

Knowledge Organiser – A Level World Sociology:

Theories and explanations

Modernisation theory of development

Modernisation theory argues developing countries are underdeveloped because their traditional values hold them back. Parsons (1964) was very critical of the traditional values of underdeveloped countries – he believed that least economically developed countries (LEDCs) were too attached to traditional customs, rituals, practices, and institutions, which Parsons argued were the ‘enemy of progress’. Modernisation theorists believed traditional societies needed western assistance to develop (Rostow’s five stages of economic growth).

Criticisms:

- There are no examples of countries that have followed a modernisation theory approach to development. No countries have completed Rostow’s five stages.
- Modernisation theory is ethnocentric – implying that traditional values in the developing world have little value compared to those of the West.
- Dependency theorists argue that development is not about helping the developing world but is a way of changing societies, so they are easier to exploit, making western companies and countries richer and opening them up to exploit cheap natural resources and labour.

World Systems Theory of development

World Systems Theory (WST) is a development of dependency theory. Wallerstein (1974) argued that we should not simply be analysing individual nation states as an explanation for inequality, rather, we should analyse the capitalist system. For Wallerstein, it’s not just Western nation states exploiting developing countries – it’s the capitalist system that exploits. Wallerstein’s argument is that our capitalist system is one that’s always on the search for profit and to get the most profit the system has created a process of exploitation. Wallerstein builds upon the dependency theory in that a modern world system exists and this is characterised by an economic division of labour which is located within three types of economic zones: core, semi-peripheral and peripheral nations.

Criticisms:

- Modernisation theory argues that aid and transnational corporations (TNCs) bring benefits to LEDCs. For example, the Four Asian Tigers are a success because of Japanese aid and TNC investment.
- Arguably, there are more causes of underdevelopment than just capitalism, such as cultural factors, corruption, and ethnic conflict.
- Wallerstein’s concepts of core, semi-periphery and periphery are vague, which means his theory is difficult to test and verify.

Dependency theory of development

Dependency theories reject the modernisation view, arguing that underdeveloped countries are not merely primitive versions of developed countries but have unique features and structures of their own and, importantly, are in the situation of being the weaker members in a world market economy. Frank (1970) argued that capitalism causes under-development, not development, which then leads to dependency on the capitalist system. Frank viewed global capitalism as the way in which class inequality between nations is perpetuated. He saw that the exploiting ruling class were the metropolis or core nations, and the exploited working class were the satellite or peripheral nations. Dependency theories propose that colonialism and neo-colonialism (continuing economic dependence on and exploitation of former colonial countries) are the main causes global poverty. Countries have developed at an uneven rate because wealthy countries have exploited poor countries in the past and continue to do so today through foreign debt and foreign trade.

Criticisms:

- Some countries appear to have benefited from colonialism – Goldthorpe (1975) pointed out that those countries that had been colonised at least have the benefits of good transport and communication networks, such as India, whereas many countries that were never colonised, such as Ethiopia, are much less developed.
- It can be argued that there are other internal factors in LEDCs that lead to underdevelopment, not just exploitation – corruption within governments (poor governance) can be blamed for the lack of development in many LEDCs.
- Modernisation theorists argue that many developing countries have benefitted from aid and that countries which have adopted capitalist models of development since World War Two have developed at a faster rate than those that pursued communism.