

The Myths of Development

By Prof. C. Douglas Lummis

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In my book *Radical Democracy* I wrote the following:

Economic Development is antidemocratic in that it requires kinds, conditions, and amounts of labor that people would never choose – and have historically never chosen – in a state of freedom. Only by giving society one or another kind of undemocratic structure can people be made to spend the greater part of their lives laboring “efficiently” in fields, factories or offices, and handing over the surplus value to capitalists, managers, communist party leaders, or technocrats.

I had the honor of having the book bashed in a review in *Foreign Affairs* by none other than Francis Fukuyama, who addressed this point in particular, saying,

The people have been voting with their feet in favor of capitalist prosperity pretty convincingly for some time now.

This is the first myth of development, once called the “revolution of rising expectations.” The myth is that as soon as people of whatever culture encounter “capitalist prosperity”, the mere encounter will cause them to exclaim, “Whatever were we thinking of”?! cast off their old ways and opt for the capitalist economy. The theory can be made to sound wonderfully logical, when written in books. The problem is, it does not describe what happened on the ground.

In history, the story of capitalist development begins with the enclosure movement in England, under which farmers were driven off their land by force to become the first generation of wage workers. Are we to believe that this very first wave of development refugees trudging down to London and Manchester were voting retroactively with their feet in favor of being driven off their land?

Not Chapter 2 but rather Phase 2 in this story begins with the beginning of colonialism. Colonialism was, of course, the specific way by which the capitalist industrial system was exported to the countries outside Europe. Few – I wouldn't say no one, but few – have argued that the colonized voted with their feet in favor of colonization, or that colonization was established on the consent of the colonized.

But perhaps Fukuyama's vague "for some time now" only refers to the post World War II period, when the word "development" attained to its present meaning. It is true that immediately after World War II there was a massive paradigm shift in this field, through which an entirely new world view and an entirely new vocabulary was introduced into the social sciences.

One of the most vivid ways to view this paradigm shift is to compare the 1933 edition and the 1968 edition of the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences.

In the 1933 edition there is no entry for "Modernization", for "Underdeveloped Countries", or for "Development". There is, however, an entry for "Backward Countries". This entry is followed by the following list of cross-references:

Civilization

Colonies

Imperialism

Raw Materials

Concessions
Spheres of Influence
Protectorate
Mandate
Forced Labor
Foreign Investment
Missions
Intervention
Diplomatic Protection

In the 1968 edition, the entry for “Backward Countries” is gone. Now there is an entry for “Modernization”, accompanied by the following list of cross-references:

Rural Society
Industrialization
Politics, Comparative
Social Change
Achievement Motivation
Poverty
Government
Political Anthropology
Political Culture
Societal Analysis
Bureaucracy
Stratification, Social

In the first list, you can hear the greed and smell the power. You can see fleets sailing, troops unloading in far-off lands, indigenous people put to work under foreign masters, rebellions breaking out and rebellions repressed, rich cargos loaded onto ships and carried away.

In the second list, there is not a whiff of power or interest. Phenomena are unfolding according to their own logic, studied carefully by cool, objective social scientists. It is as if we were speaking of a different world

Of particular interest on the first list is the entry, "Forced Labor". This entry was not written in a particularly neutral tone. The man who wrote it, a fellow named McKnight, was then Chair of the League of Nations Committee to Abolish Forced Labor. So he has a position: he is against forced labor. Nevertheless he begins by doing his encyclopedist's work, and gives a history of forced labor in ancient times. Then he comes to his real subject, forced labor in the colonies. He writes,

In most tropical areas the 'white man' is unable or unwilling to perform manual labor and enterprise must rely either upon the local population or upon imported coolie labor. Since the material wants of primitive peoples are few and they are unfamiliar with a money economy and unaccustomed to arduous and continuous toil, they are usually unwilling to work for European entrepreneurs. Out of this conflict between native indifference and the desires of governments and industrialists, forced labor arose. Many of the chief tropical railways and roads have been constructed by forced labor. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the tropics could have been held and developed with it.

The passage drips with irony and suppressed anger. But you have all heard the story. The Europeans land in some tropical region. The people there are hunter-gatherers, say; the forest gives them food, medicine, fiber for clothing, building materials. The Europeans offer them employment for money, but the locals can't see any reason to give up their relatively leisurely life for a twelve-hour day – and they don't use money. So the Europeans set up a store and put a lot of tempting goods in it. Somebody comes in and says, "Oh my, I'd love to have that steel axe, how much is that?" "Two dollars." "All right, I'll come and work for you." So the person comes and works however long it takes to make the two dollars, and

then goes and buys the axe. The next day, he doesn't show up at work. "What? Are you quitting?" "I got the axe." There is nothing in the store to induce the people to throw away their whole world to have it.

McKnight lists the places where forced labor continued in his time, that is, the 1930s, meaning not the early stages of the colonial era, but at its very end:

...all of Central Africa, French Algeria and Indo-China, British India, Dutch East Indies, Belgian Congo, British East Africa, Madagascar and French West Africa, Liberia, Portuguese West Africa, Dutch Java.

And he goes on to describe some of its consequences:

When the 'native' is suddenly and forcibly thrown into contact with industrial civilization their psychological resistance to diseases such as tuberculosis is lowered. Because of the compulsory methods used in the construction of the Congo-Ocean railway in French Equatorial Africa and a lack of adequate precautions, 17,000 native workers engaged on the enterprise died between 1925 and 1929.

Finally, McKnight introduces some of the justifications that have been given for using forced labor:

Many businessmen and some colonial officials... defended forced labor for private enterprises on the ground that primitive peoples will not progress until they learn to work and that the wealth of the tropics cannot be exploited for the outside world unless forced labor is employed.

The above is what can be called direct forced labor, extracted from people through the threat or use of violence: chains, shotguns, all that. But McKnight also describes an indirect kind of forced labor. This comes in two forms. First, if

people get their living from the forest, you can cut down the forest and replace it with a plantation. Second, you can ask the government to enforce a poll tax, payable only in money. (Interestingly, Gandhi described this technique in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*.) In either case, the people will have little choice but to trudge down the path to the plantation owner's house and ask for work. To someone who knows nothing of the situation, might this look like "voting with your feet?"

Turning again to the 1966 Encyclopedia, we find that the "Forced Labor" entry has vanished. In the Index, Forced Labor appears, with two page references. One is to forced labor in the European Middle Ages. The other is to forced labor in the Soviet Union (remember, these were also Cold War days). Since then I have read a fair number of books on modernization and development, and I have never yet come across a reference to forced labor. This means that it is perfectly possible, and probably even the norm, for a person to major in development economics, take a BA, an MA, and a Ph.D., write a dissertation on the subject and have it published, and teach classes on it in a respectable university, without ever learning that the social process, the study of which this person is a certified expert, was launched by the brutally violent practice of forced labor.

To give Prof. Fukuyama the benefit of the doubt, I suppose that he, to, actually does not know that the first march of people in the direction of the capitalist industrial economy was a forced march.

It is also worthwhile to take a second look at McKnight's "indirect forced labor": to extend McKnight's insight only slightly, to transform the natural, social, and legal environment such that wage work is the only choice is in effect a form of forced labor. It can be seen that this is not a system that was replaced by post-World War II development. This *defines* post-World War II development.

So what happened between the publication of these two editions of the Encyclopedia? It is not always easy to locate a paradigm shift accurately in time, but in this case there is a decisive moment. This is the Inaugural Address of U.S. President Harry Truman in January, 1949, when he announced that the U.S. was launching a “bold new program” to “develop the underdeveloped countries.” Until Truman’s speech the expression “underdeveloped countries” did not exist as a technical term in the social sciences. You won’t find it in the journal indices; in dictionaries “underdeveloped” is defined as a condition pertaining to camera film.

After January, 1949, “underdeveloped” came to mean a certain kind of country, a country put together wrongly and under obligation to change itself. And the word implied that this malaise called “underdevelopment” was cured, each of these countries would become as prosperous as the US. But it is interesting that Truman, in his autobiography, wrote that the beauty of the notion was that it did not imply that US industrialists doing business in the “underdeveloped” countries needed to change what they had been doing. They could go on unchanged, but now instead of calling it “exploitation” they could call it “development.”

It is difficult to be surprised at a term we have used for long, but it is worthwhile to try to put our minds back to the context of that time, and see what a stunning leap of the imagination this was. The term “underdeveloped” places all the societies and cultures and economic systems in the world, save one, into a single category. Societies like China, Egypt, Persia and India with millennia of written history and literature and monumental architectural achievements; hunting and gathering societies whose memory is preserved in oral traditions; cattle raising societies; fishing societies; farming societies; people who worship ancient gods; people who worship rivers and trees; - all these go into a single box. And what is it that they have in common? Not one has an efficient telephone system, or a network of smooth, fast highways. The thing they have in common, which qualifies them to be put into a single category, is not a characteristic that they

have, but a set of characteristics that they do not have. They do not have the economic system of the West.

Now of course, this is not an impossible way to carry out analysis. A rabbit, for example, might divide all sedentary beings into the categories “rabbit” and “not-rabbit”. The latter category would include tigers and turtles, giraffes and grasshoppers. This can be done, with no offense to logic. It is just that when you say that a particular animal is in the non-rabbit category, this does not convey much information.

Now I want to talk about the word “development” itself. As the word is used, it is a metaphor, and within this metaphor is concealed Development Myth No. 2.

Originally, the word “develop” was the opposite of “envelop.” It meant to unwrap a thing from a cloth or paper or “envelope” in which it has been wrapped. Little by little it came to be used metaphorically, to mean a form of change that resembles such an unwrapping, as for example the transformation of a seed into a seedling or a bud into a flower. The idea is that in the transformation from condition A to condition B, the form of condition B is already present in embryonic form in condition A, so that conditions A and B can be seen as “stages” in a process. Not all change fits this model. A seed growing into a tree, a child growing up to adulthood, a cultural form being elaborated with greater complexity, all can properly be called development. When a seed is destroyed by fire or eaten by worms, that may be well and proper, but we would not call it “development of the seed.” When the condition existing in state A is destroyed and replaced by something different (a rich and diverse forest is cut down and replaced by a monocultural plantation, for example), to call this “development” would be improper use of language.

“Development” is a word with a teleological thrust built into it. When a change is described as “development”, the implication is that the change is just the right

and proper thing for the entity changed, that the change is not violent or distorting, but rather allows what was only potential in the entity changed, to become actual.

Thus the second myth of development is the myth that the word itself accurately characterizes the transformations that are carried out in its name. And by calling these transformations “development” we give them an appearance of inevitability that in fact they do not possess. In this specific way, development is an ideology.

And, like the ideology of dialectical materialism, the development ideology generates a peculiar notion of responsibility. On the one hand development is inevitable, on the other hand it is our duty to make it happen. If we do not, or if we stand in its way, we are shirking and/or escaping from reality. But when development produces catastrophes and victims, we are not responsible for this. The victims are not the victims of our actions, but rather the victims of history. So we are responsible for seeing that the program is carried out, but we are not responsible for the consequences of this. This peculiar logic helps explain the radical irresponsibility of both Stalinists and developers.

The third myth of development is the myth that it will someday close the gap between the rich and the poor, and will establish economic equality.

In 19th century Europe, everybody, not only the socialists, knew that capitalism generated inequality. “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer” was the simple law of its operation. When the capitalist system expanded to its present global scale, is there any reason why it should operate differently? Of course when the rich-poor gap becomes internationalized, it may become more difficult to see, but that does not mean that the law has quit operating.

There are several ways of thinking about this. One is to ask, is it possible in principle for everyone to become rich? The word “rich” comes from the Latin *rex*,

or “king”, and originally meant “powerful, mighty, exalted, noble, great.” (OED). It meant, that is, the kind of power a king has. And the peculiarity of that kind of power is that it depends for its existence on the powerlessness of the subjects. A king has power if and only if he is surrounded by powerless subjects who obey his will. Only later did the word become specialized to mean, the kind of power a person may have over others by virtue of having more money than they do. This characteristic of “rich” was eloquently expressed by John Ruskin in the essay made famous in India by Gandhi, *Unto This Last*.

I observe that men of business rarely know the meaning of the word “rich”. At least, if they know, they do not in their reasonings allow for the fact, that it is a relative word, implying its opposite “poor” as positively as the word “north” implies the word “south”. Men nearly always speak and write as if riches were absolute, and it were possibly, by following certain scientific precepts, for everybody to be rich. Whereas riches are a power like that of electricity, acting only through the inequalities or negations of itself. The force of the guinea you have in your pocket depends wholly on the default of a guinea in your neighbor’s pocket. If he did not want it, it would be of no use to you; the degree of the power it possesses depends accurately upon the need or desire he has for it, - and the art of making yourself rich... is therefore equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbor poor.

Development then, insofar as it is designed to make some people rich, does not eliminate poverty; it modernizes and rationalizes it.

Poverty can be divided into the four following types. First, there is the poverty of people who have few possessions, but do not themselves desire much more. These people look impoverished to the outsider, but they might not see themselves that way. Second, there is absolute poverty, where people don’t have sufficient food, medication, clothing and shelter to maintain healthy life. Third,

there is the poverty continuously produced by technological advance. That is, when new gadgets are invented, at first only the rich may be able to afford them, and those who cannot feel in that degree impoverished, even though they had never felt desire for the thing before it was invented. (Note that this kind of poverty is not reduced by the advance of technology, but rather is exacerbated by it). And fourth, there is poverty as the losing end of a social relation: the “poor” corresponding to “rich” as described above.

Speaking roughly, development is the process of transforming the first form of poverty into the third and fourth, with the unfortunate side effect of increasing the number of people suffering from the second. This is what is meant by “the modernization of poverty” (Ivan Illich’s term): the transformation of poverty from a condition from which wealth cannot be easily extracted, into a condition from which it can.

This is what the development process is designed to achieve, and given this, the claim that it could somehow, someday, in some way, produce economic equality is the most outlandish myth of all.