

Basic assumptions of world-system theory

In world-system theory, the importance of economic interlinkages between social units, which might be for instance tribes, regions, states, for explaining internal processes leads to extending the frame of analysis beyond the social units to a larger social system, encompassing these relationships. This larger social system is called a "world-system". It is regarded to be "largely self-contained", being able to function even when cut off from external forces (Wallerstein 1974: 347).³ A world-system is conceptualized as consisting of three zones: core, periphery, and semiperiphery, which are hierarchically organized and characterized by unequal exchange and division of labor. The periphery and semiperiphery provide the core with raw materials, including agricultural products, perform skills on a low technological level and also serve as markets for some of the goods produced in the core. The core specializes on secondary production, and highly skilled labor. The position of a given social unit within the world-system becomes the key explanatory variable in Wallerstein's scheme. Thus processes within a social unit are to be explained in accordance with its function in relation to the unit of analysis, the world-system.

Wallerstein differentiates between pre-capitalist world-system, which he calls "world empires"⁴ and the modern world-system, which is traced back to the presumed rise of capitalism⁵ in the early 16th century (as Wallerstein tries to show in his encyclopedic historical study). World empires are, according to Wallerstein characterized by their overlap of a single political system and the economic system constituting the world empire. The modern world-system, also called world-economy, in contrast consists of a number of political systems (1974: 348). Conflicts and war are constant features of a world-system, varying in form and scope with the zones of the world-system. The core, for instance, is reknown for its expansionist drive, employing military means towards the achievement of economic goals.

World-system position and patterns of warfare

If world-system position is indeed the crucial variable in explaining internal phenomena of social units, it should be related to warfare patterns as well. This has been explored in a cross-cultural study by White and Moore (1988, see also White 1990, this volume). World-system position was measured for a sample of preindustrial societies

³ Wallerstein also acknowledges the existence of "mini-systems", i.e. very small social systems, which also fulfill the criteria of being self-sufficient (1974: 348).

⁴ China, Egypt, Rome are cited as examples of world-empires (Wallerstein 1979 quoted in Chirot and Hall 1982: 84).

⁵ Wallerstein does not distinguish between mercantile and industrial capitalism, like other authors do (e.g. Wolf 1982: 85).