Peripheral Parallels: Lave & Wenger's Educational Theory and Wallerstein's Core–Periphery Model

Learning begins with provocation. Just as a teacher captures students' curiosity through surprise or striking imagery, intellectual engagement is sparked by the recognition of parallels across seemingly distant domains. One such unexpected parallel is between Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory and Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger's model of situated learning. At first glance, global economic structures and small learning communities appear worlds apart, yet both rely on the same conceptual architecture: a dynamic of core and periphery. This resonance demands our attention because it reveals how theories of power and inequality can travel across scales, shaping both world history and the lived practice of education.

The objective of this discussion is to demonstrate how Lave and Wenger's theory of legitimate peripheral participation mirrors Wallerstein's analysis of systemic inequality. By recalling prior knowledge of Wallerstein, then presenting Lave & Wenger's framework, we compare their structures, providing illustrative examples, reflecting on critical debates, and finally assessing whether the resemblance is one of conscious borrowing or coincidental analogy.

Wallerstein's world-systems theory, developed in *The Modern World-System* (1974), argues that the world is not a collection of isolated nations but a single capitalist economy, structured around the unequal relations between core, semi-periphery, and periphery.[1] The core monopolises high-value industries and capital, the periphery is relegated to low-skill labour and raw materials, while the **semi-**periphery mediates

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[1] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, Academic Press, 1974, p. 5.

between the two.[2] This relational structure explains how inequality persists globally, not by accident, but through systemic dependence.[3]

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991) offered a different lens on inequality applied not to nations, but to communities of practice.[4] Learning, they argued, is not a solitary process of knowledge transfer but a social practice embedded in participation. Newcomers begin at the periphery, observing and contributing minimally, while experts at the core hold authority and legitimacy.[5] Over time, learners are expected to move inward, acquiring mastery. Peripherality here is not fixed but developmental, yet, just as in Wallerstein's framework, the relationship between centre and margin is asymmetric.

To understand these parallels, consider their structural alignments. Wallerstein's core monopolises capital; Lave & Wenger's core monopolises knowledge.[6] In both, the periphery contributes raw material, whether goods or novice labour. Exchange relations are unequal, and movement from periphery to core is difficult. Wallerstein stresses entrenched systemic barriers, while Lave & Wenger emphasise progression.[7] By mapping these models onto one another, learners can see how concepts of inequality and mobility scale from the global to the educational.

Concrete examples reinforce this analogy. In medieval apprenticeships, novices performed menial tasks before advancing, much as peripheral economies exported raw wool to core regions that manufactured textiles.[8] In academia, graduate students often contribute empirical data while elite universities dominate theory.[9] In digital communities, open-source novices begin by fixing bugs before gaining access to

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[2] Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, pp. 11–15.
[3] Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 28–29.

[4] Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 29.
[5] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, pp. 35–41.
[6] Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, pp. 23–24; Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, p. 42.
[7] Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, pp. 21–22; Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, pp. 55–56.
[8] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, pp. 65–67; Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, p. 88.
[9] Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, pp. 55–56.

central repositories, echoing how peripheral nations are locked into secondary roles in the digital economy.[10] Even the semi-periphery has its analogue in journeymen, participants not yet masters but already guiding novices.[11]

Critical reflection sharpens the parallel. Wallerstein highlights exploitation: the periphery's subordination sustains the core.[12] Lave & Wenger, in contrast, portray the periphery as an opportunity for growth. Yet critics argue that educational systems often fail to deliver mobility, leaving learners permanently marginalised; a condition closer to Wallerstein's periphery than to Lave & Wenger's optimistic model.[13] This feedback complicates the analogy, showing both its explanatory power and its limits.

Have the objectives been met? By now, it is evident that the structural resemblance between the two theories is more than superficial. Both identify peripherality as essential to the system, though they disagree on its permanence. Wallerstein's periphery is a trap; Lave & Wenger's is a stage. Assessing their overlap allows us to grasp not only how inequality persists across scales but also how metaphors of centre and margin migrate between disciplines.

Finally, this comparison equips us with a transferable lens. If educational communities mirror global economies, then the classroom becomes a microcosm of world-systems: access to knowledge is capital, and participation is stratified. Conversely, if economies can be read as learning spaces, then peripheral nations are also apprentices in a global community, though hindered by systemic exclusion. Recognising this duality enhances retention by embedding abstract theory in lived analogies, and transfer by enabling learners to apply the concept of core-periphery across contexts.

The parallels between Wallerstein and Lave & Wenger becomes a carefully sequenced lesson. It is plausible to argue that Lave & Wenger, whether knowingly or not, stood on Wallerstein's shoulders, adapting a macro-theory of inequality to the

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[10] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016, pp. 40–41.
[11] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, p. 74.

[12] Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, p. 34.
[13] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 77–80.

microscale of education. Their structural resonance reminds us that power circulates in similar ways, whether in the geopolitics of empire or the quiet dynamics of a classroom.

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