

**"Development was—and continues to be for the most part—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach that treats people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of 'progress.' . . . It comes as no surprise that development became a force so destructive to third world cultures, ironically in the name of people's interests."**

## The Invention of Development

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One of the many changes that occurred in the early post-World War II period was the "discovery" of mass poverty in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Relatively inconspicuous and seemingly logical, this discovery was to provide the anchor for an important restructuring of global culture and political economy. The discourse of war was displaced onto the social domain and to a new geographic terrain: the third world. Left behind was the struggle against fascism as the "war on poverty" in the third world began to occupy a prominent place. Eloquent facts were adduced to justify this new war: "Over [1.5 billion] people, something like two-thirds of the world population," Harold Wilson noted in *The War on World Poverty*, "are living in conditions of acute hunger, defined in terms of identifiable nutritional disease. This hunger is at the same time the cause and effect of poverty, squalor, and misery in which they live."

Statements like Wilson's were uttered throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. The new emphasis was spurred by the recognition of the chronic conditions of poverty and social unrest existing in poor countries and the threat they posed for more-developed countries. This led to the realization that something had to be done before the overall levels of instability in the world became intolerable. The destinies of the rich and poor parts of the world were seen to be closely linked. "Genuine world prosperity is indivisible," stated a panel of academic experts in 1948. "It cannot last in one part of the world if the other parts live under conditions of poverty and ill health."

If within market societies the poor were defined as lacking what the rich had in terms of money and

material possessions, poor countries came to be similarly defined in relation to the standards of wealth of the more economically advantaged nations. This economic conception of poverty found an ideal yardstick in one statistic: annual per capita income. Almost by fiat, nearly 70 percent of the world's peoples were transformed into poor subjects in 1948 when the World Bank defined as poor those countries with an annual per capita income below \$100. And if the problem was one of insufficient income, the solution was clearly economic growth.

Thus poverty became an organizing concept and the object of a new problematization. That the essential trait of the third world was its poverty and that the solution was economic growth and development became self-evident, necessary, and universal truths.

Rich countries were believed to have the financial and technological capacity to secure progress the world over. A look at their own past instilled in them the firm conviction that this was not only possible—let alone desirable—but perhaps even inevitable. Sooner or later, the poor countries would become rich, and the underdeveloped world would be developed. A new type of economic knowledge and an enriched experience with the design and management of social systems made this goal look even more plausible. Now it was a matter of creating an appropriate strategy to do it, of setting in motion the right forces to ensure progress and world happiness.

Behind the humanitarian concern and the positive outlook of the new strategy, new forms of power and control, more subtle and refined, were put in operation. Poor people's ability to define and take care of their own lives was eroded in a deeper manner than perhaps ever before. The poor became the target of more sophisticated practices, of a variety of programs that seemed inescapable. From the new institutions of power in the United States and Europe; from the offices of the International Bank

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for Reconstruction and Development and the United Nations; from North American and European campuses, research centers, and foundations; and from the new planning offices in the major capitals of the underdeveloped world—this was the type of development that was actively promoted and that in a few years was to extend its reach to all aspects of society. Let us now see how this set of historical factors resulted in the new discourse of development.

### DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

What does it mean to say that development functioned as a discourse—that it created a space in which only certain things could be said and even imagined? We can begin to answer that question by examining the basic premises of development as they were formulated in the 1940s and 1950s. Fundamental was the belief in modernization as the only force capable of destroying archaic superstitions and relations. Industrialization and urbanization were seen as the inevitable and necessarily progressive routes to modernization. Only through material advancement could social, cultural, and political progress be achieved. This view led to the belief that capital investment was the most important ingredient in economic growth and development. The advance of poor countries was thus seen from the outset as depending on ample supplies of capital to provide for infrastructure, industrialization, and the overall modernization of society. From where was this capital to come? One possible answer was domestic savings. But because these countries were seen as trapped in a "vicious circle" of poverty and lack of capital, much of that capital would have to come from abroad. Moreover, it was absolutely necessary that governments and international organizations take an active role in promoting and orchestrating the efforts to overcome general backwardness and economic underdevelopment.

What, then, were the most important elements that went into the formulation of development theory? There was the process of capital formation, and the various factors associated with it: technology, population and resources, monetary and fiscal policies, industrialization and agricultural development, commerce and trade. There were also a series of factors linked to cultural considerations, such as education and the need to foster modern cultural values. Finally, there was the need to create adequate institutions for carrying out the complex task ahead: international organizations (such as the World Bank and the IMF, created in 1944, and most of the UN technical agencies, also a product of the

mid-1940s); national planning agencies (which proliferated in Latin America, especially after the inauguration of the Alliance for Progress in the early 1960s); and technical agencies of various kinds.

Yet development was not merely the result of the combination, study, or gradual elaboration of these elements (some of these topics had existed for some time); nor the product of the introduction of new ideas (some of which were already appearing or perhaps were bound to appear); nor the effect of the new international organizations or financial institutions (which had some predecessors, such as the League of Nations). It was rather the result of the establishment of a set of relations among these elements, institutions, and practices and the systematization of these relations to form a whole.

To understand development as a discourse, one must look at this system of relations, relations that define the conditions under which objects, concepts, theories, and strategies can be incorporated into the discourse. The system of relations establishes a discursive practice that sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it determines the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory, or object to emerge and be named, analyzed, and eventually transformed into a policy or a plan.

### DISSECTING THE THIRD WORLD

The concerns development began to deal with were numerous and varied. Some of them, such as poverty, insufficient technology and capital, rapid population growth, inadequate public services, archaic agricultural practices, stood out clearly, whereas others were introduced with more caution or even in surreptitious ways (cultural attitudes and values and the existence of racial, religious, geographic, or ethnic factors believed to be associated with backwardness).

Everything was subjected to the eye of the new experts: the poor dwellings of the rural masses, the vast agricultural fields, cities, households, factories, hospitals, schools, public offices, towns and regions, and, in the last instance, the world as a whole. The vast surface over which the discourse moved at ease practically covered the entire cultural, economic, and political geography of the third world.

Not all the actors distributed throughout this surface could identify objects to be studied and have their problems considered. Clear principles of authority were in operation. They concerned the role of experts, from whom certain criteria of

knowledge and competence were asked; institutions such as the UN, which had the moral, professional, and legal authority to name subjects and define strategies; and the international lending organizations, which carried the symbols of capital and power. These principles of authority also concerned the governments of poor countries, which commanded the legal political authority over the lives of their subjects, and the position of leadership of the rich countries, who had the power, knowledge, and experience to decide on what was to be done.

Economists, demographers, educators, and experts in agriculture, public health, and nutrition elaborated their theories, made their assessments and observations, and designed their programs from these institutional sites. Problems were continually identified, and client categories brought into existence. Development proceeded by creating "abnormalities" (such as the "illiterate," the "undeveloped," the "malnourished," "small farmers," or "landless peasants"), which it would later treat and reform. New problems were progressively and selectively incorporated; once a problem was incorporated into the discourse, it had to be categorized and further specified. Some problems were specified at a given level (such as local or regional), or at a variety of these levels (for instance, a nutritional deficiency identified at the level of the household could be further specified as a regional production shortage or as affecting a given population group), or in relation to a particular institution. But these refined specifications did not seek so much to illuminate possible solutions as to give "problems" a visible reality amenable to particular treatments. Approaches that could have had positive effects in terms of easing material constraints became, linked to this type of rationality, instruments of power and control.

Other historical discourses also clearly influenced particular representations of development. The discourse of communism, for instance, influenced the promotion of those choices that emphasized the role of the individual in society and, especially, those approaches that relied on private initiative and private property. The emphasis on this issue in the context of development, and so strong a moralizing attitude, probably would not have existed without the persistent anticommunist preaching that originated in the cold war.

In a similar vein, patriarchy and ethnocentrism influenced the form development took. Indigenous populations had to be "modernized," where modernization meant the adoption of the "right" values, namely those held by the white minority or a mestizo majority and, in general, those embodied in the ideal of the cultivated European (programs for industrialization and agricultural development, however, not only have made women invisible in their role as producers, but also have tended to perpetuate their subordination). Forms of power in terms of class, gender, race, and nationality thus found their way into development theory and practice.

By 1955, a discourse had emerged that was characterized not by a unified object but by the formation of a vast number of objects and strategies; not by new knowledge but by the systematic inclusion of new objects under its domain. The

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most important exclusion, however, was and continues to be what development was supposed to be about: people. Development was—and continues to be for the most part—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach that treats people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of "progress." Development was conceived not as a cultural process (culture was a residual variable, to disappear with the advance

of modernization) but instead as a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions intended to deliver some "badly needed" goods to a "target" population. It comes as no surprise that development became a force so destructive to third world cultures, ironically in the name of people's interests.

## CALLING IN THE PROFESSIONALS

Development thus was a response to the problematization of poverty that took place in the years following World War II, not a natural process of knowledge that gradually uncovered problems and dealt with them; as such, it must be seen as a historical construct that provides a space in which poor countries are known, specified, and intervened upon. To speak of development as a historical construct requires an analysis of the mechanisms through which it becomes an active, real force. These mechanisms are structured by forms of knowledge and power and can be studied in terms of processes of institutionalization and professionalization.

The concept of professionalization refers here mainly to the process that brings the third world into the politics of expert knowledge and Western science in general. This is accomplished through a set of techniques, strategies, and disciplinary practices that organize the generation, validation, and diffusion of development knowledge, including the academic disciplines, methods of research and teaching, criteria of experts, and manifold professional practices: in other words, those mechanisms through which a politics of truth is created and maintained, through which certain forms of knowledge are given the status of truth. This professionalization was effected through the proliferation of development sciences and subdisciplines. It made possible the progressive incorporation of problems into the space of development, bringing them to light in ways congruent with the established system of knowledge and power.

The professionalization of development also made it possible to remove all problems from the political and cultural realms and to recast them in terms of the apparently more neutral realm of science. It resulted in the establishment of development studies programs in most major universities in the developed world and conditioned the creation or restructuring of third world universities to suit the needs of development. The empirical social sciences, on the rise since the late 1940s, especially in the United States and Britain, were instrumental in this regard. So were the area studies programs, which became fashionable after the war in academic and policymaking circles.

An unprecedented will to know everything about the third world flourished unhindered, growing like a virus. Like the landing of the Allied forces in Normandy, the third world witnessed a massive landing of experts, each in charge of investigating, measuring, and theorizing about, as was noted earlier, this or that little aspect of third world societies. The policies and programs that originated from this vast field of knowledge inevitably carried with them strong moralizing components. At stake was a politics of knowledge that allowed experts to classify problems and formulate policies, to pass judgments on entire social groups and forecast their future—to produce, in short, a regime of truth and norms about them.

Overlapping the processes of professionalization was the creation of an institutional field from which discourses are produced, recorded, stabilized, modified, and put into circulation. The institutionalization of development took place at all levels, from the international organizations and national planning

agencies in the third world to local development agencies, community development committees, private voluntary agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. Starting in the mid-1940s, with the creation of the great international organizations, this process has continued to spread, resulting in the consolidation of an effective network of power. It is through the action of this network that people and communities are bound to specific cycles of cultural and economic production and through which certain behaviors and rationalities are promoted. This field of intervention relies on myriad local centers of power, in turn supported by forms of knowledge that circulate at the local level.

The knowledge produced about the third world is used and promoted by these institutions through applied programs, conferences, international consultant services, and local extension practices. A corollary of this process is the establishment of an ever-expanding development business. Poverty, illiteracy, and even hunger became the basis of a lucrative industry for planners, experts, and civil servants. This is not to deny that the work of these institutions might have benefited people at times. It is to emphasize that the work of development institutions has not been an innocent effort on behalf of the poor. Rather, development has been successful to the extent that it has been able to integrate, manage, and control countries and populations in increasingly detailed and encompassing ways. If it has failed to solve the basic problems of underdevelopment, it can be said—perhaps with greater pertinence—that it has succeeded in creating a type of underdevelopment that has been, for the most part, politically and technically manageable.

### **THE PERSISTENCE OF "UNDERDEVELOPMENT"**

The crucial threshold and transformation that took place in the early postwar era were the result not of a radical epistemological or political breakthrough, but of the reorganization of factors that allowed the third world to display a new visibility and to erupt into a new realm of language. This new space was carved out of the vast and dense surface of the third world, placing it in a field of power. Underdevelopment became the subject of political technologies that sought to erase it from the face of the earth but that ended up, instead, multiplying it to infinity.

Development fostered a way of conceiving of social life as a technical problem, as a matter of rational decision and management to be entrusted to that group of people—the development profes-

sionals—whose specialized knowledge allegedly qualified them for the task. Instead of seeing change as a process rooted in the interpretation of each society's history and cultural tradition—as a number of intellectuals in various parts of the third world had attempted to do in the 1920s and 1930s (Gandhi being the best known of them)—these professionals sought to devise mechanisms and procedures to make societies fit a preexisting model that embodied the structures and functions of modernity. Like sorcerers' apprentices, the development professionals awakened once again the dream of reason that, in their hands, as in earlier instances, produced a troubling reality.

At times, development grew to be so important for third world countries that it became acceptable for those rulers to subject their populations to an infinite variety of interventions, to more encompassing forms of power and systems of control; so important that first and third world elites accepted the price of massive impoverishment, of selling third world resources to the most convenient bidders, of degrading their physical and human ecologies, of killing and torturing, of condemning their indigenous population to near extinction; so important that many in the third world began to think of themselves as inferior, underdeveloped, and ignorant and to doubt the value of their own culture, deciding instead to pledge allegiance to the banners of reason and progress; so important, finally, that the achievement of development clouded the awareness of the impossibility of fulfilling the promise that development seemed to be making.

After four decades of this discourse, most forms of understanding and representing the third world are still dictated by the same basic tenets. The forms of power that have appeared act not so much by repression but by normalization; not by ignorance but by controlled knowledge; not by humanitarian concern but by the bureaucratization of social action. As the conditions that gave rise to development became more pressing, it could only increase its hold, refine its methods, and extend its reach. That the materiality of these conditions is not conjured up by an "objective" body of knowledge but is charted out by the rational discourses of economists, politicians, and development experts of all types should already be clear. What has been achieved is a specific configuration of factors and forces in which the new language of development finds sup-

port. As a discourse, development is thus a very real historical formation, albeit articulated around an artificial construct (*underdevelopment*) and upon a certain materiality (the conditions baptized as *underdevelopment*), which must be conceptualized in different ways if the power of the development discourse is to be challenged or displaced.

To be sure, there is a situation of economic exploitation that must be recognized and dealt with. Power is too cynical at the level of exploitation and should be resisted on its own terms. There is also a certain materiality of life conditions that is extremely preoccupying and that requires great effort and attention. But those seeking to understand the third world through development have long lost sight of this materiality by building upon it a reality that has haunted us for decades. Understanding the history of the investment of the third world through Western forms of knowledge and power is a way to shift the ground somewhat so that we can start to view that materiality with different eyes and in different categories.

The coherence of effects that the development discourse achieved is the key to its success as a hegemonic form of representation: the construction of the poor and underdeveloped as universal, pre-constituted subjects, based on the privilege of the representers; the exercise of power over the third world made possible by this discursive homogenization (which entails the erasure of the complexity and diversity of third world peoples, so that a squatter in Mexico City, a Nepalese peasant, and a Tuareg nomad become equivalent to each other as poor and underdeveloped); and the colonization and domination of the natural and human ecologies and economies of the third world.

Development assures a teleology to the extent that it proposes that the "natives" will sooner or later be reformed. At the same time, however, it reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the third world as different and inferior, as having a limited humanity in relation to the accomplished Europeans. Development relies on this perpetual recognition and disavowal of difference, a feature inherent to discrimination. The signifiers of "poverty," "illiteracy," "hunger," and so forth have already achieved a fixity as signifieds of "underdevelopment" that seems impossible to sunder. ■