# Cultural dependency theory

**Introduction:**

There are many reasons to examine the current situation of the world, where a lot of countries are underdeveloped or are developing, and a small portion of the world, which are the Western countries, are relatively rich and developed and rule over the under-developed and developing countries. In this essay, I discuss the Modernisation theory and the Cultural Dependency Theory, how they came into existence and what are their problems. Also, the contributions made by all the countries and trying to develop have not really helped them to a great extent. In this essay, I have also explained why this division is still present and the dependency of the Third World countries on the Western countries. At the end of the essay, I have given the pros and cons of both the theories.

**International Communication Theory:**

The Third world countries were highly inferred for development because of the cold war which divided the countries into Eastern countries and western countries. This lasted for more than 50 years. Most of the Third World Nations wanted to avoid the group of countries which had common interest in politics and they wanted to concentrate on getting their population out of the control of the other legal or political restrictions. Third world nations got their name during the cold war which is said to be given by Alfred Sauvy in 1952, who was the French Economic historian. The world was divided between the capitalist first world which was led by the United States, and the communist second world, which was headed by Moscow (Thussu, 2006). The Term Third world was given to the nations who were not included in above mentioned groups (Brandt Commission, 1981; South Commission, 1990) and

Asia, Latin America and Africa started a movement of National Liberation. This changed the entire political maps of the world (Thussu, 2006). By 1960, a lot of countries were free from the colonial powers and these new independent states got an opportunity to develop because of International Communication (Thussu, 2006).

The New International Economic Order (NIEO) was approved by the UN General Assembly and the UNCTAD, because, the Non-Aligned Movement started demanding fairness in the economy. NIEO had an independent and an egalitarian economic order which was grounded on the principles of equality and was government free which included that, ' all the members of the country had equal rights to participate in the development process' (Thussu, 2006 cit. Hamelink, 1979: 145). The NIEO provided a structure which helped to understand the international relations between the countries based on North-South division. At the same time, New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) also had to be taken into consideration in order to link it with the economic order. The Non-Aligned countries demanded changes in the global economic and informational systems.

Juan Somavia, 1976, observed that, ' The transnational Power structure supported the transnational communication system to develop. This is basically a tool for transmitting values and lifestyles to Third World Countries which provokes the consumption and society which is necessary to the transnational system as a whole.' (Somavia, 1976: 16-17)

There were a lot of times when the Third World or the developing countries took technical and financial help from the Western or the developed

countries as they wanted to use the communication technologies for development. One of the main areas where the developing countries took support from the developed ones was the satellite television. Television was considered to be one of the most powerful and influential medium. It could be used for a lot of purposes like bringing change in the attitudes of the traditional people, educational purposes and modernise societies.

**Cultural Dependency Theory:**

Cultural Dependency Theory was emerged in the late 1960's and 1970's in Latin America. It was a criticism of the modernisation theory. This theory was developed in Latin America under the supervision of Raul Prebisch who was the director of United Nations Economic Commission.

The main interest in research of Instituto Lationoamericano de Estudios (ILET) which was established in 1976 in Mexico City was to study the Transnational media business, which gave a force to criticise the modernisation theory.(Thussu, 2006)

It became necessary to analyse international communication. So dependency theorists directed towards getting a substitute theoretical account (Baran, 1957; Gunder Frank, 1969; Amin 1976). Transnational Communication (TNC's) which was dominated by the North, have control over the governments and over developing countries by setting their personal rules and regulations on global trade which includes dominating labour, market, production and resources. These countries were developing in such a way that the developed countries keep dominating over the

developing countries and maintained the need for the developing countries to be dependent on the developed countries (Thussu, 2006).

Due to the neo-colonial relationship in which the TNC's controlled the exchange and structure of global markets, the inequality in the south had become wider and deeper whereas the TNC's had strengthened their control over the world's natural and human resources (Baran, 1957; Mattlelart, 1979, Thussu, 2006). Dependency theorists tried to show the link between modernisation and policies of transnational media (Thussu, 2006).

Herbert Schiller's idea of cultural imperialism is the most clearly identified one (1969-92). Schiller analysed the links between the transnational business and the dominant states. (Thussu, 2006)

The main argument of Schiller was about how the US based transnational corporations weaken the cultural liberty of the developing countries and force them to be dependent on both hardware and software of communication and media.

The definition of cultural imperialism by Schiller was, *" the sum of the process by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to or even to promote, the values and structures of the dominant centre of the system" (Schiller, 1976: 9)*

Schiller argued that new emergent American empire was taking over the European colonial empires like, British, French and Dutch. This was based on

the economic, military and informational power. According to him, the US based TNC's are continuously growing and are starting to dominate the global economy. US business and military organisations have got a leading role in the development and control of a new, electronic based global communication system due to the support that economic growth has received from the communication knowledge (Thussu, 2006). USA had the most effective surveillance system as it controlled global satellite communications which was the crucial element in the cold war years (Thussu, 2006). Due to this the dependence on the US increased for communication Technology and investment (Schiller, 1969). All the western goods and services along with the American way of life were promoted when the media programs were imported from the USA which required sponsorship to run. This was a threat to the Southern traditional cultures (Schiller, 1969). He argued in his book, which was republished in 1992 that the domination over the world's communication of the US increased after the UNESCO failed and the cold war got over. The domination of US over the economy had started decreasing as the TNC's started acquiring important role in international relations changing the cultural imperialism of US into ' Transnational corporate cultural domination' (Schiller, 1992: 39)

The other works which show the dominance of the US using ' cultural imperialism' is clearly seen in the Hollywood's relationship with the European movie market (Guback, 1996); US exports television shows to Latin America and influences it greatly (Wells, 1972); Disney comic also have contributed in promoting capitalist values (Dorfan and Mattelart, 1975) and advertising

industry has played a role of an ideological instrument (Ewen, 1976;

Mattelart, 1991) (cited in Thussu, 2006: 48-49).

Oliver Boyd-Barrett noticed one of the most prominent aspects of

dependency in international communication in the 1970's as ' media

imperialism'. This examines the information and media inequalities between

the nations. It analyses the domination of the US over the international

media (Boyd-Barrett, 1977).

**Modernisation Theory:**
The concept of modernity has become a very general statement. It

represents the experience of the western culture on the others. All the global

cultures are disapproved to modernity and the concept of cultural

imperialism critically evaluates the conclusions in the critique of modernity

(Tomlinson, 1991). A philosophical notion in the years after the war was that

international communication is an important part in order to modernise and

develop the Third world nations. The notion was that international

communication can be used to spread modernity among the newly

independent countries and that it will help to transform the traditional

societies of the developing countries. It was also used to transfer the

hypothetical description of economic and political entity of the developed

countries.

Modernisation theory is an attempt to provide a support for the development

policies which was created by the western countries. These development

policies were supported towards the Third world countries which were still

getting out of the rule of the stronger countries and were getting

independent. This theory is just an attempt to explain the economic under-development of the Third world nations by focusing on the development which can be done with a process which is determined by the society's internal features.

**Vincent Mosco points out:**

*' The Modernisation Theory was meant to reconstruct the international division of labour amalgamating the non-Western world into the emerging international structural hierarchy'* (1996: 121).

Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel and Tonnies and others came up with their own theories keeping in mind the dramatic changes in the European societies due to the modern world. There was an agreement between the theorists which was based on the political spectrum and all of them thought that the world had more than one possible meaning in the capacity to deliver fulfilment and happiness. Modernity was associated with enlightenment and was suppose to free the people from the control of another person or any legal or political restrictions. But modernity failed to deliver complete freedom.

Modernisation includes economic scientific and technical development that is very closely related to the capitalist market. But Berman's, in his book ' All that is solid melts into air' talks about the notion of self development. The main aim of his book is to explain that cultural condition of modernity stood still and lapsed during the twentieth century. He also aims to fix the serious problem which was closely linked to the possibilities of dangers along with

the enthusiasts and enemies of the modern life which was found during the nineteenth century. (Berman, 1983)

According to the Frankfurt School theorists the main issue of modernity was the injustices by the capitalist system or social intolerance by a bigot or of the ideology of possessive individualism (Tomlinson, 1991). Horkheimer and Adorno critiqued the modernisation theory by comparing it with the so called rational institutions. The main task of modernisation theory is to set people free, but the history and past politics show that this theory failed to do their task effectively (Tomlinson, 1991).

According the Berman, people living in the twentieth century do not know how to live a modern life and missed of broken the connection between the culture and lives. He describes modernisation as a set of historical processes due to which the experience of modernity evolves. He claims that modernity is one of the most difficult, anxious and uncertain place to live, but ultimately it is the world where people live and people can master the cultures of the place where they live. At one point of time, he mentions about the Third World nations and discusses that the governments of those countries are trying to protect their people from modernisation which is being imposed by the West. He says that if the culture which is being imposed by the west is really not used by the Third World nations then will they consume so much energy? The governments of the Third world nations call the West as aliens. But they do not understand the fact that they are their own people's energies, desires and critical spirit. When these governments say that they do not want the Western Countries to impose any kind of cultures in their nations, they are trying to say that, they have managed to keep the political

and spiritual influence on the people. Also they do not realise that once the people become more aware of things going around them, modernist spirit will be one of the first things to be adapted by the people.

The governments of the Third World Nations are fighting against each other in order to keep their tradition alive among the people, which had no result at the end. He also says that Third world governments think that they are being enforced upon by the western countries by accumulating a lot of capital or are being forced to break into parts.

He suggests that people have to adapt to a place in which nothing can be taken for granted. Media is just one form of medium which helps to spread the experience of modernity.

But according to another theorist, Peter Berger, 1974, modernisation is not a one way journey which rectifies human self understanding. He explains this concept with the help of a story of a visitor who visited the villages of Tanzania. People living in these villages belonged to different Tribes but are now living very co-operatively. This was one of the communities which were transferring from tradition to modernity. The visitor asked someone; whether they still practice their personal tribal dances. The answer was, yes, and it is done once or twice a year on any special occasion. He also added that this is done so that it becomes easy for the people to understand one another better. (Berger, 1974). It is clearly seen that there is a process of political-economic which is enforced upon the Third world nations as they are very closely connected with their traditions and colonialism which has become a history for the Western nations and still are in a position to dominate over

the Third world nations (Tomlinson, 1991). Castoriadis, 1985, mentions that the West will continue to conquer the world even if it was going to be destroyed materially (Castoriadis, 1985).

' So when Berman says that the Third World cultures need to be modernised, he means not just in terms of ' objective structures' of the capitalist markets, urbanism, but also in terms of a narrative with a clear beginning keeping in mind the cultures of the west. His view of modernity means that it is full of forces like the ' dynamic and development forces' which means that the Western cultures are being imposed on the Third world nations in order to modernise and develop their countries. But Castoriadis has a different opinion. He accepts individuals have their own priorities and have their personal institutional forces towards modernity. The kind of institutions we develop in order to become powerful does not come from external forces of humanity but it comes from within through the social imaginary' (Tomlinson, 1991).

Habermas's view on modernity is completely different from that of Berman's. Habermas thinks that modernity is a way of making someone poor culturally, whereas Berman thinks that there are forces which drive people towards modernity (Tomlinson, 1991).

**Cultural Dependency Theory v/s Modernisation Theory:**
The gap between the ruling and the working class increased which combined with regular recession to create dissatisfaction among the working class (McPhail, 2009). In order to fight for their rights, working class started forming groups such as unions (McPhail, 2009).

Stevenson criticised this theory by using the dependency literature which was ' notable for an absence of clear definitions of fundamental terms like imperialism and an almost total lack of empirical evidence to support the arguments' (Stevenson, 1988: 38). A lot of other theorists argued that it did not consider the media form and the role played by the audience (Thussu, 2006). ' Those involved in a cultural studies approach to the analysis of international communication argued that, like other cultural artefacts, media ' texts' could be polysemic and were amenable to different interpretations by audiences who were not merely passive consumers, but ' active' participants in the process of negotiating meaning' (Fiske, 1987, cited in Thussu, 2006: 49). It was also noticed by the theorists that cultural imperialism thesis did not consider issues as ' how global media texts worked in national contexts, ignoring local patterns of media consumption' (Thussu, 2006: 49).

Cultural Dependency theory also failed to explain the effects of the cultural products distributed by the US around the world. Also, cultural imperialism failed to give attention to the complexities of the Third World cultures and assumed a ' hypodermic-needle model' (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991, 1997). It was also argued that western scholars did not have deep knowledge about the Third world cultures. They had extremely limited knowledge and not being aware of diversities such as race, gender, class, religion and ethnicity. Very few systematic studies have been conducted by the southern scholars on cultural and ideological effects on western media on the audiences of the south (Thussu, 2006). One of the major issues of this theory was that it did not consider the role of the national elites, especially elites living in the developing countries (Thussu, 2006).

Modernisation Theory had promised to deliver the social and economic change which failed miserably (McPhail, 2009). Therefore, three other theories were developed which looked at the development communication which were totally different and directed in a different way, which were, Cultural imperialism, Participatory communication and Entertainment-Education Theory (McPhail, 2009).

Social and cultural theory does not agree with the core of modernity. Also this theory was criticised to a great degree because of its ideological basis, lack of clarity and it is a subject which is ignorant to many and it fails to exercise good judgement. This theory ignores the external determinants of underdevelopment like the exploitation of the Third world countries when they were being ruled by the Western countries. This theory ignores these factors and assumes that the Third World nations are progressing independently and are becoming modern on their own. In order for the Third world nations to progress they needed help from the Western countries as there was a lot of poverty, inadequate resources, lack of social provisions and political instability in the Third world nations.

Modernisation Theory ignores all the disapprovals and expression whose meaning cannot be determined from its context which was addressed by the classical theorists (Tomlinson, 1991). In this theory, the traditional cultures, media habits, language, religion of the developing countries were not included, and were totally ridiculed and ignored (McPhail, 2009).

One of the clear criticisms on this theory is that the American policy was to commit to free flow the information to the world and all the nations fell into

the trap and gave immense support to this statement which was assumed to be true (McPhail, 2009). Scholars from the developing countries argued that the developing countries were not the beneficiaries of this theory, which was meant for them, but the western countries who created it were only getting benefitted out of this theory as it helped the companies to grow and establish in the Third world and could find their new consumers of their products (Thussu, 2009). A lot of people in the Third World remained poor and under developed, even after adapting themselves to modernisation theory and by the mid 70's, they started talking about the ' passing of the dominant paradigm' (Rogers, 1976: 3). Slowly, when the US realised that the Southern nations are looking at them with suspicion, they stopped their free flow of information and became the one at the receiving end which at the end became a one way flow of information (McPhail, 2009). This matter was going to be brought up in the debate of the UNESCO in the late 1970's and early 1980's, but the US president, Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher withdrew from UNESCO in order to protest against NWICO. Different opinions resulted in creating two streams, one of which was the outline of cultural imperialism by Herbert Schiller and the NWICO debate and fallout. This resulted in making a particular culture homogenous, that is the American popular culture, which is been mass produced (McPhail, 2009).

Due to these reasons, the theorists of modernisation theory realised that this theory needs to be redeveloped (Thussu, 2006). The revised modernisation theory gives greater notice to the local elites (Thussu, 2006). But even in the revised version, western technology remains important. According to Thussu, 2006, Modernisation requires ' advanced telecommunication and computer

infrastructure, preferably through the efficient private corporations, thus integrating the South into a globalized information economy' (Thussu, 2006: 46)

Despite of all the criticism done on dependency theory, cultural imperialism thesis have been extremely influential in international communication (Tomlinson, 1991; Thompson, 1995). This particular thesis was extremely important and needed during the heated argument during the NWICO debates in UNESCO and other international fora in the 1970's (Thussu, 2006). While criticising this thesis, John Thompson, 1995, concluded that this research is ' probably the only systematic and moderately plausible attempt, to think about the globalisation of communication and its impact on the modern world' (Thompson, 1995: 173). Theorists, who defend this theory, argued that the critics of this theory often take the notion which is totally not in reference to the theory and it is completely abstract (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1998).

There were a lot of changes in the debate of international communication which reflected the language of privatisation and liberalisation in the 1990's, media and cultural dependency theories became less eminent but their relevance was very visible all around (Golding and Harris, 1997; Thussu, 1998; Hackett and Zhao, 2005 and Hamm and Smandych, 2005 cited in Thussu, 2006: 50)

Boyd-Barrett rightly argues that media imperialism has not included variables, such as gender, media relations and ethnic issues, so it is still a

very useful theory to understand of what he terms the ' colonisation of

communication space' (Boyd-Barrett. 1998: 157).

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