Destaque Semanal

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism refers to the conviction that all Africans and descendants of Africans in the diaspora share a common history, common interests and, ultimately, a common fate which thus(...)

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Development/Alternatives

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Development

The current dominant concept of development, the one endorsed by the United Nations (UN) and other International Organizations, builds on the idea that societies should evolve in linear (even if, now admittedly, context-specific) ways towards progress, sustained by economics and science and technology.

Questioning development strategies that target mainly the Global South, requires a look into the power relations that shaped the concept and determined its uptake.

Development as a paradigm of social change began to take shape in the period after World War II (WWII), largely as a response to Europe's devastated economy. Its strong lines were rooted in economic neo-classic theory and driven by the core principles of economic growth and technological advances as means to achieve surplus and, by default, general well-being.

The idea of development offered a way out of poverty; a comprehensive approach to tackle both economic growth and social change in Europe. It materialized in the Marshall Plan, the large economic and technical assistance programme the USA set up to assist Europe's rebuilding.

The assistance the USA provided constituted a strong political power move, designed to grant the country with an influential role in international politics and to hail capitalism as a successful societal model, not only in

Europe, but also beyond it.

Europe's economy recovered rapidly, and the region that came to be today's European Union, and that was riddled in conflicts throughout its history, entered its longest period of peace. These two outcomes of the development strategy in Europe – economic growth and political and social peace – anchored the belief that late capitalist societies were the last stage of societies' desired evolution, and that progress towards it was achievable by means of economic and technical planning.

Beyond Europe, development provided a structure on which to build new relations with former colonies and with countries that were marginalized in the international political and economic order, but that were key in ensuring access to raw materials and resources needed to leverage Europe's and the USA's economies. Development became a powerful framework conditioning international relations between the Global North and the Global South. Technical and financial aid, framed by the discourse of the UN and World Bank as a neutral effort to speed up the world economy and end poverty, actually allowed western economies the chance to interfere in state economic planning in the Global South. This provided opportunities for accessing natural resources, labour, and large consumers markets.

A first approach guiding development theory and practices was Modernization theory, building on Rotow's stages of development and Lewis' dual model. It sustained on two core arguments: 1) that modernization, i.e. industrialization, science and technology, were the sole factors driving economics and development; 2) that poor countries were lagging because they were not modern. The latter is underpinned by Europe's imperialist narrative, that construed metropolitan and colonized worlds as non-coeval (Santos, Meneses & Arriscado, 2004). Development efforts thus concentrated on bringing poor countries 'out of the past', or what was understood as traditional, and into the present, or what was considered to be modern.

Alternative development

Criticism to this approach first came from the South: the internationalist solidarity movements originating in the Bandung (1955) and Tricontinental (1966) Conferences, political and philosophical thought in Africa that produced experiences such as African Socialism (1950's and 60's) and economic approaches like Dependency Theory (first originating in Latin America in the 1950's), purported that the origins of the development model were very context-specific, its success relying on the specificities of western capitalist and industrialized societies which, in turn, depended on a world system composed by hegemonic centres and dependant peripheries. The problem with Development was that it was Eurocentric, and the problem with underdevelopment was that it was induced by these hegemonic centres, and capital or technological transfers would not do to modernize poor countries. It was the international negotiations tables that needed to be turned.

Alternative development models produced under this political stand centred on principles of sovereignty and autonomy, but, feeding into and from nationalist projects taking shape at the time, especially in Africa and Asia, they were still based on the idea of catching-up and modernization and technology as *the* way out of poverty.

The modernization approach was proved unsuccessful and the 1960's development decade unravelled against its promises, as it actually deepened inequalities producing underdevelopment. The emphasis on economics and industrialization bore high social and environmental costs, while overall indicators of poverty were not overturned.

From the 1970's and 1980's onwards, alternative development models were proposed, attempting to overcome the limits of economic-centred approaches. The traditional versus modern duality and the focus on industrialization had left behind large parts of the population that were now being placed at the centre of development theories and practice. Subaltern subjects like peasants and women came to be at the heart of new approaches such as rural development, local development, women in development. Environment also became a rather central concern, as the Brundtland report (1987) pointed to the overexploitation of natural resources and coined the concept of sustainable development. Links between democracy and development also gained traction, giving way to the emergence of participatory development, bottom-up development, capacity-building and empowerment approaches that were meant to focus on 'local' subjects.

Industrialization was no longer the central goal of development policies. However, neither of these new approaches stepped away from the central axes of the original development model: its focus on growth, science and technology; the idea that western capitalist societies and liberal democracies were the architype to aim for; the belief that outside the Global North progress was made possible only by way of knowledge transfers. And so, none questioned the underlying assumption that there was only one centre producing valid knowledge (western donor countries), whilst the rest of the world (recipient countries) was devoid of it.

Moreover, development alternatives sought to overcome the failures of centralized state-sponsored planning, which was at the core of the modernization approach, by focusing on individuals' and small communities' entrepreneurship rather than on the state. But this paved the way for much more market-oriented strategies. The market increasingly became a central player in development politics and policies, which reflected and simultaneously strengthened the operating International Division of Labour (Amin, 2006). The economic and political hegemony that Dependency Theory had illuminated, strived on, rooted in global capitalism dynamics.

Alternatives to Development

But the Eurocentric bias of Development surpassed this economic order. Although construed as a neutral and objective technical instrument, the development paradigm bears the principles of Europe's Modernity: rationality, the idea of linear progress, primacy of western science and technology, an extractivist and dominance approach to the natural world (Santos, Meneses & Arriscado, 2004).

Theoretical debates, enriched by the perspectives of anthropology and post-colonial studies, have evolved to argue that the Development paradigm is a discursive strategy and a regime of representation (Escobar, 1995), equivalent to the colonial discourse, which produces subalternized subjectivities. An apparatus built on practices, instruments and techniques, that establish control and reproduce colonial difference. Development models configure a representation of the ideal society, but also determine its contrary, rendering non-western social, political, economic, ontological manifestations of life, irrelevant, behind, non-scientific and non-democratic.

This rationale is imbedded in today's powerful global agenda for development. The Millennium Development Goals, approved in 2000, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in 2015, have further deepened the sense of tutelage over the Global South (Amin, 2006), renewing the conviction in the role of markets, modern technology and science as a way to overcome the social and environmental problems that global capitalism has yielded. In fact, SDG's have not only determined development initiatives and the financial flows of development aid, they have also come to be understood as global challenges for humanity; a comprehensive framework piloting other areas of public funding, such as scientific research.

Pointing out the failure of development efforts in reaching its own goals, and the potential of violence the paradigm bears, critique in the late 1990's focused on alternatives *to* development.

Since then, different concepts and approaches to social change have emerged or become more visible. Social movements across the South have deployed alternative epistemologies and ontologies that build on indigenous concepts which espouse ways of living collectively and in greater harmony with the natural world. *Buen vivir* and related concepts of *Pachamama* or *Sumac Kawsay,* in Latin America; *Ubuntu*, in South Africa; *Swaraj*, in India are but a few. In Europe, the degrowth movement, inspired by the debates on the limits to growth, is also claiming for an alternative to development.

References and further readings:

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