerstein's world-system as a capitalist world-economy
- Name core, semi-periphery and periphery and the mechanism of unequal exchange
- Contrast with modernisation theory and with a purely interstate realist map
- Note later debate and limits

Revision summary

Wallerstein's unit is the capitalist world-economy since the long sixteenth century, not the isolated nation-state.

Core, semi-periphery and periphery form a durable three-tier division of labour.

Unequal exchange and strong/weak states move surplus toward the core.

The theory rejects modernisation's national ladder and differs from Waltz's interstate anarchy as first cause.

Limits include economic determinism and underplaying state autonomy and culture; mobility exists but hierarchy persists.

Introduction

World-Systems Theory, associated above all with **Immanuel Wallerstein**, treats the modern world as a single **capitalist world-economy** that has existed since the long sixteenth century. States are units inside that economy. They are not a set of separate national developments that happen to trade. The central tenets are about hierarchy, surplus and time, not about a list of poor countries.

Body

The unit of analysis

Wallerstein rejected the idea that 'society' equals the nation-state. The meaningful whole is the **world-system**: a large zone with a single division of labour and multiple polities. The modern system is a **world-economy**, not a world-empire. No single political centre owns all surplus. Capitalists and states compete. That competition is what keeps the system capitalist rather than a universal empire.

Core zones concentrate high-skill production, strong states and capital. **Periphery** zones specialise in low-wage extraction and weak or captured states. **Semi-periphery** zones sit between, mixing both roles and stabilising the hierarchy so that polarisation does not immediately smash the system. Movement is possible - the Netherlands, Britain and the United States have been hegemonic cores in sequence - but the **three-tier structure** persists.

Mechanism

The mechanism is **unequal exchange** and a world division of labour, drawing on **dependency** writers and on **Fernand Braudel**'s long duration. Wages, technology and state strength differ systematically. Surplus flows toward the core. **Antonio Gramsci**'s hegemony, later used by **Robert Cox** for world order, sits nearby: the core's lead is not only guns. It is also consent around trade rules, money and culture. Wallerstein himself stressed cycles of hegemony and Kondratieff-type economic waves.

This is a direct attack on **modernisation theory**, which pictured each country climbing the same ladder from tradition to modernity. In world-systems thinking, the periphery is not late. It is **produced** as periphery by the same historical process that produced the core.

What it is not, and limits

It is not **Kenneth Waltz**'s neorealism. Waltz starts from anarchic states and relative military power. Wallerstein starts from a capitalist division of labour that states help to police. Great-power war still happens, but it is read as a fight over who organises the world-economy.

Limits are real. Critics say the theory is **too economic**, too deterministic about the periphery's fate, and weak on culture, gender and domestic politics that the interpretive approach studies. **Theda Skocpol** and others argued that states have more autonomy than a pure world-market story allows. China's rise, East Asian industrial policy and India's partial climb complicate a frozen core-periphery map, even if they do not abolish hierarchy. The tenets remain useful as a **structural picture of global inequality**, not as a prophecy that no country can change position.

Flow diagram

Wallerstein world-economy -> Core

Wallerstein world-economy -> Semi-periphery

Wallerstein world-economy -> Periphery

Core -> Unequal exchange

Periphery -> Unequal exchange

Unequal exchange -> Hegemonic cycles

Conclusion

World-Systems Theory says the modern world is one capitalist economy with core, semi-periphery and periphery, held by unequal exchange and hegemonic cycles. It explains global hierarchy better than a ladder of national modernisation. It does not replace every other theory of the state or of war.

Facts & figures

Wallerstein

The Modern World-System: capitalist world-economy with multiple states, not a single world-empire.

Three tiers

Core, semi-periphery and periphery describe production, wages and state strength in one division of labour.

Hegemonic cycles

Dutch, British and United States leadership are successive organisational centres of the same world-economy.