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unequal development

At the most general level, the concept of 'unequal development' refers to processes of global economic development that result in the 'vertical division' or stratification of the world economy into differentially advantaged/disadvantaged sectors. It may also refer to analogous processes operating within national economies and producing significant interregional inequalities in economic and social development. However, a more precise and theoretical use of the concept is to be found in studies produced by MARXIST and NEO-MARXIST scholars working within the frameworks of DEPENDENCY, WORLD-SYSTEMS and UNEQUAL EXCHANGE THEORY, for whom global inequality is the product of systemic processes of EXPLOITATION of poorer countries by richer ones. Among these scholars, SAMIR AMIN is perhaps most closely associated with the term 'unequal development', since it is the central organizing concept of his analysis of the world economy.

Whereas the concept of 'UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT' suggests that nations, countries and regions develop at different paces or tempos under the impact of an indeterminate combination of 'endogenous' and 'exogenous' factors, the concept of 'unequal development' involves the proposition that asymmetric relations of power among the units of an increasingly integrated international capitalist order are the cause as well as the result of an entrenched structure of global economic inequality. Though theorists of unequal development differ as to the mechanisms that produce and reproduce this structured global inequality, they agree that transfers of economic surplus and/or 'value' across national lines are central to these processes. General agreement also exists that the 'expanded reproduction' of the

industrialized capitalist countries has depended historically and continues to depend on their capacity to restrict, distort and retard the economic growth potential of the non-industrialized colonial and semi-colonial world.

For ANDRE GUNDER FRANK, in an early formulation, the capitalist world economy is divided between developed 'metropolitan' and underdeveloped 'satellite' countries, the condition for the success of the former being the continuing exploitation of the latter – 'the DEVELOPMENT OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT'. The metropolitan-satellite relationship also obtains in relations between and within underdeveloped economies. For IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN and other world-systems theorists, the modern capitalist world system is conceptualized as a hierarchical totality embracing 'core', 'semi-peripheral' and 'peripheral' sectors (see CORE-PERIPHERY MODEL; SEMI-PERIPHERY).

Amin's account of unequal development proceeds from a critique and reformulation of the theory of unequal exchange originally proposed by ARGHIRI EMMANUEL. According to Amin (1976), unequal processes of capitalist development have produced 'central' and 'peripheral' forms of the capitalist MODE OF PRODUCTION. In peripheral countries, capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production co-exist, but non-capitalist modes are dominated by the capitalist mode. The peripheral form of the capitalist mode of production is characterized by modern technology making possible high productivity levels and by persistently low wages in the context of the international immobility of labour. These conditions allow for unequal exchange in world markets (the sale of commodities produced in the periphery at prices persistently below their actual value) and for the net transfer of large magnitudes of SURPLUS VALUE from peripheral to central

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capitalist countries. Once it is grasped that the accumulation of capital occurs on a world scale and on the basis of transfers of surplus value from peripheral to central capitalist formations, it is apparent that the global development of capitalism must occur 'unequally'.

Marxist theorists of unequal development generally conclude that the only way out of the cycle of dependency and exploitation in which peripheral countries are enmeshed is through socialist revolution (see SOCIALISM). Socialized means of production, a state monopoly on foreign trade and central planning in the allocation of economic resources are deemed to be the necessary conditions for the 'DELINKING' of such countries from the global circuits of capital which perpetuate global inequality. For some world-systems theorists, however, nationally isolated socialist revolutions in comparatively backward countries cannot produce conditions that are sufficient for an authentically socialist development. Rather, the attempt to build 'SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY' can only lead to 'deformed workers' states' or to 'state capitalism'. From this perspective, a satisfactory solution to the problem of unequal development can only be realized on the basis of a socialist world system.

See also:

disengagement; underdevelopment thesis; value theory

Reference and further reading

- Amin, S. (1976) *Unequal Development*, New York: Monthly Review Press. Most comprehensive statement of Amin's views on unequal development, unequal exchange and the dynamics of global accumulation.
- Arrighi, G. (1991) 'World income inequalities and the future of socialism', *New Left Review* 189: 39-65. Argues that the wealth of the West cannot be generalized because it is based on relational processes of exploitation and exclusion that presuppose the relative deprivation of the majority of the world's population.
- Frank, A. (1969) *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, New York: Monthly Review Press. Most influential text of the leading dependency theorist.
- Smith, M.E.G. (1994) *Invisible Leviathan: The Marxist Critique of Market Despotism beyond Postmodernism*, Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press. Defence of Marx's theories of labour-value and exploitation, with a chapter on international and inter-regional transfers of value.
- Wallerstein, I. (1974) *The Modern World System*, New York: Academic Press. Classic statement of the world-systems perspective on the hierarchical structure of the capitalist world economy.

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