

Development

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To say 'yes', to approve, to accept, the Brazilians say 'no' — *pois nao*. But no one gets confused. By culturally rooting their speech, by playing with the words to make them speak in their contexts, the Brazilians enrich their conversation.

In saying 'development', however, most people are now saying the opposite of what they want to convey. Everyone gets confused. By using uncritically such a loaded word, and one doomed to extinction, they are transforming its agony into a chronic condition. From the unburied corpse of development, every kind of pest has started to spread. The time has come to unveil the secret of development and see it in all its conceptual starkness.

The Invention of Underdevelopment

At the end of World War II, the United States was a formidable and incessant productive machine, unprecedented in history. It was indisputedly at the centre of the world. It was the master. All the institutions created in those years recognized that fact: even the United Nations Charter echoed the United States Constitution.

But the Americans wanted something more. They needed to make entirely explicit their new position in the world. And they wanted to consolidate that hegemony and make it permanent. For these purposes, they conceived a political campaign on a global scale that clearly bore their seal. They even conceived an appropriate emblem to identify the campaign. And they carefully chose the opportunity to launch both — January 20, 1949. That very day, the day on which President Truman took office, a new era was opened for the world — the era of development.

We must embark [President Truman said] on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.

The old imperialism — exploitation for foreign profit — has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing.¹

By using for the first time in such context the word, 'underdeveloped', Truman changed the meaning of development and created the emblem, a euphemism, used ever since to allude either discreetly or inadvertently to the era of American hegemony.

Never before had a word been universally accepted on the very day of its political coinage. A new perception of one's own self, and of the other, was suddenly created. Two hundred years of social construction of the historical-political meaning of the term, development, were successfully usurped and transmogrified. A political and philosophical proposition of Marx, packaged

American-style as a struggle against communism and at the service of the hegemonic design of the United States, succeeded in permeating both the popular and intellectual mind for the rest of the century.

Underdevelopment began, then, on January 20, 1949. On that day, two billion people became underdeveloped. In a real sense, from that time on, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of others' reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in the terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority.

Truman was not the first to use the word. Wilfred Benson, a former member of the Secretariat of the International Labour Organization, was probably the person who invented it when he referred to the 'underdeveloped areas' while writing on the economic basis for peace in 1942.² But the expression found no further echo, neither with the public nor with the experts. Two years later, Rosenstein-Rodan continued to speak of 'economically backward areas'. Arthur Lewis, also in 1944, referred to the gap between the rich and the poor nations. Throughout the decade, the expression appeared occasionally in technical books or United Nations documents. But it only acquired relevance when Truman presented it as the emblem of his own policy. In this context, it took on an unsuspected colonizing virulence.

Since then, development has connoted at least one thing: to escape from the undignified condition called underdevelopment. When Nyerere proposed that development be the political mobilization of a people for attaining their own objectives, conscious as he was that it was madness to pursue the goals that others had set; when Rodolfo Stavenhagen proposes today ethnodevelopment or development with self-confidence, conscious that we need to 'look within' and 'search for one's own culture' instead of using borrowed and foreign views; when Jimoh Omo-Fadaka suggests a development from the bottom up, conscious that all strategies based on a top-down design have failed to reach their explicitly stated objectives; when Orlando Fals Borda and Anisur Rahman insist on participatory development, conscious of the exclusions made in the name of development; when Jun Nishikawa proposes an 'other' development for Japan, conscious that the current era is ending; when they and so many others qualify development and use the word with caveats and restrictions as if they were walking in a minefield, they do not seem to see the counter-productivity of their efforts. The minefield has already exploded.

In order for someone to conceive the possibility of escaping from a particular condition, it is necessary first to feel that one has fallen into that condition. For those who make up two-thirds of the world's population today, to think of development — of any kind of development — requires first the perception of themselves as underdeveloped, with the whole burden of connotations that this carries.

Today, for two-thirds of the peoples of the world, underdevelopment is a threat that has already been carried out; a life experience of subordination and of being led astray, of discrimination and subjugation. Given that precondition, the simple fact of associating with development one's own

intention tends to annul the intention, to contradict it, to enslave it. It impedes thinking of one's own objectives, as Nyerere wanted; it undermines confidence in oneself and one's own culture, as Stavenhagen demands; it clamours for management from the top down, against which Jimoh rebelled; it converts participation into a manipulative trick to involve people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them, which was precisely what Fals Borda and Rahman wanted to avoid.

A Metaphor and its Contorted History

Development occupies the centre of an incredibly powerful semantic constellation. There is nothing in modern mentality comparable to it as a force guiding thought and behaviour. At the same time, very few words are as feeble, as fragile and as incapable of giving substance and meaning to thought and behaviour as this one.

In common parlance, development describes a process through which the potentialities of an object or organism are released, until it reaches its natural, complete, full-fledged form. Hence the metaphoric use of the term to explain the natural growth of plants and animals. Through this metaphor, it became possible to show the goal of development and, much later, its programme. The development or evolution of living beings, in biology, referred to the process through which organisms achieved their genetic potential: the natural form of the being pre-seen by the biologist. Development was frustrated whenever the plant or the animal failed to fulfil its genetic programme, or substituted for it another. In such cases of failure, its growth was not development but rather an anomaly: pathological, and even anti-natural behaviour. The study of these 'monsters' became critical for the formulation of the first biological theories.

It was between 1759 (Wolff) and 1859 (Darwin) that development evolved from a conception of transformation that moves toward the *appropriate* form of being to a conception of transformation that moves towards an *ever more perfect* form. During this period, evolution and development began to be used as interchangeable terms by scientists.

The transfer of the biological metaphor to the social sphere occurred in the last quarter of the 18th century. Justus Moser, the conservative founder of social history, from 1768 used the word *Entwicklung* to allude to the gradual process of social change. When he talked about the transformation of some political situations, he described them almost as natural processes. In 1774, Herder started to publish his interpretation of universal history, in which he presented global correlations by comparing the ages of life with social history. But he went beyond this comparison, applying to his elaborations the organological notion of development coined in the scientific discussions of his time. He frequently used the image of the germ to describe the development of organizational forms. By the end of the century, based on the biological scale of Bonnet, he tried to combine the theory of nature with the philosophy of history in an attempt to create a systematic and consistent unity. Historical development was the continuation of natural development, according to him; and both were just variants of the homogeneous development of the cosmos,

created by God.

Towards 1800, *Entwicklung* began to appear as a reflexive verb. Self-development became fashionable. God, then, started to disappear in the popular conception of the universe. And a few decades later, all possibilities were opened to the human subject, author of his own development, emancipated from the divine design. Development became the central category of Marx's work: revealed as a historical process that unfolds with the same necessary character of natural laws. Both the Hegelian concept of history and the Darwinist concept of evolution were interwoven in development, reinforced with the scientific aura of Marx.

When the metaphor returned to the vernacular, it acquired a violent colonizing power, soon employed by the politicians. It converted history into a programme: a necessary and inevitable destiny. The industrial mode of production, which was no more than one, among many, forms of social life, became the definition of the terminal stage of a unilinear way of social evolution. This stage came to be seen as the natural culmination of the potentials already existing in neolithic man, as his logical evolution. Thus history was reformulated in Western terms.

The metaphor of development gave global hegemony to a purely Western genealogy of history, robbing peoples of different cultures of the opportunity to define the forms of their social life. The vernacular sequence (development is possible after envelopment) was inverted with the transfer. Scientific laws took the place of God in the enveloping function, defining the programme. Marx rescued a feasible initiative, based on the knowledge of those laws. Truman took over this perception, but transferred the role of prime mover — the *primum movens* condition — from the communists and the proletariat to the experts and to capital (thus, ironically, following the precedents set by Lenin and Stalin).

The debris of metaphors used throughout the 18th century began to become part of ordinary language in the 19th century, with the word 'development', accumulating in it a whole variety of connotations. This overload of meanings ended up dissolving its precise significance.

The *Encyclopedia of All Systems of Teaching and Education* was published in Germany in 1860. Its entry on 'development' indicated that 'this concept is applied to almost all that man has and knows.' The word, said Eucken in 1878, 'has become almost useless for science, except in certain areas.'

Between 1875 and 1900 there were published, in English, books whose titles alluded to the *development* of the Athenian constitution, the English novel, the transportation system in the United States, marriage, parenting and so on. Some authors preferred 'evolution' in the title of their books studying the thermometer or the idea of God. Others preferred 'growth' in the title, but even they used development in the text as the principal operative term.³

By the beginning of the 20th century, a new use of the term became widespread. 'Urban development' has stood, since then, for a specific manner of reformulation of urban surroundings, based on the bulldozer and the massive, homogeneous industrial production of urban spaces and specialized

installations. But this specific use, an anticipation of Trumanism, did not succeed in establishing the generalized image that is now associated with the word.

In the third decade of the century, the association between development and colonialism, established a century ago, acquired a different meaning. When the British government transformed its Law of Development of the Colonies into the Law of Development and Welfare of the Colonies in 1939, this reflected the profound economic and political mutation produced in less than a decade. To give the philosophy of the colonial protectorate a positive meaning, the British argued for the need to guarantee the natives minimum levels of nutrition, health and education.⁴ A 'dual mandate' started to be sketched: the conqueror should be capable of economically developing the conquered region and at the same time accepting the responsibility of caring for the well-being of the natives. After the identification of the level of civilization with the level of production, the dual mandate collapsed into one: development.⁵

Throughout the century, the meanings associated with urban development and colonial development concurred with many others to transform the word 'development', step by step, into one with contours that are about as precise as those of an amoeba. It is now a mere algorithm whose significance depends on the context in which it is employed. It may allude to a housing project, to the logical sequence of a thought, to the awakening of a child's mind, to a chess game or to the budding of a teenager's breasts. But even though it lacks, on its own, any precise denotation, it is firmly seated in popular and intellectual perception. And it always appears as an evocation of a net of significances in which the person who uses it is irremediably trapped.

Development cannot delink itself from the words with which it was formed — growth, evolution, maturation. Just the same, those who now use the word cannot free themselves from a web of meanings that impart a specific blindness to their language, thought and action. No matter the context in which it is used, or the precise connotation that the person using it wants to give it, the expression becomes qualified and coloured by meanings perhaps unwanted. The word always implies a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better. The word indicates that one is doing well because one is advancing in the sense of a necessary, ineluctable, universal law and toward a desirable goal. The word retains to this day the meaning given to it a century ago by the creator of ecology, Haeckel: 'Development is, from this moment on, the magic word with which we will solve all the mysteries that surround us or, at least, that which will guide us toward their solution.'

But for two-thirds of the people on earth, this positive meaning of the word 'development' — profoundly rooted after two centuries of its social construction — is a reminder of *what they are not*. It is a reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition. To escape from it, they need to be enslaved to others' experiences and dreams.

Colonizing Anti-Colonialism

In the grandiose design of Truman's speech, there was no room for technical or theoretical precision. The emblem defines a programme conscious of Mao's arrival, looking for evolution as an antidote for revolution (in the Herder tradition) while simultaneously adopting the revolutionary impetus with which Marx endowed the word. The Truman design sometimes uses development in the transitive sense of the British colonial administrators, in order to clearly establish the hierarchy of initiatives that it promotes. But it can also pass without difficulty to the intransitive use of the term, in the finest Hegelian tradition.

As it was taken for granted that underdevelopment itself was out there, that it was something real, 'explanations' of the phenomenon began to appear. An intense search for its material and historical causes immediately started. Some, like Hirschman, gave no importance to the gestation period. Others, on the contrary, made this aspect the central element of their elaborations and described in painstaking detail colonial exploitation in all its variations and the processes of primitive accumulation of capital. Pragmatic attention also began to be given to the internal or external factors that seemed to be the current cause of underdevelopment: terms of trade, unequal exchange, dependency, protectionism, imperfections of the market, corruption, lack of democracy or entrepreneurship . . .

In Latin America, the Peace Corps, the Point Four Program, the War on Poverty, and the Alliance for Progress contributed to root the notion of underdevelopment into popular perception and to deepen the disability created by such perception. But none of those campaigns are comparable to what was achieved, in the same sense, by Latin American dependency theorists and other leftist intellectuals dedicated to criticizing all and every one of the development strategies that the North Americans successively put into fashion.

For them, as for many others, Truman simply had substituted a new word for what had already been there: backwardness or poverty. According to them, the 'backward' or 'poor' countries were in that condition due to past lootings in the process of colonization and the continued raping by capitalist exploitation at the national and international level: underdevelopment was the creation of development. By adopting in an uncritical manner the view to which they meant to be opposed, their efficient criticism of the ambiguity and hypocrisy of the Western promoters of development gave a virulent character to the colonizing force of the metaphor. (How to ignore, Marx said once, 'the indubitable fact that India is bound to the English yoke precisely by an Indian army supported by India?')

The very discussion of the origin or current causes of underdevelopment illustrates to what extent it is admitted to be something real, concrete, quantifiable and identifiable: a phenomenon whose origin and modalities can be the subject of investigation. The word defines a perception. This becomes, in turn, an object, a fact. No one seems to doubt that the concept does not allude to real phenomena. They do not realize that it is a comparative adjective whose base of support is the assumption, very Western but unacceptable and

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undemonstrable, of the oneness, homogeneity and linear evolution of the world. It displays a falsification of reality produced through dismembering the totality of interconnected processes that make up the world's reality and, in its place, it substitutes one of its fragments, isolated from the rest, as a general point of reference.⁶

Conceptual Inflation

Development, which had suffered the most dramatic and grotesque metamorphosis of its history in Truman's hands, was impoverished even more in the hands of its first promoters, who reduced it to economic growth. For these men, development consisted simply of growth in the income per person in economically underdeveloped areas. It was the goal proposed by Lewis in 1944 and insinuated by the United Nations Charter in 1947.

Lewis' 1955 dictum 'First it should be noted that our subject matter is growth, and not distribution',⁷ reflects the mainstream emphasis on economic growth which permeated the whole field of development thinking. Paul Baran, by far the most influential development economist among the leftists, wrote in 1957 on the political economy of growth and defined growth or development as the increase in the per capita production of material goods.⁸ Walter Rostow, who had a very impressive impact on institutional thinking and the public, presented his 'non-communist manifesto' in 1960 as a description of the stages of economic growth, assuming that this single variable can characterize a whole society.⁹ Both of them were, of course, dealing with a lot more than short-sighted economic growth, but their emphasis reflected the spirit of the times . . . and the crux of the matter.¹⁰

Such an orientation was neither an underestimation of the social consequences of rapid economic growth nor neglect of social realities. The first *Report on the World Social Situation*, published in 1952, aroused unusual interest both inside and outside United Nations institutions. The Report concentrated on the description of 'existing social conditions' and only incidentally dealt with programmes to improve them. But the proponents of such programmes found in it inspiration and support for their concern with immediate measures for the relief of poverty. Like many others, they were trying to develop in the 'underdeveloped' countries the basic social services and the 'caring professions' found in the advanced countries. These pragmatic concerns, as well as early theoretical insights going beyond the dogmatic vision of economic quantifiers, were, however, overshadowed by the general obsession with all-out industrialization and GNP growth which dominated the 1950s. Optimism prevailed; according to statistical indices and official reports, both the social situation and social programmes of these countries were continually improving. Such progress, following conventional wisdom, was but the natural consequence of rapid GNP growth.

The endemic controversy between the economic quantifiers and the social service specialists was not eliminated by such evolution. The *Reports* on the social situation, prepared periodically by the UN, tangentially documented it. The expression 'social development', slowly introduced in the *Reports*,

appeared without definition, as a vague counterpart for 'economic development' and as a substitute for the static notion of the 'social situation'. The 'social' and the 'economic' were perceived as distinct realities. The idea of a kind of 'balance' between these 'aspects' became first a desideratum and later the object of systematic examination. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (Ecosoc) in 1962 recommended the integration of both aspects of development. That same year, the *Proposals for Action of the First UN Development Decade* (1960-70) established that:

The problem of the underdeveloped countries is not just growth, but development. . . . Development is growth plus change, [it added]. Change, in turn, is social and cultural as well as economic, and qualitative as well as quantitative. . . . The key concept must be improved quality of people's life.¹¹

The creation of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (Unrisd), in 1963, was in itself an illustration of the concerns of the period. Another Ecosoc resolution, in 1966, recognized the interdependence of economic and social factors and the need for harmonizing economic and social planning.

In spite of this gradual change, throughout the First UN Development Decade development continued to be perceived as a definable path of economic growth passing through various stages, and 'integration' was the watchword linking the social aspect to the economic aspect. In the 1960s, as Unrisd acknowledged later, social development 'was seen partly as a precondition for economic growth and partly as a moral justification for it and the sacrifices it implied'.¹²

At the end of the decade, however, many factors contributed to dampen the optimism about economic growth: the shortcomings of current policies and processes were more conspicuous than at the beginning of the decade; the attributes demanding integration had widened; and it became clear that rapid growth had been accompanied by increasing inequalities. By then, the economists were more inclined to acknowledge social aspects as 'social obstacles'. Standard evidence permeated the official bodies:

The fact that development either leaves behind, or in some ways even creates, large areas of poverty, stagnation, marginality and actual exclusion from social and economic progress is too obvious and too urgent to be overlooked.¹³

Conceptually, there was a generalized revolt against the straitjacket of economic definitions of development, constraining its goals to more or less irrelevant quantitative indicators. The question was clearly posed in 1970 by Robert S. McNamara, president of the World Bank. After recognizing that a high rate of growth did not bring satisfactory progress in development during the First Decade, he insisted that the 1970s should see more than gross measures of economic growth.¹⁴ But the 'dethronement of GNP', as this crusade was then called, did not go very far: no international or academic consensus around any other definition was possible.

While the First Decade considered the social and economic aspects of development separately, the Second Decade involved merging the two. A new paradigm had to be formulated, that of integration, after recognizing the necessary interaction of physical resources, technical processes, economic aspects and social change. The International Development Strategy, proclaimed on 24 October 1970 called for a *global strategy*, based on joint and concentrated action in all spheres of economic and social life. The turning point, however, was not in the Strategy but in an almost simultaneous UN resolution establishing a project for the identification of a *unified approach* to development and planning, 'which would fully integrate the economic and social components in the formulation of policies and programmes'. This would include components designed:

- (a) To leave no sector of the population outside the scope of change and development;
- (b) To effect structural change which favours national development and to activate all sectors of the population to participate in the development process;
- (c) To aim at social equity, including the achievement of an equitable distribution of income and wealth in the nation;
- (d) to give high priority to the development of human potentials . . . the provision of employment opportunities and meeting the needs of children.¹⁵

The quest for a unified approach to development analysis and planning thus began which looked simultaneously for cross-sectoral and spatial, or regional, integration and for 'participative development'. As a UN endeavour, it was a very short-lived and frustrating project. Its results were both controversial and disappointing. Its critique of prevailing ideas and methods of economic development encountered considerable resistance. And its failure to produce simple universal remedies doomed it to rapid extinction. But the project incubated most of the ideas and slogans and animated the development debate during the years that followed.

The Second Decade, which started with this concern for a unified approach, evolved in fact in the opposite direction: dispersion. 'Major problems', like environment, population, hunger, women, habitat or employment, were successively brought to the forefront. Every 'problem' followed for a time an independent career, concentrating both public and institutional attention. Later, the complex relation of each 'problem' with all the others was demonstrated and the pertinent exercise of unification started, with one of the 'problems' at the centre of the process. The key candidates for unification were constantly in dispute, arising from the old controversy over priorities and the day-to-day disputes among bureaucratic bodies for survival and allocation of resources.

The quest for a unifying principle continued on different terrain. In 1974 the Declaration of Cocoyoc emphasized that the purpose of development 'should not be to develop things, but to develop man'. 'Any process of growth,' it added, 'that does not lead to the fulfilment [of basic needs] — or, even worse,

disrupts them — is a travesty of the idea of development.' The Declaration also emphasized the need for diversity and 'for pursuing many different roads to development', as well as the goal of self-reliance and the requirement of 'fundamental economic, social and political changes'.¹⁶ Some of these ideas were expanded in the proposals of the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, which suggested, in 1975, *another development*,¹⁷ and specially in the search for *human-centred development*. Following Johan Galtung, for whom development has to be 'the development of a people', the experts judged that man should have a greater influence in the development process and that this should be, as Unesco insisted, *integrated development*: 'a total, multi-relational process that includes all aspects of the life of a collectivity, of its relations with the outside world and of its own consciousness'.¹⁸

In 1975, the Seventh Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly asked for an approach more effective than that of the International Development Strategy (adopted in 1970) for achieving social objectives of development. The Conference on Employment, Income Distribution and Social Progress, organized by the ILO in June 1976, offered an answer: the *Basic Needs Approach*, 'aiming at the achievement of a certain specific minimum standard of living before the end of the century'.¹⁹

One of the documents supporting the Approach explicitly recognized that development would not eliminate hunger and misery, and that, on the contrary, it would surely worsen the levels of 'absolute poverty' of a fifth, and probably of two-fifths, of the population. The Approach proposed the idea of dealing directly with the task of coping with those needs, instead of expecting their satisfaction as a result of the process of development. For two or three years the proposal became fashionable. The World Bank found it particularly attractive since it appeared as the natural sequel to its experiments with 'target groups', which it had started in 1973 when its development strategy was concentrated on the rural poor and small farmers. The Approach was also promoted by many governments and the experts. It possessed the virtue of offering 'universal applicability', while being at the same time relative enough to be 'country specific'. In 1976, the satisfaction of the basic needs of each country's population defined the first and central portion of the Programme of Action of the Tripartite World Conference on Employment, Income Distribution and Social Progress and the International Division of Labour.

The experts of Unesco, for their part, promoted the concept of *endogenous development*. For some time, this conception won more acceptance than all the others. It seemed clearly heretical, openly contradicting the conventional wisdom. Emerging from a rigorous critique of the hypothesis of development 'in stages' (Rostow), the thesis of endogenous development rejected the necessity or possibility — let alone suitability — of mechanically imitating industrial societies. Instead, it proposed taking due account of the particularities of each nation. Little acknowledged, however, was the fact that this sensible consideration leads to a dead-end in the very theory and practice of development, that it contains a contradiction in terms. If the impulse is truly endogenous, that is, if the initiatives really come out of the diverse cultures and their different systems of values, nothing would lead us to believe that from

these would necessarily arise development — no matter how it is defined — or even an impulse leading in that direction. If properly followed, this conception leads to the dissolution of the very notion of development, after realizing the impossibility of imposing a single cultural model on the whole world — as a conference of Unesco experts pertinently recognized in 1978.

The next decade, the 1980s, was called 'the lost decade for development'. In spite of the fireworks of the four Asian Tigers, pessimism prevailed. The 'adjustment process' meant for many countries abandoning or dismantling, in the name of development, most of the previous achievements. By 1985, a post-development age seemed to be in the offing.²⁰

The 1990s, by contrast, have given birth to a new development ethos. This follows two clearly distinguishable lines. In the North, it calls for *redevelopment*, i.e. to develop again what was maldeveloped or is now obsolete. In the United States and the Soviet Union, in Spain as in Switzerland, Austria, Poland or Britain, public attention is drawn by the speed and the conditions under which what was previously developed (socialized medicine, nuclear plants, steel production, pre-microchip manufacturing, polluting factories or poisonous pesticides) may be destroyed, dismantled, exported or substituted.

In the South, redevelopment also requires dismantling what was left by the 'adjustment process' of the '80s, in order to make room for the leftovers from the North (atomic waste, obsolete or polluting manufacturing plants, unsellable or prohibited commodities . . .) and for the *maquiladoras*, those fragmented and temporary pseudo-factories that the North will keep in operation during the transitional period. The obsession with competitiveness, for fear of being left out of the race, compels acceptance of the destruction of whole sections of what was 'developed' over the last 30 years. Sacrificed on the altar of redevelopment, these will instead be inserted in transnational designs consistent with world market demand.

In the South, however, the emphasis of redevelopment will not be on such ventures, existing in the form of technological and socio-political enclaves. Rather, redevelopment implies the economic colonization of the so-called informal sector. In the name of modernization and under the banner of the war on poverty — pitting as always the waged against the poor, not a war against poverty itself — redeveloping the South involves launching the last and definitive assault against organized resistance to development and the economy.

Conceptually and politically, redevelopment is now taking the shape of *sustainable development*, for 'our common future', as prescribed by the Brundtland Commission. Or else, it is being actively promoted as green and democratic redevelopment, for those assuming that the struggle against communism, the leitmotiv of Truman's speech, is over. But in its mainstream interpretation, sustainable development has been explicitly conceived as a strategy for sustaining 'development', not for supporting the flourishing and enduring of an infinitely diverse natural and social life.

The current decade has also given birth to a new bureaucratic exercise to give development another lease of life. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published in 1990 the first *Human Development Report*.²¹

This clearly follows in the steps of the economic quantifiers, while paying appropriate consideration to Unrisd's efforts for measurement and analysis of socio-economic development and to the tradition of the *Reports* on the world social situation.

Following this new Report, 'human development' is rendered a process and a level of achievement. As a process, it is 'the enlargement of relevant human choices'. As a level of achievement, it is 'the internationally compared extent to which, in given societies, those relevant choices are actually attained'. The authors of the Report found very expedient ways to overcome the traditional challenges of quantification and international comparisons, as well as the conceptual puzzles of their endeavour. Human development is presented by them through an 'internationally comparative level of deprivation', which determines how far from the most successful national case are the other countries. The most ambitious goal of the Report is to produce a Human Development Index, 'synthesizing, along a numerical scale, the global level of Human Development in 130 countries'. The method: combining life expectancy deprivation, adult literacy deprivation and real GNP per capita deprivation. The Report also includes analysis of the social conditions existing in these countries for the period 1960–88, after gathering the data for a wide collection of variables and a series of projections, presenting 'viable social targets' to be achieved by the year 2000.

Adopting the yardstick of GNP per capita in real dollar terms is not without courage! The authors of the Report thought that expectancy of a long life, together with full literacy, are not enough to give a human being reasonable room for choice if he is at the same time deprived of access to resources for the satisfaction of his material needs. But measuring the latter is plagued with difficulties; the Report acknowledged them and opted for a simple solution — a technical refinement of the good old, universal yardstick, GNP.

Expanding the Reign of Scarcity

During the 19th century, but in fact starting much earlier in Europe, the social construction of development was married to a political design: excising from society and culture an autonomous sphere, the economic sphere, and installing it at the centre of politics and ethics. That brutal and violent transformation, first completed in Europe, was always associated with colonial domination in the rest of the world. Economization and colonization were synonymous. What Truman succeeded in doing was freeing the economic sphere from the negative connotations it had accumulated for two centuries, delinking development from colonialism. No more of the 'old imperialism', said Truman. In retrospect, it is possible to see that the emphasis on economic growth of the first post-Truman developers was neither a detour nor a mistaken interpretation of the Truman proposal: rather, it was the expression of its very essence.

As a conceptual construction, economics strives to subordinate to its rule and to subsume under its logic every other form of social interaction in every

society it invades. As a political design, adopted by some as their own, economic history is a story of conquest and domination. Far from being the idyllic evolution pictured by the founding fathers of economics, the emergence of economic society is a story of violence and destruction often adopting a genocidal character. Little wonder, resistance appeared everywhere.

Establishing economic value requires the disvaluing of all other forms of social existence.²² Disvalue transmogrifies skills into lacks, commons into resources, men and women into commodified labour, tradition into burden, wisdom into ignorance, autonomy into dependency. It transmogrifies people's autonomous activities embodying wants, skills, hopes and interactions with one another, and with the environment, into needs whose satisfaction requires the mediation of the market.

The helpless individual, whose survival now becomes necessarily dependent on the market, was not the invention of the economists; neither was he born with Adam and Eve, as they contend. He was a historical creation. He was created by the economic project redesigning mankind. The transmogrification of autonomous men and women into disvalued 'economic man' was in fact the precondition for the emergence of economic society, a condition that must be constantly renewed, reconfirmed and deepened for economic rule to continue. Disvalue is the secret of economic value, and it cannot be created except with violence and in the face of continuous resistance.

Economics recognizes no limits to its application. This contention is predicated on the assumption that no society is free from the 'economic problem', as economists call their definition of social reality. At the same time, they proudly acknowledge that their discipline, as a science, was an invention. They love to trace its roots back to antiquity, using Aristotle and his worries about value as a case in point. But they see those ancient insights as mere initial intimations heralding the advent of the patron saints of the science, those who discovered economy in the 18th century.

Economists, of course, did not invent the new patterns of behaviour emerging with economic society through the creation of the modern market. But the founding fathers of the discipline were able to codify their observations in a form that fitted well with the ambitions of the emerging interests: they offered a 'scientific' foundation to the political design of the new dominant class. When that form was 'received' as truth by the public and absorbed into common language, it was able to transform popular perceptions from within by changing the meaning of previously existing words and assumptions.

The founding fathers of economics saw in *scarcity* the keystone for their theoretical construction. The finding marked the discipline forever. The whole construction of economics stands on the premise of scarcity, postulated as a universal condition of social life. Economists were even able to transform the finding into a popular prejudice, a self-evident truism for everyone. 'Common sense' is now so immersed in the economic way of thinking that no facts of life contradicting it seems enough to provoke critical reflection on its character.

Scarcity connotes shortage, rarity, restriction, want, insufficiency, even frugality. Since all these connotations alluding to conditions appearing everywhere and at all times are now mixed up with the economic denotations of

the word, as a *terminus technicus*, the popular prejudice about the universality of economics, with its premise of scarcity, is constantly reinforced.

Little understood is the fact that the 'law of scarcity' formulated by economists and now appearing in every textbook does not allude directly to the common situations denoted by the word. The sudden shortage of fresh air during a fire is not scarcity of air in the economic sense. Neither is the self-imposed frugality of a monk, the insufficiency of stamina in a boxer, the rarity of a flower, or the last reserves of wheat mentioned by Pharaoh in what is the first known historical reference to hunger.

The 'law of scarcity' was construed by economists to denote the technical assumption that man's wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas his means are limited though improvable. The assumption implies choices over the allocation of means (resources). This 'fact' defines the 'economic problem' *par excellence*, whose 'solution' is proposed by economists through the market or the plan. Popular perception, especially in the Northern parts of the world, even shares this technical meaning of the word scarcity, assuming it to be a self-evident truism. But it is precisely the universality of this assumption that is no longer tenable.

A few years before Truman's speech, just at the end of the War, Karl Polanyi published *The Great Transformation*.²³ Convinced that economic determinism was a 19th century phenomenon, that the market system violently distorted our views of man and society, and that these distorted views were proving one of the main obstacles to the solution of the problems of our civilization,²⁴ Polanyi carefully documented the economic history of Europe as the history of the creation of the economy as an autonomous sphere, disjoined from the rest of the society. He showed that the national market did not appear as the gradual and spontaneous emancipation of the economic sphere from governmental control, but quite the opposite: the market was the result of a conscious and often violent intervention by government. In the years that followed, Polanyi laid down the foundations for comparative economic history.

After him, many others have followed this road, retracing economic history as merely one chapter in the history of ideas. Louis Dumont, among others, has shown that the discovery of the economy through the invention of economics was, in fact, a process of the social construction of ideas and concepts.²⁵ The economic 'laws' of the classical economists were but deductive inventions which transformed the newly observed patterns of social behaviour, adopted with the emergence of economic society, into universal axioms designed to carry on a new political project. The assumption of the previous existence of economic 'laws' or 'facts', construed by economists, is untenable when confronted with what we know now about ancient societies and cultures, and even with what we can still see in some parts of the world.

Marshall Sahlins and Pierre Clastres, among others, have given detailed and well documented accounts of cultures in which non-economic assumptions govern lives and which reject the assumption of scarcity whenever it appears among them.²⁶ Men and women seen today on the margins of the economic world, the so-called marginals, find support in that tradition as they continue to challenge economic assumptions both in theory and in practice. All over the

world, descriptions of a whole new set of experiences of those peoples are trying to find a place in the shelves of the libraries, but they do not fit in well with any of the social classifications tainted by the economists' lenses.

New Commons

Struggling to limit the economic sphere is not, for the common man at the margins or the majority of people on earth, a mechanical reaction to the economic invasion of their lives. They are not Luddites. Rather they see their resistance as a creative reconstitution of the basic forms of social interaction, in order to liberate themselves from their economic chains. They have thus created, in their neighbourhoods, villages and *barrios*, new commons which allow them to live on their own terms.

In these new commons, there are forms of social interaction that have appeared only in the post-war era. Still the people in these new spaces are the heirs of a diversified collection of commons, communities and even whole cultures destroyed by the industrial, economic form of social interaction. After the extinction of their subsistence regimes, they tried to adopt various patterns of accommodation to the industrial form. The failure of both industrial society and the remnants of traditional forms of interaction to effect this accommodation was the precondition of the social inventions whose consolidation and flourishing has been further stimulated by the so-called crisis of development.

For people on the margins, disengaging from the economic logic of the market or the plan has become the very condition for survival. They are forced to confine their economic interaction — for some, very frequent and intense — to realms outside the spaces where they organize their own modes of living. Those spaces were their last refuge during the development era. After experiencing what survival means in economic society, they are now counting the blessings they find in such refuges, while working actively to regenerate them.

By equating education with diplomas, following the economic definition of learning, they lacked teachers and schools. Now, after re-embedding learning in culture, they have the affluence of constantly enriching their knowledge with a little help from friends bringing to them experiences and remedies from outside their tradition.

After equating health with dependence on medical services, they lacked doctors, health centres, hospitals, drugs. Now, after recognizing health again as the autonomous ability to cope with the environment, they are regenerating their own healing capability, benefiting from the traditional wisdom of their healers and from the richness of the curative capacity of their environments. This, too, with a little help from their friends, when something beyond their reach or their traditional realm requires external help.

After equating eating with the technical activities of production and consumption, linked to the mediation of the market or the state, they lacked income and suffered scarcity of food. Now, they are regenerating and enriching their relationships with themselves and with the environment, nourishing again

both their lives and their lands. And they are usually coping well with the shortages still affecting them — as a consequence of the time and effort required to remedy the damage done by development or their temporary inability to escape from the damaging economic interactions they still have to maintain. It is not easy, for example, to step out of commercial crops or give up the addiction to credit or industrial inputs; but intercropping helps regenerate both land and culture, in time providing an improvement in nutrition.

Peasants and grassroots groups in the cities are now sharing with people forced to leave the economic centre the ten thousand tricks they have learned to limit the economy, to mock the economic creed, or to refunctionalize and reformulate modern technology. The 'crisis' of the 1980s removed from the payroll people already educated in dependency on incomes and the market, people lacking the social setting enabling them to survive by themselves. Now the margins are coping with the difficult task of relocating these people. The process poses great challenges and tensions for everyone, but it also offers a creative opportunity for regeneration, once they discover how mutually supportive they can be for one another.

The basic logic of human interactions inside the new commons prevents scarcity from appearing in them. People do not assume unlimited ends, since their ends are no more than the other side of their means, their direct expression. If their means are limited, as they are, their ends cannot be unlimited. Within the new commons, needs are defined with verbs that describe activities embodying wants, skills and interactions with others and with the environment. Needs are not separated into different 'spheres' of reality: lacks or expectations on one side, and satisfiers on the other, reunited through the market or the plan.

One of the most interesting facets of the ongoing regeneration in the new commons being created by ordinary men and women is precisely the recovery of their own definition of needs, dismantled by development in perception or in practice. By strengthening forms of interaction embedded in the social fabric and by breaking the economic principle of the exchange of equivalents, they are recovering their autonomous ways of living. By reinstalling or regenerating forms of trade operating outside the rules of the market or the plan, they are both enriching their daily lives and limiting the impact and scope of the commercial operations they still have to maintain, and also reducing the commodification of their time and the fruits of their effort.

The leading actor of the economy, economic man, finds no feasible answers for coping with the 'crisis' of development, and frequently reacts with desolation, exhaustion, even desperation. He constantly falls for the political game of demands and promises, or the economic game of carpetbagging the present for the future, hopes for expectations. In contrast, the leading actor of the new commons, the common man, dissolves or prevents scarcity in his imaginative efforts to cope with his predicament. He looks for no more than free spaces or limited support for his initiatives. He can mix them in political coalitions increasingly capable of reorienting policies and changing political styles. Supported by recent experiences, the new awareness emerging from the margins can awaken others, broadening those coalitions towards the critical

point in which an inversion of the economic dominance begins to be feasible.

The economy of economists is nothing but a set of rules by which modern societies are governed. Men and societies are not economic, even after having created institutions and forms of interaction of an economic nature, even after having instituted the economy. And those economic rules are derived from the chronic scarcity of modern society. Rather than being the iron law of every human society, scarcity is a historical accident: it had a beginning and can have an end. The time has come for its end. Now is the time of the margins, of the common man.

In spite of the economy, common men on the margins have been able to keep alive another logic, another set of rules. In contrast with the economy, this logic is embedded in the social fabric. The time has come to confine the economy to its proper place: a marginal one. As the margins have done.

The Call

This essay is an invitation to celebrate and a call for political action.

It celebrates the appearance of new commons, creatively opened by common men and women after the failure of the developers' strategies to transform traditional men and women into economic men. These new commons are living proof of the ability and ingenuity of common people to react with sociological imagination, following their own path, within hostile environments.

This essay is also a plea. It pleads, first of all, for political controls to protect those new commons and to offer common men a more favourable social context for their activities and innovations. Such political controls can be implemented only after public awareness of the limits of development has become firmly rooted in society. Even those still convinced that development goals are pertinent ideals for the so-called underdeveloped should honestly recognize the present structural impossibilities for the universal materialization of such goals. The cynicism of those who, knowing such limits, continue to proclaim the myth, should be publicly exposed.

This essay requests public witness and invites public debate on the post-economic events now appearing everywhere, in order to limit the economic damage and give room for new forms of social life. It challenges the social imagination to conceive political controls that allow for the flourishing of post-economic initiatives.

This essay also pleads for research and public discussion of the issues that give content to citizens' coalitions for implementing political controls on the economic sphere, while re-embedding economic activities in the social fabric. It pleads for a new, dignified, public appraisal of the views now emerging as rumours among common men, defining limits to the economy while trying to renew politics at the grassroots level.

The new commons, created by common men, are heralding an era which ends privilege and licence. This essay celebrates the adventure of common men.

Development has evaporated. The metaphor opened up a field of knowledge and for a while gave scientists something to believe in. After some decades, it is clear that this field of knowledge is a mined, unexplorable land. Neither in

nature nor in society does there exist an evolution that imposes transformation towards 'ever more perfect forms' as a law. Reality is open to surprise. Modern man has failed in his effort to be god.

To root oneself in the present demands an image of the future. It is not possible to act here and now, in the present, without having an image of the next instant, of the other, of a certain temporal horizon. That image of the future offers guidance, encouragement, orientation, hope. In exchange for culturally established images, built by concrete men and women in their local spaces, in exchange for concrete myths, truly real, modern man was offered an illusory expectation, implicit in the connotation of development and its semantic network: growth, evolution, maturation, modernization. He was also offered an image of the future that is a mere continuation of the past: that is development, a conservative, if not reactionary, myth.

It is now time to recover a sense of reality. It is time to recover serenity. Crutches, like those offered by science, are not necessary when it is possible to walk with one's own feet, on one's own path, in order to dream one's own dreams. Not the borrowed ones of development.

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