

# WORLD SYSTEM MOBILITY: THE RELEVANCE OF THE SEMIPERIPHERY CONCEPT FOR DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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“Ultimately, development processes are struggles over domination.”

Max Weber

## Introduction

After a long period of neglect caused by the 1980s crisis and the liberal catharsis of the 1990s, developmentalism is once more relevant topic in Brazilian economic literature. During the most acute period of the liberal consensus, the work of non-orthodox economists was largely dedicated to highlighting the theoretical inconsistencies of the neoclassical school, and to search at the same time, for a more comprehensive debate with society about the consequences of the adoption of the policies recommended by the Washington Consensus (Williamson 1990).

In this new moment of revitalization of developmental thinking, the challenge proposed to rebuild a new project for the country has been made from a critique of certain concepts and policies inherent in developmental thinking and project in force for approximately half a century in the country - from the coffee burning of Vargas to the debt crisis of the 1980s. This criticism regarding *old developmentalism* is leading to the emergence of new analysis that seek to modify certain aspects of the first in order to allow the

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built of the so-called new-developmentalism.

A underexplored feature of this debate relates to the impacts that this new project of national development would have in the international scenario. Although many authors are aware of the needs and obstacles imposed by the external sector - hence the overcoming of external bottlenecks is one of the main points of the debate -, the geopolitical issues related to a strongly hierarchical interstate system are not held into account by most of the analyzes.

The existence of a “world beyond the sea” is constantly ignored by the new developmental analyzes, which, when analyzed, are largely limited to the impacts of the value of the national currency on the exports level and the country’s ability to import. These new studies are compatible with a methodological nationalism in which “the nation is referred to [...] as a self-sufficient unit and inserted in an undifferentiated international environment”. (Medeiros 2010, 638).

The consequences imposed by the existence of a strongly hierarchical interstate system are usually ignored and taken as exogenous variables, leaving the following question unanswered: “how is it possible to change an unfavorable power correlation between nations, based on a situation in which the States already appear historically hierarchical [...] and compete within the same global capitalist economy?”. (Fiori 1999, 53-54).

Mobility in this system is not carried out only considering the best use of the factors of production, the application of a coherent macroeconomic model or the adoption of models from institutions imported from other countries. It is necessary to consider that the conflicting interactions between Nation States in the world system, even when we consider only the economic point of view, are not resolved through competitive markets and/or negotiations in international institutions such as the WTO or the IMF<sup>2</sup>.

The aim of this article is to offer a contribution to address this analytical gap, considering the relevant of the semiphery concept for the study of economic development. The article will be divided into three parts in addition to this introduction.

In the first part, some concepts of the World-System Approach will be analyzed. It will be seen how the process of capitalism’s expansion through the interstate system will incorporate areas that were formally on its margins. Also, it will be studied how this system reproduces itself in a space-time framework through economic and political mechanisms that keep countries

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2 “[The] small core of the great powers maintains its centrality ... and it is still their decisions and conflicts that determine the dynamics of the system, including the “windows of opportunity” open to the states located on its periphery. (Fiori 2004, 41)

locked into an international division of labor and in an extremely hierarchical interstate system.

In the second part, a more in-depth examination on the semiperiphery question will be made. Here, the analysis of economic mechanisms - the role of global value chains, the economic activities inherent in the center and the periphery, the unequal distribution of the surplus - and political mechanisms - occupation of the territory, military capabilities and regional influence - allows to understand the existence of countries in an intermediate situation: the semiperipheral countries.

In the third part, new contributions to the concept of semiperiphery in the interstate system of the XXI century will be analyzed: the empirical attempts to define the semiperiphery, its role in the reproduction of capitalism at the global level and the mobility in the hierarchy of the world system.

## Notes on the Modern World System

The concept of semiperiphery was used to explain the dynamics and reproduction of what Wallerstein calls the Modern World System, whose genesis took place from a capitalist world-economy that emerged in Europe in the XVI century. Braudel (1996, 12) understands the world-economy as “a fragment in the universe, a piece of the planet that is economically autonomous, capable of, in essence, sufficing itself and to which its connections and exchanges confer a certain organic unity”. In a slightly more rigorous definition, we could say that a world economy can be defined as a geographically delimited area where productive processes interconnected by chains of goods operate in order to create an interdependent and hierarchical economic space.

Its economic uniqueness is guaranteed by a division of labor, an articulating axis between central and peripheral economic processes, and its integration occurs through the market, the main space, but not the only one, where unequal exchanges take place. In striking contrast, its political space is fragmented into sovereign political units, with varying degrees of autonomy over its jurisdictions, which form the interstate system (Wallerstein 2004).

The demands for expansion of this world-economy derive directly from its capitalist mode of production. There is an expansive compulsion in capitalism that compels the world economy to expand its borders. It is a complex process, which requires time and resources, which seeks to make the new territories compatible with the process of capital accumulation and, therefore, with the world system.

On the economic side, the new zones will have to be part of the international division of labor, its territories will have to be crossed by one or more chains of goods. These changes in the sphere of production are usually quite traumatic: “normally involved upsetting or adapting land tenure arrangements, relocating labor forces, changing the relations of production, altering balances of social power”. (Hopkins & Wallerstein 1987, 776).

For this absorption to be complete, new organizational and institutional structures must be built or derived from the pre-existing ones. These political structures will accommodate the region to the processes and institutions of the interstate system. Structures that should be neither too strong nor too weak. To the extent that if they were too strong they could obstruct the flow of goods, capital and labor. But if they were too weak, they might not prevent others, particularly from within the same jurisdiction, from obstructing. (Hopkins & Wallerstein 1987, 778).

These incorporation processes are fundamental for the accumulation of capital. Hopkins and Wallerstein (1987) believe that the resistance of these regions outside the world economy strongly influences the incorporation processes. The more strongly structured the political systems of these regions were, the greater the military capacity they would have to withstand pressure. These zones would end up being incorporated into the world economy not as a periphery, but with a higher status, as a semi-periphery.

From the moment this incorporation process was completed, these new zones would become part of a capitalist world-economy strongly hierarchized and polarized, in a trimodal model: organic core (center), periphery and semiperiphery. This polarization of the capitalist world-economy is not only derived from its own functioning, but mainly, essential for its reproduction.

The polarizing reproduction of the world-economy comes from the division of labor, which is responsible for the uneven distribution of gains made in the various economic activities. The concept of division of labor is used here to designate processes that are constitutive, continuously reproduced and that end up constantly changing the structural relations of production (Hopkins 1982).

These processes are integrated into global value chains. The most profitable economic activities are found predominantly in the organic core while the least profitable economic activities are carried out largely on the periphery. It is not simply a matter of encompassing the entire production chain of a more profitable final product. The important thing is to analyze which of the activities of a chain of a certain commodity give more return. It is for this portion that the dispute responsible for the polarization of the world-economy takes place.

As a large part of the value chains cross more than one State, what will differentiate them with regard to the extraction of economic surplus is their position relative to the most profitable nodes in these chains. Organic core states are characterized by being composed mostly of the most profitable activities, while peripheral states are mainly composed of low-profit activities.

It is appropriate at this point to emphasize that it is not exclusively an economic phenomenon. The political sphere is also important. Countries in the organic core, whose state apparatus is stronger than their peripheral peers, use the widest range of policies that influence the attraction of these more profitable activities.

Thus, this permanent tension in the world system between an economy of global scale and an historically unprecedented number of sovereign state jurisdictions, or, to put it another way, between the articulation of processes of division and integration of global scale of work with processes of sovereign jurisdictions formation in the world system, are responsible for the trend of convergence between the centrality of the economic network and the centrality of the political network. That is, *strong states develop strong economies; weak states result in peripheral areas, peripheral economic processes* (Hopkins 1982).

But tension is not exclusive to the core-periphery dichotomy, it is also present between states that make up the same stratum. It arises from the contradiction between the trend of geographic centralization of the most profitable nodules in the value chains and the growing competition between the countries of the organic core to shelter them. The friction arising from this spatial inequality in the centers of capital accumulation accounts for much of the fierce competition that the modern world system is experiencing today.

The mechanisms for reproducing the polarization of the world system originate from this unequal division of labor. The most accepted approach within the world-system literature regarding this issue points out to the mobility of goods and their production chains, carried out through unequal exchange. For Wallerstein (2004), profitability would be directly related to the degree of monopolization of economic activity. Given that monopolies need strong states, it is in the core countries where they find a more fertile economic environment to reproduce.

This polarization of the world-economy is a dynamic and relational phenomenon. Relational because the benefits of an economic activity depend on its position along the value chain. The origin of its highest profit is the coercive appropriation of the peripheral surplus. It is about understanding the term 'peripheral' in a sense that is different from marginal and expendable. Without peripheries there is no organic core and without both there is no capitalist development (Hopkins 1982). Both concepts can only be fully

understood if related. That is why Arrighi (1998, 217) believes that the wealth of the states of the organic core “cannot be generalized because it is based on relational processes of exploitation and relational processes of exclusion that presuppose the continuous reproduction of poverty of the majority of the world population” .

The intrinsic dynamism of polarization is due to the fact that no activity is inherently part of the organic core or the periphery, on the contrary, its nature varies historically. A division between industrialized products as belonging to central economic activities and primary products as coming from peripheral economic activities, would not be compatible with the economic reality in force in contemporary economy.

So far our focus on the polarization of the contemporary world system has been strictly on its most extreme cases, for simple analytical reasons. Following, the concept of semiperiphery can be more clearly analyzed regarding its origin, conceptualization, empirical verification and relevance to economic development studies.

## The Semiperiphery

Latin American structuralism, whereas analyzing national development projects, sought to identify the specific situation of the economies of the region and their position vis-à-vis the most advanced economies. This relationship was portrayed in the concept of center-periphery, presented by Prebisch (1949). In this way, the development of the center started to link directly with the underdevelopment of the periphery. Economies that had better relations with central economies, based these interactions on trade, due to the difference in income-elasticity of industrialized products in the center and in primary products in the periphery.

The appropriation of this hierarchical view of the world capitalist system was carried out selectively by the World-System Approach. It is not enough to simply start producing industrialized products, considered as central, at the expense of primary, peripheral products, for the country to become developed. It is, as we have seen, a dynamic relationship. On the other hand, the rigidity of the center-periphery dichotomy did not include certain countries that did not seem to fit very well at their extremes, in addition to preventing understanding how some countries managed to rise within this hierarchy.

We could define the semiperiphery as an intermediate region in the international division of labor, which is composed of a balanced composition

between central and peripheral economic processes. Their economies are pierced by nodes in the value chains that vary between belonging to the organic core and others that have peripheral characteristics.

This hybrid composition allows them to resist complete *peripheralization*, but it is insufficient for them to completely overcome it, preventing them from joining the organic core. They allow them to obtain a greater share of the surplus than the peripheral countries, thus being able to act, in part, as peripheral zones for the center and as central zones for peripheral areas (Wallerstein 1976).

However, it should be noted that the semiperipheral regions also have political characteristics that can be seen as intermediaries between the two extremes. Their state apparatus is essential if they are to avoid the periphery of their countries, but in most cases it is not strong enough to convert the country into an organic core.

This semiperipheral countries very different configuration ends up making it difficult to empirically verify the concept. Several authors sought to develop methodologies that would be able to visualize a world system divided into three layers.

In a classic study, Arrighi and Drangel (1998) made an effort in this direction. Through a sample of several countries, whose variable used was GNP per capita, they sought to quantify the appropriation of world income made by each country, which would reflect their ability to extract resources from the world economy. This would represent an indirect way of assessing how the country is in charge of important nodes in the value chains.

Babones (2005), using a more comprehensive database and a new methodology, updated the Arrighi and Drangel results for the period between 1975-2002. His research proves the existence of a world system divided into three main zones, in which the vast majority of countries maintained their position unchanged throughout the period<sup>3</sup>, whose exceptions will be analyzed later.

Karatasli et all. (2017) elaborated a research whose objective is to analyze the hierarchy of the world system since its beginning. For the authors, in its *long durée*, the world system experienced different income stratifications.

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3 **Core:** Germany, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Spain, United States, Finland, France, Greece, Netherlands, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom, Singapore, Sweden and Switzerland. **Semiperiphery:** South Africa, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Jamaica, Malaysia, Mexico, Panama, Tunisia, Turkey and Uruguay. **Periphery:** Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, China, Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Philippines, Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Togo and Zambia (Babones 2005, 51- table 2).

From an unimodal distribution between the XVI century and the beginning of the XIX century, changing to a bimodal form that lasted until the middle of the XIX century. The XX century has already started with a distribution based on the trimodal model.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be presenting a new form of hierarchy in the world system that would be divided into four groups of countries in a quadrimodal format. This new hierarchy would be formed by the center, semiperiphery, high periphery and low periphery. (Karatasli, 2017). Grell-Brisk (2017) credits this dissolution of the trimodal model at the beginning of this 21<sup>st</sup> century to the economic rise of China and, to a lesser extent, India.

The use of GNP per capita as an analytical variable is quite debatable. It is not able to measure the capacity to control, acquire and project wealth and power through the world system. With regard to the appropriation of benefits from value chains and, therefore, resources of the world economy, using a per capita variable can be misleading. Such an analysis of the contemporary economy would not reflect the economic weight of China and India.

Another criticism can be made of the choice of Arrighi & Drangel (1998, 144), Babones (2005), Karatasli (2017) and Grell-Brisk (2017) for taking into account only the economic aspects that the concept of semiperiphery covers. This exclusion from the political sphere makes the analysis to some extent functionalist, since it is through the political-military power that the countries of the organic core manage to distort a large part of the economic processes in their favor. This theoretical weakness was avoided by Terlouw (1993).

His work seeks a better balance between the political and economic dimensions of the positioning of countries in the world system. This occurs through the creation of an index, whose composition has three economic indicators: GDP per capita as a percentage of world GDP per capita, percentage of world trade, and stability of trade relations. Also included in the index are three political indicators: number of ambassadors sent and received, number of diplomats sent and received and military strength (size of the army and military expenditures) (Terlouw 1993).

The author criticizes the way in which some studies see the semiperiphery as a distinct group of countries clearly delimited between center and periphery. Unlike countries belonging to the organic core and those on the periphery, the identification of the countries that make up the semiperiphery is always very problematic due to the inherent heterogeneity in the political and economic structures of such countries.



You can find countries whose economy is strong enough as an organic core economy, but which do not have the same political power. In the same way, conversely, a country may have political-military power equivalent to the countries of the organic core, having a semiperipheral economy. This diversity can be seen in the table below, prepared by Honda (2006, 10, figure 1):

Feasible Configurations	Capability Distribution	Archetypes
Central States with Peripheral Economies	High Power; Low Wealth	Russia (1960 onwards)
Central States with Semiperipheral Economies	High Power; Average Wealth	China (1970 onwards)
Semi-Central States with Peripheral Economies	Moderate Power; Low Wealth	India (1990 onwards)
Semi-Central States with Semiperipheral Economies	Moderating power; Average Wealth	Denmark (1980 onwards)
Semiperipheral States with Semi-Central Economies	Average Power; Moderate wealth	Sweden (1990 onwards)
Semiperipheral States with Central Economies	Average Power; High Wealth	Canada (1980 onwards)
Peripheral States with Semiperipheral Economies	Low Power; Moderate wealth	Taiwan (1970 onwards)
Peripheral States with Central Economies	Low Power; High Wealth	Japan (1960 onwards)

It is more beneficial to view this stratum of the world economy not as a group of distinct countries, but as a continuum between the organic core and the periphery (Hall; Chase-Dunn 2006)<sup>4</sup>. This eliminates unnecessary controversies about classifications, as it facilitates the understanding of the role of semiperiphery in the reproduction of the world system.

## Development and Mobility in the World System

To what extent does economic development mean the rise in the hierarchy of the interstate system? Is it possible that certain countries can achieve higher levels of income and well-being in general, while remaining classified in the same hierarchical positions of the world-system?

<sup>4</sup> “The exact boundaries between the core, semiperiphery and periphery are unimportant because the main point is that there is a continuum of economic and political/military power that constitutes the core–periphery hierarchy. It does not matter exactly where we draw lines across this continuum in order to categorize countries”. (Chase-Dunn; Lawrence 2010, 474).

Seen as a hierarchical rise, development is a possibility that cannot be spread to all countries. For Pasciuti and Paine (2017), despite the improvement in income of many countries during the XX century, the hierarchy remains stable in the world system. In other words, even if several countries in the periphery and semiperiphery are in a favorable situation, they have not been able to reduce the distance to the countries at the center of the system. For the authors, it is a failure of development that is associated with what Arrighi (1998) called the “development illusion”.

If the rise to the center is a rare event, mobility in the other strata is more common. Karatasli (2017) sees that, beyond China and India, other countries have also risen in recent years. For example, Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco and Thailand would have risen to semiperipheral status.

Thus, the rise to the center is an empty promise, at least as far as the whole of the countries belonging to the lower strata is concerned, because if this system feeds on inequality, it cannot disappear. As we saw earlier, the organic core exists only to the extent that the periphery and semiperiphery exist<sup>5</sup>. Upward mobility is therefore for few, and these few are found in the middle region of the system.

The intermediate place of the semiperiphery in the hierarchy of the world system is the target of two analyzes that follow different directions. On the one hand, for Wallerstein, the semiperipheral countries have a legitimating role in the system, fulfilling a depolarizing function, in order to prevent unavoidable tensions from occurring in the case of a direct relationship between the two extremes.

The most exploited countries on the periphery are unable to rebel because the most powerful of them, the semiperipherals, profit from their exploitation. The possibility of ascension, which opens up exceptionally for a few individual states, contributes to the political stability of the system. (Wallerstein 2004; Terlouw 1993).

Semiperiphery is then understood to be pro-systemic. This would have been the role of the socialist countries<sup>6</sup>. As important as their role in the world economy was the political role that these nations played.

By preventing the unified opposition of all non-core areas against the upper

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5 “The periphery is not “catching up” with the core. Rather, both core and peripheral regions are developing, but most core states are staying well ahead of most peripheral states”. (Hall; Chase-Dunn 2006, 35).

6 “[T]he socialist states had contributed to depolarizing the capitalist system and had therefore consolidated – not undermined it – as the Cold War ideology implied”. (Boatcă 2006, 322).

stratum, the emergence of socialist countries as middle stratum [...] had filled the required intermediate slot by which semiperipheral states [...] had ensured the survival of the modern world system. (Boatcă 2006).

On the other hand, for Chase-Dunn (1990, 6) “semiperipheral locations are exceptionally fertile with regard to historical action which both resists and transforms capitalism”. The relationship between mobility and position in the hierarchy would take the form of an inverted U, in which the peak of mobility would occur in intermediate sectors of the world economy. He demonstrates that the three hegemonies of the modern world-system (Holland, England and the United States) were commanded by countries that traveled from the semiperipheral position to the organic core, reaching the position of *hegemon* (Chase-Dunn 1990).

The semiperipheral regions are prone to generate innovative institutional forms whose impact transforms the structures of the system and the modes of accumulation. This is a pattern called semiperipheral development (Hall; Chase-Dunn 2006, 49):

This means that those innovations that transform the logic of development and allow world-systems to get larger and more hierarchical come mainly from semiperipheral societies. Some semiperipheral societies are unusually fertile locations for the invention and implementation of new institutional structures. And semiperipheral societies are not constrained to the same degree as older core societies by having invested huge resources in doing things in the old way. So, they are freer to implement new institutions. (Hall; Chase-Dunn 2006, 49)

The paths that a semiperipheral country should then follow in order to reach the upper strata of the world economy would imminently involve the recomposition of its internal structure in terms of improving its position in the value chains, in order to alter the balance of activities in favor of belonging to the organic core to the detriment of those considered to be peripheral.

In general, the objective would be to operate directly on the division of labor. It seeks to act on some sectors of the economy to make them reach the status of organic core, acting on the very center-periphery structure of the world economy (Arrighi 1998). In these changes in domestic economic structures, the state apparatus plays a fundamental role: “in semiperipheral countries with potential for upward mobility, state mobilization of development has often been an important feature”. (Chase-Dunn 1990, 5).

A state apparatus strong enough to manage and coordinate an

economic effort directed at certain sectors of the economy is by no means common in the interstate system. This need for active policies on the part of the State, which causes the rare examples of upward mobility to occur in the semiperipheral regions. Its fragility *vis-à-vis* the countries of the organic core is compensated at certain times by a solid state apparatus, a situation completely different from that experienced by peripheral countries that do not have strong enough state structures.

## Final Remarks

This article sought to demonstrate the relevance of the semiperiphery concept for development projects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It demonstrated how this process is not something natural that flows freely through market forces. It is necessary to see the process from both the economic and the political sides, both of which are co-constitutive of a successful rise within the hierarchy of the contemporary capitalist world-economy.

However, it is not a question of placing the full weight of development on the international level. On the contrary, what was sought in this article was to try to draw attention to the fact that the phenomenon of economic development has important external ramifications, which in no way should be treated as a simple appendix of domestic affairs. The strength of external factors in the definition of national development processes is dependent not only on the form of insertion of this country in the world economy, but also on the international situation. In certain periods it can have equal or even greater weight in the definition of a development strategy.

Finally, we highlight the fundamental role that the State plays in such a phenomenon, which is more an exception than a rule in this system in which we operate. In the capitalist world-economy that encompasses the entire planet at the beginning of this century, the opportunities for ascension within the hierarchy remain closed and the space for development is increasingly diminished by the action of the countries of the organic core (Wade 2003). However, this does not prevent States “seeking a particularly innovative combination of economic policies and/or blessed by a competitive advantage, from improving their combination of organic core and periphery activities, until they become Organic Core States”. (Arrighi 1998, 159).

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to discuss the relevance of the concept of semiperiphery to analyze the world system in the 21st century. First, the main concepts of the world-system approach will be analyzed. In the second part, a more in-depth examination of the question of the semi-periphery will be made through its political and economic characteristics. Later, we will examine the empirical attempts to define the semiperiphery, its role in the reproduction of the capitalist world-economy and the question of mobility in the world-system hierarchy. In conclusion, the role of government apparatus in the issue of development and overcoming the status of semi-periphery in the capitalist world-system will be highlighted.

## KEY WORDS

Economic development; International Political Economy; Semiperiphery.

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