

Rethinking Development

Written by Tayyab Mahmud

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TAYYAB MAHMUD, SEP 3 2012

Perhaps there has never been a better historical moment to interrogate development. The fog of market fundamentalism and the neoliberal consensus has lifted a bit in the wake of the financial meltdown and the lingering and almost global economic crisis. Bond market vigilantes are turning even governments in the Global North into debt-collecting agencies on behalf of the global oligarchy of finance capital; a fate until now reserved for the Global South. The purported link between capitalism and democracy appears stained if not severed as states in the Global North resort to declaring Financial Martial Laws. “Capitalism with Asian characteristics” complements “Socialism with American characteristics” – read public bailouts of finance capital. Technocratic governance displaces political government. While the welfare state follows the fate of the development state towards shrinkage and oblivion, the coercive capacity of the state, the capacity and willingness to wage war both within and without, grows unabated. Ubiquitous austerity measures and structural adjustments are yet again transferring wealth from the poor to the rich both within and across states. All this unmistakably underscores that mythologies of the “free market” notwithstanding, the concert of the hidden hand of the market and the iron fist of the state is indispensable for capitalism, and that accumulation by dispossession is a basic *ontological condition* of capitalism, rather than just its historical pre-condition. The only growth industry today, besides privatized prisons, is the production of liminal spaces and subjects at the margins of legal orders and formal economies – “the other side of universality – the moral and legal *no man’s land*, where universality, yet again, finds its spatial limit.”

The Role of Debt

After thirty years of the neoliberal counter-revolution, it is time for those tasked to rethink development to take political economy seriously. Those weaned on mythologies of “free market,” “governance,” “human capital,” “deregulations,” “balanced budget,” and “inflation is the enemy” have to clearly understand that neo-liberal globalization is the hegemony of finance capital, unimpeded by national, democratic or popular control. We have to recognize that for over a generation, finance capital has presided over a combination of structural adjustments and capillary governmentalities. The explosion of debt and restructuring of labor markets furnish the most evocative examples.

The explosion of debt, both sovereign and personal, did not just happen. Capture of monetary policy and designation of inflation as the enemy of all, are hallmarks of neoliberal counter-revolution and hegemony of finance capital. Note that inflation is the enemy of finance capital; the enemy of the workers is unemployment. As the welfare state shrank, workers had to purchase private welfare. Private deficits displaced public deficits. In this schema, debt rather than full employment was the response to the chronic demand deficit of capitalism. From reverse red-lining in housing markets in the Global North to micro-lending in the Global South, ever increasing numbers were drawn into circuits of debt. If ever-growing debt-driven consumption responded to the aggregate demand problem, it also disciplined. Bond markets discipline ostensibly sovereign states. Finance companies discipline companies. Credit reports discipline consumers. Repayment schedules discipline micro-borrowers. All disciplined to be pliant facilitators of predatory capital accumulation.

And debt disciplined labor markets that today increasingly stand restructured outside zones of public and private law. The informal economy, ostensibly “discovered” by economists in the 1970s in Africa, was always where those dispossessed by incipient capitalism, the reserve army of labor, those condemned to the “waiting room of history,” etched out a living by creating an economy of need. Under the hegemony of finance capital, this zone is no longer

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simply an accompaniment of formal labor markets or confined to the Global South. As Fordist and Taylorist production systems give way to the social factory and collective knowledges become yet another new commons enclosed and captured for private appropriation, everyone is supposed to be a “free” independent contractor, responsibly investing in and deploying his/her “human capital.” Of course, without job-security, without any welfare safety net, and without unions.

The Origins of Development

Today, the neoliberal counter-revolution has stalled, though by no means defeated. Even in the United States, a society where 85% are supposed to think and did think that they belong to the upward mobile middle class, the ideas of “We are the 99%,” and General Strike have entered a hitherto depoliticized political culture. It is a great time, then, to re-call and re-state some basics about the genealogy and trajectory of the idea and project called development. We all know this story so well that we may have forgotten it.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the idea of “development” has operated as both a cognitive category and a relation of force, to re-map the terrain marked by the colonial encounter and the condition of post-coloniality. One has to be clear that the grammar of colonialism is in the genetic code of the development project. How could it be otherwise? After all, both capitalism and liberalism, hallmarks of modernity and founts of the development project, were constituted in and through the colonial encounter. Indeed, the very first use of the word *capital*, in the sense of bases for capitalism as a new mode of production, was coined in 1766 in the context of capital-intensive but slave-hungry Antillean sugar plantations. Colonialism forged capitalism and liberalism by furnishing the field where their inner core came forth. Accumulation by dispassion and engulfment in exception, the defining and enduring grounds of capitalism and liberalism, blossomed and matured in and through colonial subjugation.

Development, then, is the latest variant of the 500 year-old project variously called: saving native souls, the white man’s burden, manifest destiny, the civilizing mission, and the historical imperative of progress. Development is not just a theory about economic growth and elimination of poverty, but an ideological and an institutional device to consolidate the domination and hegemony of the Global North over the Global South. The condition of post-coloniality, then, may be conceptualized as an effect of, and a condition of subjection to, the development project, with the latter seen as a discursive structure, a disciplinary apparatus, an institutional modality, and a meta-theory of history whose genealogy is firmly rooted in the colonial encounter.

My submission is that development is, above all, a way of thinking. Once consolidated, it determines what can be thought, said, and even imagined. Development defines a perceptual domain, colonizes reality, and produces subjectivities. Development is not only an omni-historical ideological construct, and a hegemonic global discourse; it is the primary instrument of cartography of postcolonial “imaginary. As a full-service enterprise, with confident notions of time and space, of nature and culture, of society and individual, of the good and the truth, development is the primary mechanism through which particular parts of the world and particular subjects and subjectivities are produced. In the process, and as result, precluded are other ways of imagining, seeing, doing and living. Like imperialism, the development project entails “epistemic violence,” – a violence against the other exercised by confident systems of knowledge and a violence embedded in the constitutive function of such systems.

As a result, even its critiques remain imprisoned within the imaginary of development, and can only speak of alternative development. I submit that a radical critique must move beyond the discourse of alternative development and begin to imagine alternatives to development. A radical critique that has to be cognizant of the charge that perhaps all social theory is fear of the plebeians – fear of the mob – indeed a fear of humanity. Furthermore, could it be that the urban bias of social theory and social theories comes in the way of any satisfactory reading of the perennial agrarian question?

The specific discourse of development emerged in the era of national liberation struggles as a containment strategy to appropriate and normalize challenges to colonialism and neo-colonialism. Development policies and projects proliferated in an attempt to manage the evident poverty and inequality in postcolonial settings by isolating the causes of these conditions within these settings, thereby rendering invisible the role of global forces in instituting

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these very conditions. “National” development was scripted by this new discourse. It did so by positing an underdeveloped, underproductive subject to be named, located, studied, theorized, and ultimately policed through development policies and projects. Once defined, located and policed, this subject was to be the ostensible beneficiary of development projects imparted from above by governments under the direction of international agencies. This teleology of progress not only provided an alibi for colonialism’s role in forging the conditions of post-coloniality, but it also furnished the rationale for continued surveillance of postcolonial societies and subjects. Categories of need and care abstracted by this discourse warranted development projects that extended the opportunity for exploitative economic and social relations into every corner of the globe.

One can, then, configure the development project as the sum of three gestures. First, development demarcates a site of intervention of power by constituting abnormalities in the anatomy of the Global South, amenable to specific interventions. Second, through normalization of development within a knowledge/power matrix, a field of control is demarcated. Social issues are removed from the political realm to the preserves of science to facilitate a regime of truths and norms. Third, institutionalization and professionalization of development at all levels is secured, ranging from international organizations and national planning bodies to local development agencies and development NGOs. These institutions—a network of new sites of power—constitute an interlinked global apparatus of development.

With this in mind we can conceptualize development as an institutional apparatus that links forms of knowledge about the Global South with the deployment of particular forms of power and intervention. Once societies become the targets of new mechanisms of power—embodied in endless programs and strategies—their economies, societies, and cultures are offered up as new objects of knowledge that, in turn, create new possibilities of power.

The Hegemony of Development

If we have located the genealogy of development, what of its critique? I would argue that the imaginary of development imprisons even its critiques. This is primarily the effect of a meta-theory of history, the foundation of the development project, which holds hegemonic sway even on the critics. This meta-theory, a progeny of the Enlightenment project, is one that posits all human history as a unidirectional and liner movement from primitive to modern. Forged in the context of the colonial encounter, this meta-history assigned colonized societies to the prehistory of the West and served to legitimize domination and subjugation. This meta-theory of history was primarily concerned with the difference the colonized native presented for the colonizer, and explicitly empowered certain cultures while suppressing others. Saturated with assumptions of development, this meta-history envisions a postcolonial global civilization where all other surviving civilizations are supposed to define themselves with reference thereto. All surviving cultures have to rewrite their own history and live up to that of the West. In this schema, then, post-colonial peoples have a noxious past, a degraded present, and someone else’s enviable present as their future. Rabindranath Tagore, writing almost a century ago, stated the matter well when he said, “the entire East is attempting to take into itself a history which is not the outcome of its own living.”

While the genealogy of the development discourse is rooted in ideologically laden Cold War rhetoric of “stages of growth” and “modernization,” development as a discursive phenomenon and as a policy assumes a stubbornly non-ideological character. International development agencies and state bureaucracies become what have been evocatively designated “anti-politics machines” because they continually reduce the questions of poverty and degradation to failures of technological advancement. In its refusal to interrogate the history and operations of capitalism and geopolitical power relations that generate conditions of poverty, developmentism as an ideology conjures an anti- historical reality, in that its structure and function are deemed immutable, present in the same form throughout history. This discourse renders development an immutable fact, a value-neutral process, and an imperative of history prior to, and beyond, political struggles and resistance.

Dysfunctions of the global capitalist economy and the resulting gap between the promise and actuality of the development project, the problem of social welfare versus Darwinism of the market, protection versus comparative advantage, and growth versus environmental protection each open up spaces for critique. To date the critiques have taken two roads. First, there is the series of internal critiques of the project accompanied by proposals for its modification and revitalization. These critiques often use the rhetoric of relief for the poor. Their overriding concern,

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however, is to keep intact the basic foundations of the global economic order and its favorite progeny, the development project. Then there are the critiques that often succeed in exposing claims of universality and justice of the capitalist model of development, and in the process demystify the linkage of the development project with global capitalism.

However, some problems remain. By virtually externalizing the sources of crises, states and ruling elites in the Global South remain the only relevant actors for any strategy of action that may be suggested by counter-proposals of the alternative structural analysis. The center-periphery models of economic relations do not recognize the supra-territorial flexibility and heterogeneity of globalization—the contemporary phase of the capitalist mode of production. Prescriptions of delinking postcolonial economies from global capitalism do not adequately address the contemporary modes of global capital accumulation. The conceptual framework of delinking rests on an understanding of the postcolonial state as an autonomous regulator of the flow of commodities, capital, and labor—an understanding not warranted in the context of neo-liberal restructuring of the global capitalist economy. In the final analysis, the structural critique maintains fidelity to modernity's meta-theory of linear history, and hence its implied prescription remains development, even though now qualified as "autonomous."

A favorite modern counter-response to resistance to hegemonic discourses and materialities is to split the construct being challenged or resisted. Development has been similarly split into "conventional" development and "alternative" development. The latter has many aliases: "sustainable development," "eco-development," "indigenous development," "grassroots development," "participatory development," "green-development" – in a word, "kinder and gentler development." The problem is that these characterizations remain prescriptions for development, prescriptions for a unidirectional journey along the linear inclined plane of history hoping to arrive at a terminus called modernity.

Beyond Development

We are often cautioned about a deficit of hope involved in any radical critique of the development project. I believe that loss of hope reigns where we cannot imagine alternatives to hegemonic constructs. To move towards alternatives to development, questions of subjectivity and the agency of transformation must be squarely addressed and the issue of practice taken seriously. This, in turn, necessitates reexamining the relationship of development discourse and construction of the postcolonial subject. As we continue the turn towards de-centering the subject by disrupting liberalism's notion of a free and autonomous agent's self-determined movement towards liberation from tradition and oppression, a space for the subject's critical distance and reflexivity must be retained. We must not reduce the subject to be a mere property and effect of discourse or to equate consciousness with hegemony. We should not posit hegemony as an overarching order that cannot be escaped, creating a discursively constituted subject imprisoned within it. Such a conceptual straight-jacket leads to the impasse of "can the subaltern speak?" Useful here is Antonio Gramsci's model of a fragmented composite subject that is constituted as an "inventory of traces" of multiple and fragmented hegemonies. Similarly useful is to theorize a desiring subject who avoids full determination by the symbolic order because there is always a surplus of the "real" over any symbolization. We should, therefore, focus on the ongoing tension between specific structures of domination and "lines of flight"—desires that escape these hegemonic formations and bear the seeds of change. It is along the fault lines between domination and desire that "the individual repeatedly passes from language to language." In this framework, then, one can theorize the postcolonial subject as a bundle of agencies; as a complex site of conflicting desires and multiple subjective modalities. Beneath the dominant technologies of modernity there survives a "polytheism of scattered practices ... dominated but not erased by the triumphal success of one of their number." It is in this context that we should turn to counter-hegemonic "stories and struggles from the bottom;" –We have to recover, restore, regenerate and refashion "subjugated knowledges," as a strategy to "bring hegemonic historiography of development to crisis."

We have to start with exploring a theory of political action, without which all theorizing about alternatives to development would remain at the level of global normativism, a preserve of the counter-elites in the West and their jet-setting counterparts in the rest. As a first step we need to challenge the legitimization of the intellectual role of elites in determining the terms of self-definition for their societies. Alternatives to development practiced by popular

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movements presuppose that theories of political action will emerge from the concrete struggles of the people at specific conjunctures. Only in this process do the activists of popular movements become their own theorists and theorists find validation of their constructs through direct involvement in such movements.

We find ourselves in a world characterized by increasingly pervasive norms of the so-called free market: competition, freedom from others, consumerism, and self-fulfillment. With individuals posited as self-contained, self-interested, competitive, and primarily driven by greed, these norms reorder the balance between the individual and the community. Collective identities, duties to others, and social solidarities are increasingly banished from public discourse. This has a profoundly negative impact on the potential and scope of theory-building and collective movements that aim at foundational transformations of collective life.

Imagining alternatives to development summons a more substantive and non-linear understanding of human life and well-being — a bringing together of both material and non-material human needs. Economic processes will have to be designed and evaluated with reference to self-determination and autonomy of cultures. Alternatives to development will issue from an engaged critique of the pervasive ethos of over-consumption, a consequence of globalized commodification and capital accumulation masquerading as development and progress. We will need to explore and actualize individual and collective lives that respect the inner boundaries of the person and the outer-limits of nature.

What is ultimately at stake is the transformation of the political, economic, and institutional regimes of truth production that have defined the era of development. This, in turn, requires changes in institutions and social relations, openness to various forms of knowledge and cultural manifestations, new styles of participation, and greater community autonomy over the production of norms and discourses. The agenda of radical critique today must be to devise means of liberating postcolonial societies and cultures from the imaginary of development and for lessening their dependence on the episteme of modernity. The specific task, then, is the construction of collective imaginaries capable of reorienting social and political action. In this context, it is necessary, on the one hand, to deploy non-reductionist and non-teleological notions of politics and economics, and, on the other hand, to facilitate participatory and democratizing potentials of new social subjects.

Demarcation of subjectivities not defined by hegemonic discourse of development may well be the first task of social criticism and political activism on the road to imagining alternatives to development. We have to continually create and expand a space at the margins of the present neo-liberal global civilization for a new, plural, political ecology of knowledge. In this particular context, we have to recognize that located at the variously entangled public spaces, “the postcolonial subject is often forced to bargain in a pre-existing conceptual marketplace.” We have to recognize that the subaltern may well be “ideologically promiscuous” in his/her tactical alignments with political formations across the ideological spectrum. We have to acknowledge that extreme heterogeneity of struggles against accumulation by dispossession can appear without progressive characteristics, and may be difficult to be brought together both either thematically or geographically. This does not preclude coalition-building. While recognizing that if everyone is comfortable, it is not a coalition.

The grammar of the modern world has always demanded that the victim must learn and adopt the oppressor’s language and worldview before qualifying as a proper dissenter. Consequently the resistance to the conceptual and discursive categories deployed to normalize and homogenize dissent is part of the struggle for survival. At different specific conjunctures this resistance has to adopt myriad forms. It may involve a rejection of modernity’s deepest faith, instrumental rationality, and a subversion of modernity’s cleverest enterprise — development—the race without a finishing line.

Even though postcolonial imaginary is imprisoned by development, Edward Said, who alerted us a generation ago to the constitutive and dominating power of colonial discourses, also reminded us that “in human history there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and this is obviously what makes change possible.” A radical critique of development involves a project that must attempt a restructuring of the traditional perspectives, norms and assumptions that form the basis of modern thought. In order to do so, we must first “change the imaginary in order to be able to act on the real.” The project of peace, justice, dignity and

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community rests on decolonization of imagination. As a first step we need to abandon the search for models of alternative development and start imagining alternatives to development. Perhaps the project today is not so much to rethink development, but to un-think it.

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