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Q8(c)

Critically examine the World-Systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein in terms of development and dependency of various nations

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Social Change in Modern Society

Social Change in Modern Society: Sociological theories of social change; Development and dependency; Agents of social change; Education and social change; Science, technology and social change.

Core demand of the question

- **State Wallerstein's world-systems theory:** capitalist **world-economy**, core, **semi-periphery**, periphery, long cycles
- Examine it in terms of development and dependency of nations
- **Give a critical assessment:** class and state within nations, culture, rise of new cores, comparison with Frank and with modernisation theory

Revision summary

Wallerstein takes the capitalist **world-economy**, not the nation, as the unit of analysis.

Core, **semi-periphery** and periphery are linked positions in one division of labour.

Development of the core has been historically tied to peripheral constraint.

The theory criticises Rostow-style national stages and is cousin to Frank's underdevelopment thesis.

Criticisms include thin treatment of internal class, culture and new industrial cores.

It remains a strong map of dependency, provided ranks are not treated as eternal.

Introduction

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory says that since the long sixteenth century a capitalist **world-economy** has been the relevant unit of analysis, not the isolated nation. Development and underdevelopment are positions in that system. Core, **semi-periphery** and periphery name those positions. A critical examination must state this map and then test it against how nations actually grow, stagnate and change rank.

Body

The main idea

Wallerstein, building on Fernand Braudel's long duration and on dependency writers such as Andre Gunder Frank, argued that a **world-economy** is bound by a single division of labour and multiple political states. There is no single world empire that commands the whole. The **core** specialises in high-skill, capital-intensive production and strong states. The **periphery** supplies cheap labour, raw materials and weaker states. The **semi-periphery** stands in between and stabilises the system, as a middle layer that can be both exploited and exploiting.

Unequal exchange, in the language of Arghiri Emmanuel and related debates, moves surplus toward the core. Hegemonic powers rise and fall in long cycles: the United Provinces, Britain, the United States. Development of one zone is historically linked to the constrained development of another. This is a theory of **dependency inside a system**, not of cultural backwardness.

Against W. W. Rostow's stages, a peripheral nation is not simply late. Its agriculture, mines and labour markets have already been organised for the core. Frank's development of underdevelopment is close, though Wallerstein is more historical-systemic and less a simple two-term metropolis-satellite pair.

Critical examination

The theory is strong in explaining colonial drain, plantation economies, and the limits of import-substitution when the world market still sets terms of trade. It is strong in refusing methodological nationalism: Indian or Brazilian growth cannot be read as a closed story. It helps explain why political independence did not automatically mean economic autonomy.

Limits are serious. The categories can become labels that hide class struggle inside India or Brazil. A. G. Frank and Wallerstein were criticised by Marxists who wanted more on national bourgeoisies, the state and modes of production, as in the work of Ernesto Laclau or Indian debates involving A. R. Desai and later writers. Culture, caste and gender are thin in the original world-systems volumes. The rise of East Asian industrial cores and of China challenges a frozen map of periphery. **Semi-periphery** can become a catch-all. Empirical measures of unequal exchange are disputed. The theory can underplay agency of labour movements and of South-South ties.

Still, as a critical tool for development and dependency, world-systems theory remains more adequate than a naive modernisation ladder. Nations develop in a hierarchy of the **world-economy**. They can change position, but not by pretending that the hierarchy is not there.

Development and dependency of nations, applied

A core nation can set financial rules, patent regimes and military umbrellas that shape what a peripheral nation may industrialise. A semi-peripheral nation may export cars and still import high-end chips and pay tribute in profit outflow. East Asian catch-up shows that position can change when a strong state, land reform and access to the US market combine. It does not show that every nation can repeat that path at once, because the system needs cheap zones. India's software exports and its large informal labour force can sit in the same country, which is why a single label is crude and still why a **world-economy** frame is useful. Dependency is a relation, not a national character. Wallerstein's value is to keep that relation in the answer.

Flow diagram

Capitalist world-economy -> Core
Capitalist world-economy -> Semi-periphery
Capitalist world-economy -> Periphery
Core -> Unequal exchange
Periphery -> Unequal exchange
Unequal exchange -> Dependency and constrained development

Conclusion

Wallerstein explains development and dependency as related positions in a capitalist **world-economy** of core, **semi-periphery** and periphery. The theory beats a closed national stages model. It is weaker on internal class, culture and recent shifts of the core. Used critically, it still names the global structure in which nations grow or stay dependent.

Facts & figures

World-economy

A large zone with a single division of labour and many states, as opposed to a world-empire with one political centre.

Semi-periphery

An intermediate zone that both exploits and is exploited, and that buffers polarisation of the system.

Hegemonic cycles

Wallerstein's historical pattern of successive core powers that organise the world-economy for a period.

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