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Development, in the contemporary world, largely affects different populations across the globe. Development can be defined in many ways but it mostly concerns the political and economic changes that affect any given population. The changes are closely related to industrialization and different forms government. There are many different actors that can influence development such as the government (or state), foreign governments or organizations, and social movements.

Although there are many development theories, this essay will specifically focus on two: Modernization and Underdevelopment. The theories of Modernization and Underdevelopment hypothesize about the positive and negative influences of development on regions across the world. The theory of Underdevelopment has two sub-theories: Dependency theory and the World Systems theory. The foci of all three of these theories are the affects of development on, what are referred to as, “developing” countries or, in some cases, indigenous populations. The theories also attempt to explain why these countries and populations are “developing”. In addition to comparing and contrasting these two theories, this essay will also examine the anthropological approach to development and how it differs from the theories.

Modernization theory operates under the assumption that economic improvement in the world market and industrialization will lead to development. This theory maintains the idea that there are different stages of development. Development runs on a linear scale and those countries that are not developed are “backwards” and have not “progressed”. The Rostow piece defines five stages to development. Modernization theorists blame internal factors for the lack of “progress” in developing countries. In this theory, states play the biggest role in development. Other important factors include education and the spread of knowledge, as well as the expansion of new technologies. External help is encouraged in this theory and Modernization theorists often believe that the support of developed nations helps to integrate undeveloped nations into the world market.

There are two types of Underdevelopment theories that this essay will examine: Dependency theory and the World Systems theory. Both of these theories claim that, in the world, there is a core of wealthy nations and a periphery of poorer nations. Both theories state, in some manner, that the core exploits or has exploited the periphery. Dependency theory maintains this basic idea and stresses the fact that developing nations must separate themselves from the world market and wealthy nations. Dependency theorists claim that the periphery of countries is integrated in the world economy to be used by the core. The World Systems adds a semi-periphery category of nations to the world. The semi-periphery consists of nations that are neither poor nor wealthy, or exhibit characteristics of both. The Wallerstein piece describes how valuable resources are redistributed from the periphery and eventually to the core. The World Systems theory stresses that industrialization does not necessarily equate to development. It follows a neo-marxist belief that opposes the inequalities that exist in the world between rich and poor countries.

The major differences between these theories relate to the influence of external actors, specifically developed countries, and the view of development. Modernization theorists and Underdevelopment theorists disagree on what influence the external, developed countries, should have on developing countries. The former believes that richer countries should help undeveloped countries to integrate into the world market, while the latter believes that undeveloped countries should stay away from the world market and cut off ties with developed countries that take advantage of them. Another difference between the theories is how each views development. While the Modernization theory sees development in stages, Underdevelopment theory sees development as positional (based on a “status” in the world). They both stress the importance of economy in development. Both believe that internal infrastructure is necessary and that the state is a determining factor in development. However, neither of these theories addresses a social or cultural aspect to development.

The anthropological approach to development differs from the other two theories in a few fundamental ways. Research in anthropology is based on participant observation and is very culturally aware. The theorists that believe in modernization and underdevelopment do not factor culture as an aspect of the effects of development. Development is caused by political or economic change; however the anthropological approach understands that simple political or economic changes may have severe social and cultural repercussions. The anthropological approach involves intensive ethnographic investigation. Theorists who follow an anthropological approach understand that development is far more complex than how political scientists portray it. They know that progress is different for every culture. In many countries industrialization would destroy the framework of society and ruin valuable customs and traditions. Changing the environment through building dams, bridges, or modern houses can drastically affect societies in what are considered “developing” nations. What results in development for one nation may result in the destruction of social and cultural norms in another. To put it simply, the anthropological approach recognizes that similar events may affect cultures in different ways.

Development is an incredibly complex concept. Modernization theorists believe that states and economy are the most important aspects in development. They believe that developing countries must be integrated, by developed countries, into the world market for them to progress. Dependency and World Systems theorists believe that the developed countries exploit the developing countries and that the world market serves to help only the rich and not the poor. The problem with these theories is that they define progress very ethnocentrically. Progress is an incredibly relative term. For anthropologists, development and progress are concepts that are often defined without regard for ethnographic and cultural research. This is why the anthropological approach to development opposes making assumptions that can be highly unfavorable to society and culture.