



Development and Post-development in a Time of Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

The field of development studies has always presented difficult challenges for policymakers, academics, practitioners, journalists and concerned citizens. Methodologically, these challenges can be usefully approached from two angles. On the one hand, by appreciating the essentially contested nature of the concept of ‘development’. For Gallie (1955, pp. 171–172), an essentially contested concept:

(I) must be *appraisive* in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement. (II) This achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole. (III) Any explanation of its worth must therefore include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features; yet (...) there is nothing absurd or contradictory in any one of a number of possible rival descriptions of its total worth (...) In fine, the accredited achievement is initially variously describable. (IV) The accredited achievement must be of

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a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance (...) [Therefore] we should (...) say not only that different persons or parties adhere to different views of the correct use of (...) [the] concept but (V) that each party recognizes the fact that its own use of it is contested by those of other parties, and that each party must have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question. More simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it against other uses and to recognise that one's own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses.

On the other hand, accepting the limitations of the middle-range theories that are frequently deployed to examine processes of development—that is, processes of systemic change that are only partially purposeful, not fully controllable and highly susceptible to unintended consequences. These processes take place in distinct ways, in large swathes of the globe, over long periods of time.

For Merton (1968), middle-range theories derive inductively from stylised empirical observations (e.g., countries have followed distinct economic policies and have grown at different rates over time; capitalists are wealthier and have a lower marginal propensity to consume than workers; microloans can allow poor people to purchase productive assets and so on). These observations may or may not be 'correct', but they are invariably selective and tend to be highly suggestive of causation; they generally derive from common sense notions of 'how the world works', allusions and reasoning-by-metaphor. They are often based on intellectual fashions, rather than being rigorously grounded on a 'grand' theory and tried and tested chains of reasoning deriving from the structure of the theory, backed up by empirical evidence.

Because of their immediate appeal to plausibility, those (often 'fashionable') middle-range observations can be widely (if temporarily) adopted as analytical starting-points even by analysts with incompatible viewpoints. In this way, those observations end up becoming structures used to explain the stylised facts that had generated them in the first place (e.g., uneven development is due to domestic policy differences; capitalists are richer because they save more; microcredit reduces poverty, etc.). In doing this, middle-range theories tend to conflate cause and effect, since they generally suggest that, since those stylised facts have *implications* for development, they must also *cause* those observable outcomes

without further mediation. This can slip into conclusions unsupported by a solid analytical scaffolding, that could secure the conceptual structure and contextualise its outcomes (e.g., individual countries are entirely to blame for their own failure to develop; in order to accelerate economic growth governments must cut taxes on the rich; or governments should transfer resources from development banks to microcredit institutions). Over time, the structure of middle-range theories tends to create logical fissures and missing links with the evidence that, in time, become apparent and lead to their supersession by newer fashions based on different sets of empirical observations.

The essentially contested nature of development implies that disagreements about its meaning, significance and implications, and the ‘best’ policies to accomplish developmental goals can never be resolved definitively. In addition, the deployment of middle-range theories to examine specific development problems, which may be demarcated thematically, chronologically, geographically or in other ways, can create intractable difficulties. The difficulties concern the identification of the problem, its context and historical background, consideration of the options, evaluation of the policy choices and so on. These complexities cannot be untangled by middle-range approaches, since they derive inductively from the specific cases themselves, rather than from abstract (foundational) principles. Examples of middle-range theories in development include structuralist, dependency and evolutionary theories and, as will be shown below, post-development. To reiterate, these theories are not necessarily ‘wrong’, since, in the social sciences, validity is quite separate from theoretical consistency. However, by construction middle-range theories stand in contrast with grand theories starting from first principles. These seek to derive logically conclusions that may, eventually, inform policy choices or that could be applied empirically in other ways. Grand theories in development include, primarily, neoclassical and Marxist theory—showing that the matter concerns methodology rather than political preference, ideological inclination or the orientation of the conclusions.

The twin challenges of the contested nature of development and the dominance of middle-range theory are aptly captured in this collection. It focuses on the deconstruction of conventional development discourses (with a small d, in the sense of Hart, 2009; see also Lewis, 2019, Mawdsley & Taggart, 2022), and the critique of their implications for Development (with a capital D) problems and processes. This

is done primarily, though not exclusively, from the perspective of post-development (see, for example, Escobar, 1995; Rahnama & Bawtree, 1997; Sachs, 1992).

This essay includes four short sections. Following this introduction, the second section outlines the agenda of the post-development approaches examined in the contributions to this volume, and their strengths. The third identifies some potential shortcomings in these approaches. The final section outlines the challenges to thinking about development in a time of multiple, overlapping and systemic crises.

DEVELOPING A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA

Post-development approaches are, by construction, middle-range. They have offered four especially important contributions to the study of d/Development. First, they provide rich critiques of the history of development and the limitations of the current global dispensation and offer convincing arguments supporting radical (and much needed) changes to our modes of living. This is clearly stated by Ashish Kothari in this volume, who highlights ‘the broad contours of transformation being attempted or needed, if we are to move towards socio-economic equity and justice, and ecological sustainability. (...) Draw[ing] from broad principles such as social justice and well-being and cultural diversity (...) [t]he initiatives I present are a complex mix of creating spaces within the existing system and fundamentally challenging it, of synergising old and new knowledge, and of retaining or regaining the best of traditional and modern life while discarding their worst’. The goal is to identify ‘a different set of principles and values than the ones on which the currently dominant economic and political structures are based’ (see Chapter 4).

Second, post-development approaches have highlighted powerfully the limitations, contradictions and perverse outcomes of the theories associated, most recently, with the Washington Consensus and the post-Washington Consensus, and the neoliberal policies that derive from them (see Fine & Saad-Filho, 2014). These policies have often failed in their own terms, when the outcomes are compared with the stated goals of the adjustment programmes that, often, herald the policy shift towards neoliberalism (in this volume, Telleria and Ziai critically review the chequered history of development studies, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni examines five waves, or phases, of structural adjustment in Africa, with dire consequences for the continent).

Third, post-development approaches have highlighted, perhaps as never before, the agency, voice and heterogeneity of the subaltern, the intrinsic value of their experiences, the severity of the consequences of the mainstream policies imposed upon them and the drastic implications of these policies for subaltern lives and communities (see, in particular, the contributions by Armijos-Burneo et al., and Zeweri and Farmer in this volume).

Finally, post-development approaches have stressed the limits of the Earth within the currently dominant modality of development. Recognition of the ecological disasters inflicted by neoliberal development strategies is valuable, but post-development contributions go beyond the description of specific outrages. They also draw systemic conclusions about the climate catastrophe driven by contemporary capitalism, and the tensions, contradictions and displacements currently reshaping the global environment, with unpredictable but, inevitably, catastrophic consequences (see Castro-Sotomayor and Minoia in this volume, and IPCC, 2021).

LIMITATIONS

The valuable contributions of post-development approaches outlined in the previous section coexist with analytical constraints that may affect some contributions in different ways. Perhaps the most significant is the focus on the small, rural, native and marginalised (see, for example, the thoughtful intervention by Ziai in this volume). This can serve as a valuable counterweight to the stress of most conventional development literature on macroeconomic policy issues, the preferences of large-scale industrial and financial capital and the machinations of powerful interest groups operating through the state. This is unquestionably limited, and limiting; yet, the alternative focus on the small can shift the analysis away from the fact that the so-called developing world, today, is mostly (peri-) urban and proletarian, rather than agrarian and peasant, and there is no way back from this.

A closely related issue concerns the assumption in some post-development writings that traditional communities either are, or were, organised horizontally and that they lack internal drivers of change, with movement being imposed from outside, typically through imperialist intervention. Historically, however, traditional societies tended to be heavily hierarchical, and those social structures were often destroyed (or,

in some cases, transformed and partly reinforced) through confrontations against colonising and imperialist powers. These confrontations frequently ended in the brutal defeat and destruction of the social structures that used to prevail in the societies under attack, while new structures of inequality emerged under conditions of external domination. Pre- or post-conflict, traditional societies were always dynamic, but generally not democratic, open or tolerant. Notwithstanding the strengths and limitations of Western 'bourgeois democracy', they ought not to be compared with this given the sharp differences in ambitions and circumstances. To project upon today's most marginalised societies arcadian or timeless fictions of freedom and equality would distract from the recognition of their internal contradictions, dynamics and processes of change, which would be idealistic and ahistorical.

Examination of the material structures of social reproduction is essential for the study of any society. It follows that proposals for policy changes or, more ambitiously, for wholesale social transformation, must recognise that a predominantly urban world with 8 billion people cannot be sustained without industrial processes and mass production, mass employment, mass housing and mass transportation, large-scale provision of public services and so on. In turn, these must draw on scientific rationality and the organisation of production with a view to the maximisation of efficiency and the minimisation of waste by some generally accepted criteria. This implies that traditional small-scale agriculture and artisanal production, while deserving of respect, autonomy and support, cannot be expected to expand significantly, at least in the medium term, since this would be incompatible with the sustenance of contemporary societies. Note, also, that 'autonomy' and 'support' may come into contradiction (e.g., the provision of financial services, tax rebates, grants, export subsidies, roads, electricity and other infrastructure, and legally enforceable labour rights could infringe on local autonomy).

In other words, while it is imperative to limit and, if possible, reverse the assault of capitalist accumulation on the world's remaining non-capitalist enclaves, this cannot be scaled up towards the expectation that the wider technologies, property relations and structures of social reproduction can be dismantled, unless we are willing to contemplate catastrophic losses of earnings, social identities (currently, mostly based on urban and proletarian circumstances) and welfare systems. While it is essential to recognise place, roots and identities, it will take time to reorganise a world that has been structured by internationalised patterns

of production, consumption and employment. The encasement of the analysis into marginalised communities can limit the reach of some post-development contributions and highlights the importance of avoiding the drift into political ambitions that may be incompatible with the material circumstances, forms of living and expectations of the vast majority.

Urgent solutions are needed for a wide range of problems hindering the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world, and policy changes can give an essential contribution to the improvement of their circumstances. For example, cash transfer programmes (while heavily questionable on account of their conditions as well as side-effects) can drastically reduce extreme poverty (Saad-Filho, 2015); funding for education and health services can save lives and improve prospects for the vulnerable and better infrastructure can facilitate production and enrich the lives of the poor. They must have the same rights to information, mobile telephones, transport, water, sanitation and advanced healthcare as anyone else, even though these services cannot generally be financed, organised or provided entirely within, or by, small communities. It is also essential to recognise that poverty under capitalism has two analytically distinct drivers, which have been examined in very different ways with significant political and policy implications.

For mainstream economics, poverty derives primarily from exclusion from market processes because of incomplete markets, market failures or limitations to voluntary exchange. It is measured by the inability to reach arbitrary expenditure lines, which could be US\$2.15 per day or whatever. This viewpoint implies that markets are unambiguously creators of wealth, and that economic growth, the expansion of markets and the integration of poor people into them can eliminate poverty, for example, through opportunities for paid work or sales of goods or services. This approach is rightly criticised by post-development scholars because it is incomplete: although economic growth can alleviate poverty, adverse forms of integration into the market economy can also create poverty. This can happen, for example, through the dispossession of poor peasants by debt or rural development projects or the elimination of livelihoods because of the expansion of large capital (e.g., the dislocation of street sellers by new planning laws, new supermarkets or gentrification). In addition, capital-intensive technological change (from tractors to robots) can destroy jobs and skills, and ‘pro-market’ policy shifts can disrupt established lifestyles (for example, trade liberalisation can make small-scale

agriculture economically unviable). Market growth can also create environmental stresses that undermine livelihoods and destroy the productive capabilities of the poor (e.g., rising commercial demand can lead to overfishing and the collapse of stocks). This implies that ‘free markets’ do not necessarily or spontaneously eliminate poverty, and that targeted policies are *always* needed to steer economic growth towards social integration, sustainable livelihoods and the distribution of wealth. While mainstream economic theories focus almost exclusively on the potential of markets to eliminate poverty, post-development approaches generally stress how capitalist policies and processes create poverty. It is, however, important to recognise that *both* the creation and the elimination of poverty are inherent to capitalism, and their interaction must be examined concretely.

A final comment about post-development approaches is that stressing the local can shift the focus away from systemic or society-wide processes that can condition or set limits to actions by individuals or small communities. For example, the growth of inequality, premature deindustrialisation and premature financialisation under neoliberalism, or the adverse implications for the poor of the macro-institutional structures of neoliberalism, such as ‘independent’ central banks and regulators, the proliferation of privatisations, public–private partnerships, conditional (rather than universal) welfare benefits and so on. Going beyond the well-known concerns of the economic development literature, post-development has, rightly, called attention to the twin imperatives of ecological sustainability and climate justice. These potentially competing imperatives, and the ensuing policy choices, must be examined in the light of their implications for the poor and for the poor countries, including their right to development and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (see Saad-Filho, 2022).

DEVELOPMENT IN A TIME OF CRISIS

We live in times of crisis, across the economy (prolonged stagnation punctuated by catastrophic finance-driven crises), politics (the erosion of democracy and the rise of new forms of fascism), health provision (expressed by the disastrous outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic), the environment (due to the joint pressures of the pursuit of profit at the local level and climate change at the level of the world as a whole), and much else, with implications for employment, trade, food production, water supplies and more (for details see Saad-Filho, 2021). Post-development

approaches have made an important contribution to the examination of these processes and their implications for the global system, all the way to local communities.

Systemic and overlapping crises demand complex and internally consistent explanations, that must be grounded on a grand theory. These crises also open spaces for new understandings of the problems of contemporary development, their root causes and the potential solutions responding to local demands, however, contested these diagnoses and policy proposals may be. These alternatives must address the flaws, shortcomings, contradictions and limitations of an infinitely acquisitive and environmentally destructive neoliberal modality of capitalism whose prosperity relies, increasingly, on outright despoliation, extraction and fraud. Neoliberalism must be overcome in order to preserve lives, livelihoods and the stability of the Earth's climate. No task is more urgent, and none requires greater mobilisation of our collective energies.

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