

Global Inequality



Which of these theories offers the most convincing explanation of global inequalities: modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory?

On the face of it, this question asks for a straightforward comparison of some competing theories in the sociology of development. A standard answer would therefore achieve a fairly average grade, so it is worth thinking through what is at stake in these theories and how you might go beyond a simple response.

At the outset it is useful to describe the scale of global inequalities to set the answer on a solid empirical foundation. Global inequalities are multidimensional and each dimension may have quite specific causes. Table 13.2 on page 533 sets out some dimensions on which you could structure this section using relevant data from across the chapter. It is important to create a clear picture of global inequalities and perhaps some idea of whether they are worsening or improving.

Following this section, the main theories of development start on page 548 and there are in fact four, which offers the opportunity to branch out from the question once you have established the three theories in question.

Modernization theory stands or falls by Rostow's model of the 'stages of growth' and his argument that cultural values were responsible for holding some countries back. There is a link from the modernization theory of the 1960s to the neoliberalism that has become the dominant economic view today and it is worthwhile looking for such lines of continuity in all of the theories to illustrate their persistence over time.

Dependency theory has an interesting lineage, originating in Latin America and Africa, locations at the wrong end of modernization theory, as it were. This gives the theory an oppositional feel that demonstrates the close relationship between real world activity and sociology. Dependency theory is often assumed to be Marxist due to its emphasis on exploitation within the structure of global capitalism. Yet Rostow's stages of growth model with its idea of a 'take-off' to growth carries strong echoes of Marx's material conception of history.

As global interconnectedness has grown, so has the currency of Wallerstein's **world-systems theory**, a perspective that sees not just a collection of independent countries engaged in diplomacy and trade, but a coherent world-system divided into a core and a periphery with semi-peripheral counties sandwiched in-between. The temptation to see this theory as 'proto-globalization' theory is very strong and could be briefly pursued (maybe with reference back to Chapter 4).



For a more ambitious and complete answer, it would be worthwhile focusing on the missing perspective – **state-centred theories** (pp. 554-5). These point to the positive role played by governments in the NICs of East Asia. Given the fact that their success bucks the trend of under-development, it would be interesting to examine their experience and to assess the extent to which they either confound the established theories of development or can be accommodated within them. Of course, the question does explicitly ask for your own assessment and you will have to reach a conclusion, even if this is somewhat tentative at this point in your studies.