

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to consider Development Theory and the problems that it presents today as a scientific endeavour. In order to do so, it employs the terms *metatheorisation*, understood as the process of reflection on Development Theory as a cognitive project, and *metatheory*, defined as the set of essential characteristics of Development Theory as such project. The paper, thus, begins with an analysis of Development Theory, concluding that its problems are due to both insufficient metatheorising and lack of a well developed metatheory. Following this, Critical Theory is explored as an example of a scientific cognitive project constructed through a proper process of metatheorisation and with a well defined metatheory. This paper concludes that if Development Theory is to overcome these problems, it should undertake a metatheoretical process analogous to the one described for Critical Theory, and adopt a similar metatheory characterised as being materialist, historical, dialectical, critical, totalising and interdisciplinary.

Development and Critical Theory: Searching for a Metatheory

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Introduction

Development Theory¹ is at a crossroads. The intrinsic complexity of its enterprise is complicated by a diversity of approaches and theories which reveal its incoherence and confusion as a cognitive project. Moreover, a look at the world shows an enduring persistence of poverty and other problems which the development project is supposed to solve. It is not surprising, then, that in response to these shortcomings, some critics have even called for a complete abandonment of the development endeavour.

I believe that although the critique of Development Theory is fair, the reasons for its existence are still in place and therefore it is a worthwhile project. As a consequence, in this paper I attempt to investigate the causes of its problems and propose a way forward. I do so by focusing on Development Theory as a scientific cognitive enterprise and by emphasising its insufficient metatheorising and its lack of a well developed metatheory. Using the example of Critical Theory to guide my discussion, I try to answer the question: how can a metatheoretical reflection on Development Theory help it overcome its problems?

In order to do so, I follow three different sections. First, I present and define the terms metatheorising and metatheory, which I will be using throughout this work. Second, I turn my attention to Development Theory and analyse the causes of its current problems. Finally, I examine the specific case of Critical Theory and use it to show how Development Theory could benefit from the lessons that it provides in reference to metatheorising and metatheory.

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the term 'Development Theory' to refer to the scientific cognitive project which deals with the social process of development. Some authors use, instead, the term 'Development Studies' to refer to the same concept, while others attribute different meanings to each of them. In order to avoid confusion about a distinction which is beyond the scope of this paper, I utilize only the former and avoid the latter. See more on terminology in note 2 (p.5)

Metatheorising and metatheory

Before moving to focus on Development Theory and its problems, and on the role of Critical Theory in solving them, it is necessary first to take a look at the concepts of metatheorising and metatheory, which will be a central element of my argument.

Metatheory in the literature

There is much disagreement about what metatheory is. Based on its etymology, there is a wide understanding that metatheory comes after theory and that it deals with theory. However, this perception of the term is too broad and leads to its use in reference to related but nonetheless different things.

This is the case, for instance, in sociology, the social science which has made a more extensive reflection on the concept (see Ritzer 1988 and Fuhrman and Snizek 1990). Ritzer (1988, p.188) argues that metatheory, in relation to sociology, is “the study of the underlying structure of sociological theory”. Or more specifically, that it is concerned “with the study of theories, theorists, communities of theorists, as well as the larger intellectual and social contexts of theories and theorists” (Ritzer 1988, p.187).

This has led to bitter critiques from many sociologists of the uselessness of metatheory. It has been accused of being too abstract (Ritzer 1988, p.195), of deferring attention from the understanding of the operative dynamics of the social world and of becoming an end in itself (Turner 1990, pp.37-38).

In response to these accusations, defenders of metatheory argue that this practice can in fact be of great help for theorising and reaching a greater understanding of the social world. This can be done in several ways. First, the critical study of old theories can be the starting point for the creation of new ones. Ritzer (1988, p.189), for instance, shows how the metatheoretical efforts of Marx in analysing Hegel’s philosophy helped him formulate his own theories. Second, careful examination of existing theories can help clarify their core conceptual issues, identify their weaknesses and contribute to their improvement (Fuhrman and Snizek 1990, pp.21 and 24). Finally, metatheory can shed light on the underlying assumptions regarding the object of study and its relation to the researcher that any social investigation, intentionally or not, inevitably makes (Fuhrman and Snizek 1990, p.26). This exercise

potentially illuminates non-evident differences between theories or approaches and explains certain theoretical orientations.

Those propounding metatheory concede, however, that some metatheoretical practice incurs in futile exercises which, no matter how intellectually rewarding, do not contribute to the goals of the discipline. However, this does not disqualify metatheory in itself, which if properly used can be extremely productive (Ritzer 1988, p.194). As Sklair contends, it is possible to do research ignoring metatheoretical issues completely. Yet a proper consideration of metatheory “will improve the chances of any science to achieve the goals of explanation and prediction through empirical research.” (Sklair 1988, p.698).

Clarifications and definitions

The preceding discussion hopefully has illustrated the relationship between metatheory and theory, and shown how the former can contribute to the advancement of knowledge about the social world. However, there are still two issues that require further clarification.

The first has to do with how metatheory is used in the literature reviewed to describe a *process* or *activity* as some authors use the term specifically to refer to the *outcome* of this process (see Sklair 1989 and Booth 1985). In order to avoid confusion, in this paper I will use the term *metatheorising* to refer to the process of reflection on theory, and *metatheory* to denote its outcome (see extended definitions below).

A second issue with which I have to deal before I proceed to define these terms has to do with the notion of theory. If metatheorising is the reflection on theory the definition of the former depends on the understanding of the latter. I would contend that the literature reviewed in the previous section largely refers to the term ‘theory’ in a narrow way, as a set of propositions that describe the functioning of some part of the social world. However, there is a second broader understanding of ‘Theory’ as a *scientific cognitive project* which can accommodate several individual theories. This

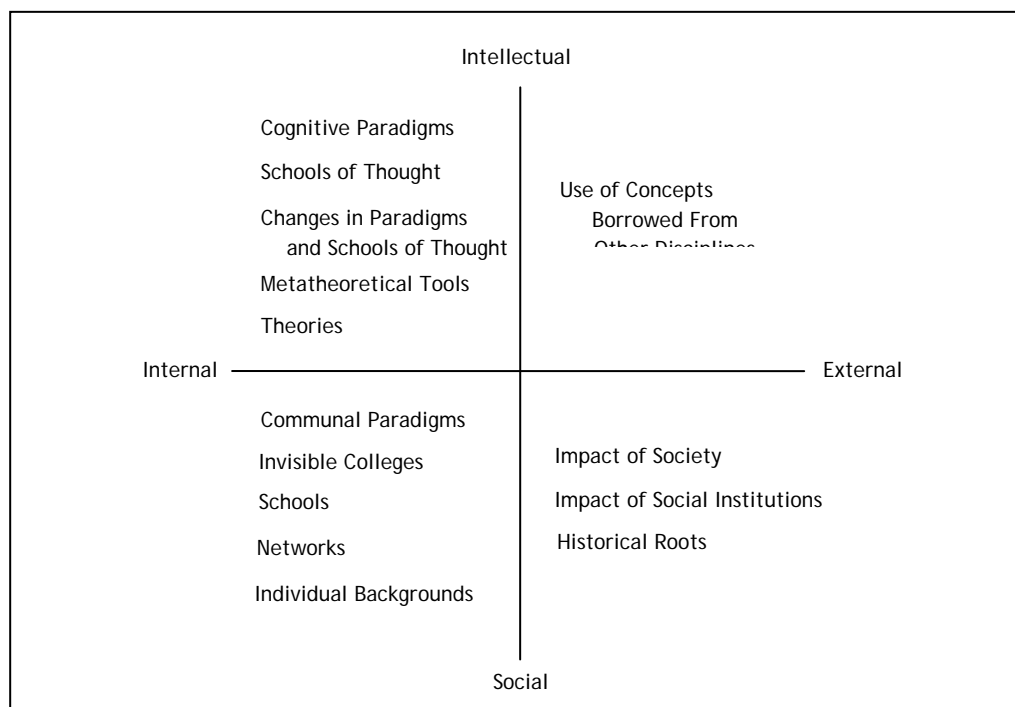
is the meaning to which expressions such as ‘Development Theory’ and ‘Sociological Theory’ refer, and on which I am going to focus in this paper.²

Taking these two considerations into account, it is now possible to formulate working definitions of the main concepts to be used in this paper. *Metatheorising* can then be defined as the process of reflection on the essential elements of a given scientific cognitive project. Consequently, *metatheory* will be the outcome of this reflection process, the set of crucial features of this project. These will include its assumptions about the social world and how it can be apprehended, its depiction of the relationship of the researcher with the object of study, and the main approach that will be used for the research.

Types of metatheorising

In order to clarify the ways in which effective metatheorising can be undertaken, I will now introduce a typology which is a slightly altered version of the one presented by Ritzer (1988, pp.190-193).

Figure 1: Types of Metatheorising



Source: Ritzer 1988, p.190

² In order to avoid confusion, I use the term ‘theory’ to refer to individual theories and ‘Theory’ (with a capital T) to denote a scientific cognitive project. Hence the capitals when using Development Theory throughout this paper.

As Figure 1 shows, metatheorising can be organised according to two axis: Intellectual–Social, and Internal–External. The dichotomy introduced by the Intellectual–Social axis distinguishes the intellectual aspects of Theory, its cognitive structure (theories, tools to analyse theories, concepts borrowed from other disciplines) from its social features, the social structure of the Theory (schools where theorisation takes place, the effect of individual background factors on theorists, the impact of larger society, etc.) The Internal–External axis differentiates those elements which take place within the Theory from those which occur externally but nonetheless influence it.

Four types of metatheorising, or ways in which Theory can be reflected upon, arise from these axes. The Intellectual/Internal category refers to the Theory itself, how it is organised in paradigms or schools of thought, how it evolves, and what its defining elements are. The Intellectual/External type complements the Intellectual/Internal by focusing on how the Theory incorporates or relates to other theories and concepts in other disciplines.

Dealing with Theory, however, does not only entail the study of its intellectual final outcome. In order to understand it, it is necessary to look at the circumstances in which the Theory is constructed. Thus, the Social/Internal category examines the sites and individuals who produce theories and analyses how individual backgrounds and relationships among theorists influence the final product. Similarly, the Social/External type of metatheorising focuses on the impact of social processes and institutions on the production of theories (e.g. the impact of globalisation).

Development and Development Theory

In this section I am going to engage in metatheorising Development Theory. In order to understand its current state and its problems I will proceed by outlining its history as a scientific cognitive project. I will particularly pay attention to the impasse that the field reached in the 1980s and to the metatheoretical reflections it brought about. The main goal of this review is to raise important issues about Development Theory which will be subsequently used to sketch my central argument about metatheory and development.

Development Theory: a brief historical review

Consequently with the typology of metatheorising presented in the previous section, I will now review the history of Development Theory paying attention both to the intellectual description of the theory and to its social dimension.

A study of Development Theory requires some consideration of the notion of development. Leys (1996, p.4), for instance, loosely equates development to an improvement of human societies. He claims that it was only after the industrial revolution that, due to the acceleration of material progress, humanity became aware of the concept of development and started to reflect upon it. Thus the tradition of thought about development can be traced back to Hegel and Marx and their conception of history as a process of progression to the better.

However, Development Theory as the cognitive project that we know nowadays did not emerge until the 1950s and was concerned with a much narrower issue: how the colonies of the different European powers could be transformed and made more productive as decolonisation approached (Leys 1996, p.5).³ Development became then a synonym of economic growth and its analysis was very much rooted in economics.

This radical break with previous tradition which gave birth to a new and differentiated Development Theory was caused, according to Leys (1996, pp.5-7), by three main factors. First, by its very strong practical orientation. The need for immediate action went against “philosophical dispassion and reflective self-criticism” (Leys 1996, p.5). Second, by the Cold War, which implied that theorists had to make political commitments which in turn influenced their thinking. In the capitalist world, for instance, it was not possible to take Marx’s work seriously. Finally, by the Bretton Woods financial regime, which set a structure that made economic growth the main goal of development and emphasised the importance of the state in securing it.

During the 1950s, Development Theory was dominated by what has come to be known as the modernisation paradigm. Based in North American universities, this approach “sought to identify the conditions that had given rise to development in the First World, and specify where and why these were lacking in the Third World.”

³ This project incorporated Latin America as well, which is described by Leys (1996, p.5) as still semi-colonial despite its formal independence for over a century at the time.

(Rapley 1996, p.16). It assumed that all societies progressed in linear fashion along the same path toward development, and prescribed capital accumulation and diffusion of modern values through education and technology transfer (Leys 1996, pp.9-10; Rapley 1996, p.17).

By the 1960s, however, it became evident that Third World countries were not following the path of development that modernisation promised. The critique came especially from Latin America where, after a long time of independence, the progress prophesised by the model had still not arrived. The most prominent critical perspective was put forward by dependency theory, which introduced a new paradigm. Broadening its sources and incorporating for the first time the tradition of Hegel and Marx, dependency theorists argued that the capitalist states of First World countries were preventing the development of the Third World by striking alliances with the dominant classes of these countries, essentially the rural oligarchy (Leys 1996, p.7). This oligarchy based its source of revenue on the exportation of primary goods to First World countries, on which it also depended for the provision of luxury goods (Rapley 1996, p.19). This pattern of exchange hindered the industrialisation of developing countries and maintained their dependency from rich nations. The basic policy recommendation from dependency theorists for developing countries was, consequently, the construction of autonomous national-development strategies. In order to do that, they had to “sever their ties to the world economy and become more self-sufficient” (Rapley 1996, p.20).

Although the dependency paradigm broadened the development agenda and raised issues which had not been considered by the modernisation paradigm, it shared many of its limitations. Dependency theorists also subscribed to a very practical, short-term, state-orientated conception of development, and were very influenced by Cold War partisanship as well (Leys 1996, p.7).

The development debate during the 1970s can be seen as a continuing tension between the modernisation and dependency paradigms. This confrontation brought about an expansion of the concept of development, which began to incorporate dimensions that went beyond mere economic growth. This was exemplified by the International Labour Organisation’s proposal of a ‘Redistribution with Growth’ agenda, or the World Bank’s endorsement of a ‘Basic Needs’ approach (Leys 1996, pp.11-12).

However, the initiatives of the 1970s did not succeed in practice, and the 1980s saw the emergence of neoliberalism as a new paradigm which came to dominate Development Theory. According to the neoliberal view, it was the idea of bringing about development through state intervention in the economy which was blocking the advance of capitalism in the Third World. Consequently, its proponents defended the withdrawal of the state from intervention in the economy and its retreat to functions of law enforcement and protection of order. The belief was that markets free from distortions would bring about efficiency, growth and development (Leys 1996, p.18).

This radical change, however, was not solely caused by the limitations of the previous paradigms, but by major changes in the world. The dissolution of the Bretton Woods world financial order in the 1970s made states much less able actors in managing their economies than they were before. This led to a worldwide task of strengthening market forces and to the rise of neoliberal regimes in the United States and the United Kingdom at the end of the decade. Within that environment, the emergence of the neoliberal paradigm in Development Theory was no surprise (Leys 1996, p.7).

The impasse and metatheory

By the second half of the 1980s, however, it was evident that the neoliberal approach was failing to improve the standards of living of poor people all over the Third World, which were in fact deteriorating. Development Theory found itself in what came to be known as the 'impasse'. Failure of the development project was evident, and even current theories were unable to respond to the challenges of the field, but there were no signs of new theoretical innovations suggesting a way forward.

This situation triggered the appearance of several contributions reflecting on the nature and problems of Development Theory (see Booth 1985, Sklair 1988 and Graaf 1989). In these works there was a general agreement on the need to metatheorise in order to understand what the causes of the impasse were and how to overcome them (Booth 1985, p.777; Graaf 1989, p.3).

In his own diagnosis, Booth (1985, pp.776-777) argued that the problems of Development Theory came from its excessive generality, necessitarianism, teleology, class reductionism and dogmatism, among other shortcomings of a metatheory grounded on Marxism. Similar conclusions were reached by Sklair (1988, p.701). In

light of this situation, these theorists asserted a need to rethink the discipline; to metatheorise in order to change the foundations of Development Theory so as to avoid the current problems.

Just a few years later, however, in a work published in the mid-1990s, Booth (1994) reflected on the impasse and concluded that Development Theory had left it behind. The motive for his optimism was the appearance of a large diversity of unconnected local initiatives which he thought showed a step away from the old general and dogmatic analysis. He acknowledged that there was a risk of falling into 'glorified empiricism', but claimed for the need of theorisation efforts to extract common lessons from those initiatives in order to avoid this problem (Booth 1994, pp.14-15).

Development Theory nowadays

Was Booth right in his diagnosis? Did Development Theory overcome its problems? In a recent contribution, Kothari and Minogue (2002) argue that the answer to both questions is negative. They contend that the present development agenda is set out in the programmes of major multilateral and bilateral aid donors, and that the policies proposed have been "standard priorities for at least three decades" (Kothari and Minogue 2002, p.2).

It is true that the 1990s saw the rise of several development initiatives which collectively came to be referred to as 'alternative development', such as participatory development, gender and development, and sustainable development. However, it has been argued (Pieterse cited in Kothari and Minogue 2002, p.10) that alternative development does not really present an alternative way of achieving development. In fact, it shares the same goals of traditional Development Theory while proposing new means to achieve them that usually are presented as people-centred.

In conclusion, Kothari and Minogue (2002, pp.2 and 7) claim that the post-war development project has failed, and that there is a strong need to "devise new meanings, agendas, processes and targets for development".

A much more radical position is formulated by the so-called post-developmentalists. This current, as exemplified in the works of Sachs (1992) and Escobar (1995), maintains that development has not only failed, but has also caused great harm to

developing countries, and lobbies for the complete abandonment of the development project.

A metatheory for development: some requirements and considerations

The previous analysis shows that Development Theory is in crisis, and that the metatheoretical efforts undertaken in the 1980s did not succeed in enabling Development Theory to accomplish its goals. In this section I will draw on the findings of the preceding review of Development Theory in order to offer a diagnosis of the problem.

The main component of my argument is that Development Theory has insufficiently metatheorised itself. This has led to a lack of proper understanding of what it is, what its goals are and how these can be achieved. Using the terms described above, it can be said that insufficient metatheorising has prevented the construction of an effective metatheory, an understanding of its main elements necessary to undertake its project.

I believe that the major cause of this problem resides in the normative character of Development Theory (Hettne 1995, p.16). The object of study of Development Theory, whatever its specific formulation might be, implicitly incorporates a value judgement which implies that development is desirable. Hence Development Theory is not only about understanding how the process of development takes place, but also how it can be influenced and accelerated.

This leads to two different implications for Development Theory. First, knowledge about development is not only generated by a group of academics in relative isolation and independence. Around development there is a whole collection of actors, what Leys calls the 'development community' (1996, p.29), who include "staff of donor and recipient country development ministries, of multilateral aid agencies, financial institutions and non-government organisations, and academic and non-academic consultants". All these actors are policy-oriented, and thus the extent to which they undertake serious theoretical reflection is limited, giving place to what could be called development thinking (Hettne 1995, p.16), which is broader than Development Theory and not necessarily scientific. The blurring of Development Theory in this policy-oriented development thinking is increased by the important role that policymaking development institutions have in funding development research. The

outcome of all these factors is that Development Theory gets enmeshed in very practical specific studies which do not provide space for proper theorisation, and even less metatheorisation.

The second implication of the normative character of Development Theory has to do with the influence that world events exercise on it. As it has clearly been shown above, the definition of the ultimate goal of Development Theory –namely development– has changed throughout time according to social factors such as the Cold War or the collapse of the Bretton Woods institutions. The varying understanding of the objective of Development Theory has driven the controversies and different approaches that it has produced. This in turn has made more difficult for Development Theory to construct a coherent intellectual project with a certain degree of continuity throughout time.

These factors explain why Development Theory has evolved through a succession of competing paradigms. The need for a clear diagnosis from which useful policies could be derived prevented a wide analysis of the nature of the social world and social change. When these policy recommendations proved to be unable to bring about development as promised and criticism around them arose, they had to be discarded and a new approach had to be quickly located. This unreflexive nature of Development Theory seems to be the case even for the latest initiatives of ‘alternative development’ (Kothary and Minogue 2002, p.12).

It is my contention that even though all these problems resulted in the emergence of the impasse, they also limited the scope of the metatheoretical efforts triggered by the impasse. This is the reason why Booth thought the impasse was overcome once new specific theories within the framework of the same development project began to appear.

In accordance, with this diagnosis, I suggest that what development studies needs is to employ proper metatheorising in order to question its very foundations. The goal is to construct a metatheory, a set of defining characteristics of it as a scientific cognitive project that allows it to achieve the relevance it now lacks. I reject the conclusions of the post-developmentalists arguing that the failure of the development project should give way to its abandonment. The goals of development are still unmet and their achievement is desirable and necessary. It is now the time, then, not to give up, but to reflect on the problems of Development Theory and try to solve them.

This metatheorising exercise, however, is not a completely abstract enterprise taking place in a vacuum. It has to be based on the previous analysis of what a Development Theory can be and the limitations and constraints it will face. The resulting metatheory, then, needs to take into account its normative character, the strong influence of the set of actors that make up the development community and the crucial impact that social processes and events have on it.

A metatheory for Development Theory: the example of Critical Theory

The construction of a metatheory for Development Theory cannot be the work of one or a few isolated individuals, but a large scale effort of development theorists. Hence, my goal in this paper is to make a case for the need of such an exercise and to present a few suggestions regarding how it could take place. Consequently, in this section I will review the case of Critical Theory as a metatheoretical project and demonstrate how Development Theory could benefit from this example.

The metatheory of Critical Theory

There are many different understandings of what Critical Theory is. On one extreme, it refers to the specific work of a group of theorists gathered around the Institute for Social Research in Germany, also known as the Frankfurt School, from the 1930s onwards. On the other, this term is used by some authors in a much broader sense to refer to a collection of perspectives or theories which share a critique of positivist social science (see Agger 1998).

In this paper, I will focus on Critical Theory in the restricted sense of the work of the Frankfurt School. However, even within this limited meaning, Kellner argues that Critical Theory “strives to provide both a substantive social theory of the present age and a meta-theory of its theoretical presuppositions and method” (Kellner 1990). It is this metatheory of Critical Theory that I am interested in here and which I think can be of use for Development Theory.

The main description of Critical Theory as a cognitive project was made by Max Horkheimer upon assuming the position of Director of the Institute of Social Research in 1931. In his inaugural address, entitled ‘The State of Contemporary Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research’, he metatheorises upon

the cognitive project of 'social philosophy'. This exercise is motivated by his concern that social philosophy "is in no better shape today than most philosophical, indeed most fundamentally intellectual, efforts" (Horkheimer 1989, p.25).

Horkheimer begins by defining the project of social philosophy as an attempt to elucidate the fate of human beings, insofar as they are part of a community and not mere individuals. Social philosophy is, therefore, mainly concerned with the social existence of people (Horkheimer 1989, p.25).

Then he goes on to critically analyse the history of social philosophy by pointing out its limitations. Horkheimer agrees with the view of current social philosophy against the reductionism of positivism, which only considers the individual and the relations between individuals –"all is exhausted by facts" (Horkheimer 1989, p.30). Therefore he believes that social science disciplines –such as materialist sociology– are limited because they abstract from the structure and organization of society as a whole to describe limited domains of social experience, losing sight of the totality. However, he also criticises contemporary social philosophy because it considers the contradicting partial views of social science as 'different world views' (Horkheimer 1989, p.30). This position implies, he argues, an idealist stance from which social philosophy does not use empirical experience to reach an understanding of the totality. Hence, while on the one hand the social sciences focus on partial elements of social experience, on the other hand, social philosophy deals with the totality through idealism and ignoring empirical facts. This lack of connection is precisely the object of Horkheimer's critique.

Based on this criticism of social philosophy, Horkheimer proposes to rethink the foundations of the field by proposing a new type of social philosophy which pursues its "philosophical questions directed at the big picture with the finest scientific methods, to transform and to make more precise these questions as the work progresses, to find new methods, and yet never lose sight of the whole" (Horkheimer 1989, p.32).

It can be seen, then, how in front of a perceived failure of social philosophy, Horkheimer metatheorises at the highest level in order to find out how this project might overcome its weaknesses. The result of this process is not a proposal of new lines of research or new subjects to be studied, but rather a complete rethinking of the cognitive project. However, what is the form proposed for this project?

Kellner (1990) argues that one of its main characteristics is its *materialism*. In effect, Horkheimer rejected any kind of idealism and claimed that sense experience is the basis of knowledge. However, he also warned against the tendency to ‘absolutise sensation’ in which current positivist forms of materialism incur (Held 1980, p.181). He maintained that sense experience is not absolute but mediated through concepts, and that both sense perception and cognition are subject to social conditions and historical change (Kellner 1990).

Thus the metatheoretical project of Critical Theory is also *historical*. As Held (1980, p.181) states, “cognition is always the cognition of particular men and women, in particular social relations within a particular society”. Hence as both the subjects and objects of knowledge change, cognition must depend on the specific historical moment, precluding the possibility of absolute knowledge.

In dealing with how this historical knowledge coming from sense experience and mediated by concepts is produced, Horkheimer claims that the cognitive process of Critical Theory is also *dialectical*. This means that the elements of the cognitive process do not change in isolation from each other, but do so in a continuous interaction which, in turn, is determined historically and therefore must be studied in each specific case (Kellner 1990). Moreover, this interaction must be seen as happening also across levels, for example between the parts and the whole (Held 1980, p.181).

Another –and obvious– feature of Critical Theory is that it is *critical*. Horkheimer (1972) argues that what he calls ‘traditional theory’ –that is theory preceding Critical Theory– is “unaware of the ways in which it is bound together with social processes and thus fails to see its lack of autonomy and social determination” (Kellner 1990). This implies that the knowledge it produces reflects the power structure of society, affirms dominant interests and thus uncritically reproduces the existing society. In opposition, Critical Theory uses its dialectical materialism to identify contradictions (for instance between objects and concepts), creating knowledge which will strive to transform society (Held 1980, pp.183-184).

Critical Theory is also *totalising*. This term is usually regarded negatively because it is assumed to imply a “mode of thought which stresses coherence, unity, and order in which all parts are seen as elements of a whole in which holistic harmony is posited as a normative value” (Kellner 1990). However, totality in the context of

Critical Theory stems from its materialism, in which knowledge comes from sense perception but is mediated by concepts. These concepts are the only way to refer to global processes (such as capitalism or globalisation) which inevitably affect and are affected by specific social events. Thus totality implies the study of the interconnections between particular social elements and these wider processes, but it does not assume that the former are explained by the latter.

Finally, and as a consequence of the previous point, the cognitive project proposed by Critical Theory is *interdisciplinary*. Given the fact that there are a large number of points of view from which knowledge can be constructed –all of them valid from a materialist perspective– different disciplines have to come together in order to reach the thorough understanding implied by the notion of totality.

It can, thus, be concluded that the metatheory of Critical Theory as a scientific cognitive project is defined as materialist, historical, dialectical, critical, totalising and interdisciplinary.

The use of the metatheory of Critical Theory for Development Theory

I believe that the case of Critical Theory can be useful for Development Theory on two levels. Firstly, as an example of metatheorising. There is a sense of failure in Development Theory which has been maintained despite the new theoretical approaches that appeared after the impasse. It is therefore necessary to undertake a thorough reflection not only on specific development theories, but on Development Theory as a cognitive project. Such an exercise is what the example of Critical Theory provides. In face of a perceived failure of the project of social philosophy, there was a successful reformulation of its foundations which gave place to a new and prolific endeavour. I believe that a similar process should be the main goal of Development Theory today.

Secondly, the specific metatheory of Critical Theory presents some features from which a renewed Development Theory could learn for its own determination. I claimed above that the problems of Development Theory were caused by its normative character, which implied that the knowledge generated was very much influenced both by a pressure for finding suitable policy recommendations and by wider social processes such as globalisation. The consequence was that a lack of reflection on these issues led to a succession of competing paradigms which were

not able to achieve the intended objectives. In this sense, a project which was materialist, historical, dialectical, critical, totalising and interdisciplinary could potentially help overcome these weaknesses.

In my opinion, Development Theory should be *materialist*, as it is concerned with practical social problems with a very physical dimension such as poverty. Moreover, the non-absolute and therefore *historical* feature of the materialism proposed by Critical Theory is also essential, as social reality is ever changing and knowledge about it must be constantly reassessed.

The complexity of the object of study of Development Theory also requires it to be *dialectical* and *totalising*. Development cannot be understood by focusing on a restricted area or level of society, but it is affected by events and interactions at all levels. This makes it impossible to look at strictly unidirectional causal effects, but the whole range of dialectical effects among social elements must, to some extent, be taken into account. This implies the consideration of wider social processes and their interrelations with elements at other levels.

This kind of analysis is, as it was argued in the presentation of Critical Theory, impossible without an *interdisciplinary* approach. Development is determined by relationships between a wide range of elements and processes which are currently analysed by different disciplines. Only a common effort to transcend the boundaries of the disciplines will allow for the proper awareness of the complexities that have to be understood in order to be able to formulate useful policy recommendations.

Finally, I believe that the basic goal of development, whatever form its specific formulation takes, means that Development Theory must be *critical*. Talking about development implies the recognition of something that needs to be changed in society, and this requires a transformative approach to overcome the reproduction of the present situation in ways which will not bring about the desired changes.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Development Theory is currently failing to accomplish its objectives, and has suggested that in order to overcome its problems a process of reflection on itself or metatheorising is needed. This should have as an outcome a new metatheory, a set of defining elements of the scientific cognitive project of

Development Theory which would allow it to achieve its goals. I have also contended that the case of Critical Theory constitutes a useful example of how Development Theory could undertake this reflective exercise, and of how it could benefit from a metatheory which is materialist, historical, dialectical, critical, totalising and interdisciplinary. I would like to conclude now with a few comments about this endeavour.

First, Critical Theory has been used only as an example which could inform the metatheoretical efforts of Development Theory. I have employed it because of my personal conviction of its usefulness for the case studied here. Yet I think that it is up to development theorists to decide in what ways they should metatheorise, and alternative options are obviously available. Moreover, I do not intend to fall on the naïve belief that there is a homogeneous body of development theorists who will agree on collectively undertaking this exercise and would reach a unanimous conclusion. The example of Critical Theory shows how the initiative will have to start from individual or small group efforts. However, if any impact has to be achieved they will have to subsequently incorporate other theorists and, even more importantly, other members of the development community. This does not mean that all development theorists and practitioners will have to join this project, but even if alternatives to the project of Critical Theory exist, a critical mass should be achieved if the new enterprise is to be effectively transformative.

This leads to my second point, which is that of the relationship between Development Theory and practice. The object of study of Development Theory must not be understood solely as a social process which happens in isolation of the production of knowledge about it. On the contrary, knowledge of development and development are inextricably intertwined, and Development Theory must necessarily pay attention to how its products are used to make policy and affect the world. It is within the study of the workings of this interrelationship that the key to a more relevant Development Theory lies.

Finally, the previous argument suggests that one of the main tasks of Development Theory must be metatheorising. Because of its direct impact on development policymaking and its tendency to get enmeshed in specific practical questions, Development Theory must not only position its findings in the context of larger social processes but also continually reflect in on itself. It was lack of metatheorising in the past which gave way to the myriad of problems of the present, and the new

Development Theory proposed here will have to metatheorise if it does not want to see itself also falling into an impasse.

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