Theories of Global Stratification: Crash Course Sociology #28

Crash Course: Sociology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=b350ljkYWrU
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/b350ljkYWrU

For much of human history, all of the societies on Earth were poor. Poverty was the norm for everyone. But obviously that's not the case anymore.

Just as you find stratification among socioeconomic classes within a society like in the United States, across the world you also see a pattern of global stratification with inequalities in wealth and power between societies.

So, what made some parts of the world develop faster, economically speaking, than others?

===== Introduction (0:28) =====

How you explain the differences in socioeconomic status among the world's societies depends, of course, on which paradigm you're using to view the world.

One of the two main explanations for global stratification is Modernization Theory and it comes from the structural-functionalist approach. This theory frames global stratification as a function of technological and cultural differences between nations.

And it specifically pinpoints two historical events that contributed to Western Europe developing at a faster rate than much of the rest of the world.

The first event is known as the Columbian Exchange. This refers to the spread of goods, technology, education, and diseases between the Americas and Europe after Columbus's so-called discovery of the Americas.

And if you want to learn more about that, we did a whole World History episode about it.

This exchange worked out pretty well for the European countries. They gained agricultural staples like potatoes and tomatoes which contributed to population growth and provided new opportunities for trade while also strengthening the power of the merchant class.

But the Columbian Exchange worked out much less well for Native Americans whose populations were ravaged by the diseases brought from Europe. It's estimated that in the 150 years following Columbus's first trip, over 80% of the Native American population died due to diseases such as smallpox and measles.

The second historical event is the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th century. We've mentioned this before and there's a couple World History episodes that you can check out for more detail, but this is when new technologies like steam power and mechanization allowed countries to replace human labor with machines and increase productivity.

The Industrial Revolution at first only benefited the wealthy in Western countries, but industrial technology was so productive that it gradually began to improve standards of living for everyone.

Countries that industrialized in the 18th and 19th century saw massive improvements in their standards of living. And countries that didn't industrialize lagged behind.

The thing to note here is that Modernization Theory rests on the idea that affluence could have happened to anyone, but, of course, it didn't. So why didn't the Industrial Revolution take hold everywhere?

Well, Modernization Theory argues that the tension between tradition and technological change is the biggest barrier to growth. A society that's more steeped in family systems and traditions may be less willing to adopt new technologies and the new social systems that often accompany them.

Why did Europe modernize? The answer goes back to (?~2:48) ideas about the Protestant work ethic. The Protestant reformation primed Europe to take on a progress-oriented way of life in which financial success was a sign of personal virtue, and individualism replaced communalism.

This is the perfect breeding ground for modernization. And, according to American economist Walt Rostow, modernization in the West took place as it always tends to: in four stages.

First, the Traditional Stage refers to societies that are structured around small, local communities with production typically getting in family settings. Because these societies have limited resources and technology, most of their time is spent laboring to produce food, which creates a strict social hierarchy.

Think: feudal Europe or early Chinese dynasties. Tradition rules how a society functions. What your parents do is what their parents did and what you'll do when you grow up too.

But as people begin to move beyond doing what's always been done, a society moves into Rostow's second stage: the Take-Off Stage.

Here, people begin to use their individual talents to produce things beyond the necessities, and this innovation creates new markets for trade.

In turn, greater individualism takes hold and social status is more closely linked with material wealth.

Next, nations begin what Rostow called the Drive to Technological Maturity, in which technological growth of the earlier periods begins to bear fruit, in the form of population growth, reductions of absolute poverty levels, and more diverse job opportunities.

Nations in this phase typically begin to push for social change along with economic change. Like implementing basic schooling for everyone and developing more democratic political systems.

The last stage is known as High Mass Consumption, when your country is big enough that production becomes more about wants than needs. Many of these countries put social support systems in place to ensure that all of their citizens have access to basic necessities.

So the TL;DR version of Modernization Theory is that if you invest capital in better technologies, they'll eventually raise production enough that there will be more wealth to go around and overall well-being will go up.

And rich countries can help other countries that are still growing by exporting their technologies in things like agriculture, machinery, and information technology as well as providing foreign aid.

But critics of Modernization Theory argue that, in many ways, it's just a new name for the idea that capitalism is the only way for a country to develop. These critics point out that, even as technology has improved throughout the world, a lot of countries have been left behind.

And they argue that Modernization Theory sweeps a lot of historical factors under the rug when it explains European and North American progress. Countries like the U.S. and the U.K. industrialized from a position of global strength during the period when there were no laws against slavery or concerns about natural

resource depletion.

And some critics also point out that Rostow's markers are inherently Eurocentric, putting an emphasis on economic progress. But that isn't necessarily the only standard to aspire to.

After all, economic progress often includes downsides like the environmental damage done by industrialization and the exploitation of cheap or free labor.

Finally, critics of Modernization Theory see it as blaming the victim. In this view, the theory essentially blames poor countries for not being willing to accept change, putting the fault on their cultural values and traditions rather than acknowledging that outside forces might be holding back those countries.

This is where the second theory of Global Stratification comes in. Rather than focusing on what poor countries are doing wrong, Depency Theory focuses on how poor countries have been wronged by richer nations.

This model stems from the paradigm of Conflict Theory and it argues that the prospects of both wealthy and poor countries are inextricably linked.

This theory argues that, in a world of finite resources, we can't understand why rich nations are rich without realizing that those richest came at the expense of another country being poor.

In this view, Global Stratification starts with colonialism and it's where we'll start today's Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (6:24) =====

Staring in the 1500's, European explorers spread throughout the Americas, Africa, and Asia, claiming lands for Europe. At one point, Great Britain's Empire covered about 1/4 of the world.

The United States, which began as colonies themselves, soon sprawled out through North America and took control of Haiti, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, the Hawaiian Islands, and parts of Panama and Cuba.

With colonialism came exploitation of natural and human resources. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade followed a triangular route between Africa, the American and Caribbean Colonies, and Europe.

Guns and factory-made goods were sent to Africa in exchange for slaves, who were sent to the colonies to produce goods like cotton and tobacco, which were then sent back to Europe.

As the slave trade died down in the mid-19th century, the point of colonialism came to be less about human resources and more about natural resources. But the colonial model kept going strong.

In 1870, only 10% of Africa was colonized. By 1940 only Ethiopia and Liberia were not colonized.

Under colonial regimes, European countries took control of land and raw materials to funnel wealth back to the west. Most colonies lasted until the 1960s and the last British colony, Hong Kong, was finally granted independence in 1997.

Thanks Thought Bubble!

===== NewSection (7:42) =====

This history of colonization is what inspired American sociologist, Immanuel Wallerstein's model of what he called the Capitalist World Economy.

Wallerstein described high-income nations as the core of the world economy. This core is the manufacturing base of the planet, where resources funnel to become the technology and wealth enjoyed by the Western world today.

Low-income countries, meanwhile, are what Wallerstein called the Periphery, whose natural resources and labor support the wealthier countries. First as colonies, and now by working for multinational corporations under neocolonialism.

Middle-income countries such as India or Brazil are considered the Semi-Periphery due to their closer ties to the global economic core.

In Wallerstein's model, the Periphery remains economically dependent on the core in a number of ways which tend to reinforce each other.

First, poor nations tend to have few resources to export to rich countries, but corporations can buy these raw materials cheaply and then process and sell them in richer nations. As a result, the profits tend to bypass the poor countries.

Poor countries are also more likely to lack industrial capacity, so they have to import expensive manufactured goods from richer nations.

And all of these unequal trade patterns lead to poor nations owing lots of money to richer nations, creating debt that makes it hard to invest in their own development.

So, under Dependency Theory, the problem isn't that there isn't enough global wealth; it's that we don't distribute it well.

But, just as Modernization Theory had it's critics, so does Dependency Theory. Critics argue that the world economy isn't a zero-sum game. One country getting richer doesn't mean other countries get poorer. And innovation and technological growth can spill over to other countries, improving all nations well-being, not just the rich.

Also, colonialism certainly left scars, but it isn't enough on its own to explain today's economic disparities. Some of the poorest countries in Africa like Ethiopia were never colonized and had very little contact with richer nations. Likewise, some former colonies like Singapore and Sri Lanka now have flourishing economies.

In direct contrast to what Dependency Theory predicts, most evidence suggest that nowadays, foreign investment by richer nations helps, not hurts, poorer countries.

Dependency Theory is also very narrowly focused. It points the finger at the capitalist market system as the sole cause of stratification, ignoring the role that things like culture and political regimes play in impoverishing countries.

There's also no solution to global poverty that comes out of Dependency Theory. Most Dependency Theorists just urge poorer nations to cease all contact with the rich nations or argue for a kind of global socialism.

But these ideas don't acknowledge the reality of the modern-world economy, making them not very useful for combating the very real, very pressing problem of global poverty.

The growth of the world economy and expansion of world trade has coincided with rising standards of living worldwide, with even the poorest nations almost tripling in the last century.

But, with increased trade between countries, trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement have become a major point of debate, pitting the benefits of free trade against the cost to jobs within a countries borders.

Questions of how to deal with global stratification are certainly far from settled, but I can leave you with some good news: it's getting better.

The (?~10:36) of people globally living on less than $1.25 per day has more than halved since 1981, going from 52% to 22% as of 2008.

Today we learned about two theories of Global Stratification. First, we discussed Modernization Theory and Walt Rostow's Four Stages of Modernization. We then talked about Dependency Theory, the legacy of colonialism, and Immanuel Wallerstein's capitalist world economy model.

===== Outro (11:32) =====

Crash Course Sociology is filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Studio in Missoula, Montana and is made with the help of all of these nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe and Crash Course is made with Adobe Creative Cloud.

If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone forever, you can support the series at Patreon; a crowd-funding platform that allows you to support the content you love.

Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all of our Patrons in general and would like to specifically thank our Headmaster of Learning, Ben Holden-Crowther.

Thank you so much for your support!