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The Opportunity of Latin American Critical Development Thinking

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The Opportunity of Latin American Critical Development Thinking[1]

The calls for *Buen Vivir* that have emerged from the Andean region have prompted a revival of interest in Latin American contributions to development thinking. Policy and academic initiatives have multiplied in the last few years (See post on *Buen Vivir*), in a reinvigorated interest in alternative notions of development, as well as in the struggles of social movements from across the region and their impacts on national and regional politics. The policy initiatives from different governments in the region that appear to have tilted the political paths to the left, have attracted international headlines and a shifted attention to discussions of development that to inexperienced eyes may appear as a novelty. This renewed interest in Latin American development thinking is most welcome in a discussion that has largely prioritised a Western/Eurocentric lens in its focus. However, this new opportunity to engage with Latin American thinking should not be dissociated from the wealth of experiences, academic and otherwise, that this region has seen in the field of critical development. From the onset of global discussions of development, Latin American scholars, activists, educators, politicians, priests and theologians have engaged in the collective exercise of reflecting on the possibility of advancing development, broadly conceived (this has also included discussions and reflections on the nature of this same path, and on the possibilities of thinking alternative paths). Perhaps precisely because the region has seen contrasting political, social and economics projects being implemented in the name of development, more often than not with despairing results, discussions of ideas of

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development hold a particular sense of urgency in Latin America, one that has given birth to particularly fertile forms of critical development thinking.

One of the most powerful contemporary ideas, the project of development has shaped human lives all over the world, with projects and strategies to achieve it implemented by national governments, international organizations and the most varied civil society organisations across regions and decades. Throughout the decades, as well as today, it has mobilized innumerable resources of every kind.[2] Yet, at the beginning of the 21st Century, ideas of *Development* remain ambiguous and controversial. For some, they represent the articulation of the hopes for progress and betterment of society, and the structured efforts to achieve it. Along these lines, ideas of development, inextricably linked to those of progress and a golden dream of universal welfare, have been in the realm of political and philosophical debates for several centuries.[3] For others, far from a view of development as a project that seeks the improvement and the 'catching up' of the developing world with the West, development represents a project that, in the words of Gustavo Esteva, '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'.[4] Like Gustavo Esteva, many have offered critical readings of the

[2] A simple glance at recent statistics of international institutions working on development can give us a clear view: The Official Development Assistance from the OECD countries to developing regions stood at over 128 billion US dollars for 2010, while the United Nations Development Programme counted with over 16,000 staff working in 177 countries, and a budget for 2011/2012 of over 865 million US dollars and the World Bank with over 15,000. Of the top International Non-Governmental Organisations working in development, BRAC from Bangladesh, had an annual expenditure of 583 million US dollars, while OXFAM international an expenditure of 900 million Euro. These numbers give only a hint at the amount of resources allocated for development at an international level, showing some of the most representative institutions. This of course excludes the myriad of NGOs that work for development in national and local contexts and the national government funded implementation of projects, programs and institutions at the national and regional levels.– Data from: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2012; United Nations Environment Program 2013; United Nations 2011; OXFAM 2012; BRAC 2012

[3] In fact, in 1920 British historian J.B. Bury wrote in the opening of his book *The idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origins and Growth* that 'To the minds of most people the desirable outcome of human development would be a condition of society in which all the inhabitants of the planet would enjoy a perfectly happy existence'. Bury 2008, 5 His early systematic study of the origins of progress as the aim of humanity's transformation traces the appearance of ideas of growth back to the medieval period and argues that it was not until the Enlightenment that the possibility of the improvement of humanity became a part of the philosophical and political imaginary of the world. Robert Nisbet, in his 'The idea of Progress', goes back even further tracing the discussions of progress all the way back to ancient Greece. Even while none of these works engages development theory in itself, the analysis of the idea of progress is framed in what could presently be understood as the space of development thinking- ideas that give 'substance to the hope for a future characterized by individual freedom, equality, or justice' Nisbet 1979, 7 Both works are also clearly Eurocentric and their scope limited to an informed genealogy of the term, yet the authors clearly trace back many centuries ideas of development, intertwined with discussions of progress.

[4] Esteva 2010, 5

idea of development arguing that, in particular after the Second World War, ideas of development have served as instruments of domination from the Western world over the Third World[5]. Others, as we will see below, have questioned different aspects of the development ideal, challenging its goals, strategies or main actors.

However, the uncertainty in the definition of development has been no obstacle to the central role that it has played in articulating national governments, international organisations and activists' efforts in the second half of the twentieth century. The living conditions of billions of people around the globe have been transformed to one degree or another by strategies designed and implemented under different readings of this politically loaded term. While questions like 'What is the meaning and goal of development? How it is best achieved? Who undertakes the task of pursuing development? Is development a worthy goal?' are still unsettled today, different responses have been attempted in the last six or seven decades. The idea of development has evolved considerably, and Latin America has offered, as it does today, a fertile space for critical reflection (and for experimentation) on these ideas. Far from being an exhaustive analysis of the Latin American contributions to development thinking, this post intends to serve as a broad, general overview of some of its main trends.

The 'golden dream' of development

In the decades that followed the end of the Second World War, theories of development were mainly formulated around ideas of transfers of knowledge and resources from the developed West to the developing nations of the Southern hemisphere, to assist them in 'catching up' with the advanced standards of social and economic indicators that existed in the Global North. Modernization theories of development, emerging in the 1940s and 1950s, shared a linear, evolutionist view of development, an adamant belief in the unlimited possibilities of progress and the assumption that advanced Western societies were the standard for development strategies. As such, the vision of development linked to a modern vision of progress was a teleological one, articulated in a staged process that would take countries in the same path that North American and European countries took. This notion of development was dependent on economic growth and industrialization, and the agency of the process would lie with the national states: the international system was mainly seen as assisting the developing countries in

[5] See, for example, Escobar 1995; Rahnema and Bawtree 1998; Sachs 2010

creating the internal conditions necessary for the 'take off' of these countries, especially focusing on the role of labour, capital and technology.[6]

However, this optimistic view of the development process was short-lived, and Latin America was the context in which the first systematic criticism to these ideas started to emerge. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the Structuralist and the *Dependencia* theories of development came to challenge the main assumptions of the Modernization school. In the work of Raúl Prebisch, Celso Furtado, Enzo Faletto, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, André Gunder Frank, Theotonio Dos Santos and others, the focus shifted from the endogenous to the exogenous conditions for development, to explain the possibilities and failure of the 'take-off' of these economies to effectively occur.[7] These theories generally pointed to the inability of the Modernization school to account for the difficulties of the colonial legacy and the unequal international structures of trade that developing countries confronted in their path towards development. The most radical version of these critiques, theorized by the *Dependencia* school, combined the structuralist approach with Marxist orthodoxy. Their analysis emphasised the path dependency that was created by the social, political and economic structures of colonization and the resulting structures of world trade which remained an unavoidable characteristic of the economic and social processes of development pursued from the core (Western developed world) to the periphery. As such, these theories pushed for different policy strategies than those of the Modernization theorists, and claimed the need to break this path dependency to effectively transit a development path.

The intellectual power and clarity of these theories had a great impact at the national and international level in policy and academic discussions of development. At the policy level, their influence prompted the implementation of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) national strategies and influenced the creation of international organizations focusing on the international economic structures for development (such as the creation of the ECLAC and the UNCTAD). In academic discussions, by the end of the 1970s, Dependencia theories and different readings of the Structuralist position were central in debates around development. Both in receiving fervent support and vehement criticism, theories of development were discussed around these ideas, and the debate was slowly leading to exhaustion. In

[6] Some clear examples of Modernization theories of development include the works of Rosenstein-Rodan 1961; Rostow 1990; Nurkse 1961; Lewis 1954

[7] Some important examples of these theories are the works of Prebisch 1986; Cardoso and Faletto 1974; Furtado 1964; Frank 1969; Frank 1966; Dos Santos 1970

1985, David Booth published his "Marxism and Development Sociology: Interpreting the Impasse" in which he argued for the existence of an effective 'impasse' in the scholarship around development until the previous decade.[8] At a theoretical level, the early understandings of development were criticised for their pure economicism, for neglecting the role of political struggle in their developmental strategy, and for their methodological nationalism, that relied heavily on national states for the promotion of development.[9] Slowly, the limitations of mainstream understandings of development were becoming more apparent, and a plurality of frameworks for understanding development was emerging. In Latin America, reflection on these ideas evolved into a plethora of disparate notions, projects and strategies for development. Some of them, like the contemporary surge of discussions of *Buen Vivir*, made deep, long- lasting impressions in academic and policy debates. Others, remained at the periphery of such discussions.

Development thinking and its discontents

The limitations that the 'development impasse' debate[10] pointed out were not the only challenges to the linear notions of development associated to economic growth that both Modernization schools and its Structuralist and Dependencia critiques sustained. Many challenges to these ideas of development, in fact, emerged in the late 60s and 70s and were incorporated in the terms of the 'impasse debate'. Others remained at the margins of the discussions of development or were only incorporated decades later, some of which have only appeared under the mainstream development gaze only in recent years. The discontent with these early ideas of development appeared not only from academia but from committed political activists as well as from policy institutions. Critiques varied in range but focused on the agency, contents and strategies for development.

Discussions of the content and goal of development questioning the narrow understanding of development that pure economic growth could provide were common earlier criticisms. In 1971, Robert McNamara, President of the World Bank declared the war on poverty and called for the need to 'dethrone GDP' from being the main indicator of development. [11] On similar lines, the 1970s saw the

[8] Booth 1985

[9] Munck 2010, 38

[10] See, for example, Booth 1994; Corbridge 1990; Kiely 1995; Mouzelis 1988; Schuurman 1993; Sklair 1988

[11] McNamara 1979

emergence of the concepts of *Basic Human Needs* to expand the focus on economic growth with more social considerations.[12] This economicist criticism expanded as well, shaping the idea of sustainable development andillustrating the limitations of industrialization strategies for development. In 1972, the Club of Rome published the influential report *The Limits to Growth* and in 1987, the Bruntland Commission from the United Nations published *Our Common Future,* both of which are milestones in the emergence of sustainability concerns in discussions of development.[13] At the same time, critiques of the need to reconsider where the main agency of the development process lay received input from two different (and more often than not, mutually reinforcing) areas: the state-centric vision of development that prevailed in the earlier theories was under fire from those who claimed the need for the individual to take a stronger stance in the development process, and from those who pointed at the suitability of the market for leading such an endeavour. In line with the Neoliberal upsurge of the 1980s and 1990s, strategies of development pointed to the necessity of restructuring the economy to give a broader space for the market, in the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) across the global south. The publication in 1987 of the UNICEF report *Adjustment with a Human Face* together with the acknowledgement of the most despairing results brought upon by the SAPs, brought the focus closer to the human-side of development.

The emergence of people-centred development, with a focus on the individual as 'means and ends' for development, offered the possibility to combine most of the critiques raised. As such, is not surprising that the Human Development initiative, launched in the 1990s became the new mainstream perspective on development. Framed mainly in terms of the worl of Amartya Sen, the Human Development paradigm enshrines a need for understanding it as being 'development *of* the people *by* the people, *for* the people'[14]. This has become inextricably linked to ideas of political and economic empowerment inundating mainstream contemporary discussions and policy initiatives for development. These discussions of the limitations of development are far from settled. In Latin America, scholars and activists alike have become involved in developing further these ideas or in attempting to rethink them completely. Some of these ideas entered global discussions of development and contributed to expand Latin American critical

[12] International Labour Office 1976; Streeten et al. 1981; Stewart 1985

[13] . Meadows et al. 1972; World Comission on Environment and Development 1987

[14] United Nations Development Program 1991, 13

development thinking. One of the clearest early examples can be found in the work in Chile of Manfred Max-Neef and in the work of Enrique Leff in Mexico that was initiated in the early 1980s, but has continued to develop.[15] Both works engaged discussions of sustainability and environmental concerns, and quite successfully engaged global discussions of sustainable development from Latin America.

Other perspectives, however, remained in the periphery of development thinking, and their contributions have not traditionally been accounted for in discussions of development theory. Here, we can see the un-acknowledged contributions to development thinking from some of the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America. Several social movements that foresaw a different future for the region, engaged in reflections and discussions of development far away from university classrooms greatly influenced by the dependentistas understanding of development. Two of the strongest examples, were the social movements linked to Liberation theology and Radical Pedagogy that spread across Latin America in the late 1960s and 1970s. While discussions of development were not the main or immediate focus of either of these movements, both projects led to an early emergence of reflection on the link between the role of the individual and development that was escaping the narrow visions of the Modernization school and its Latin American critics. [16] In their theological and pedagogical discussions, both projects discussed materially grounded ideas of development, in which the individual and their societies started to be seen not only as those who benefit from but as the agents of development. Working mostly from outside the structures of the state, these grassroots movements initiated in Latin America were predecessors of the ideas of individual empowerment and citizen participation as paths towards development that would only enter mainstream development discussion many years later. In these perspectives, the search for liberation and social justice is closely linked to notions of development, yet it transcends ideas of economic growth and modernization. Both Liberation Theology and Critical Pedagogy called for a process of development whose focus was the *humanization* of the individual and their communities, achieved through a process of individual empowerment. Perhaps because of their deep commitment to practice, these ideas did not attempt to participate in mainstream discussions of development. At the same time, the rise of dictatorships in most Latin American

[15] Some of the iconic early works in these lines includes Max-neef 1986; Max-neef 1982; Leff 1986

[16] In the case of Liberation Theology, is worth mentioning the works of Gutiérrez 1975; Boff 1980; Boff and Boff 1987; Camara 1971; Quigley 1971 The case of critical pedagogy is mainly based in the work of Paulo Freire. See, for example, Freire 1972; Freire 1974; Freire 1977

countries was a major deterrent for the implementation of these projects of development, or even for their academic discussions. Yet, their contributions have not been unacknowledged in Latin American thinking and in general, have contributed to the wealth of experiences and reflections that the region has offered for critical development thinking.

Rethinking the path: alternatives to development

More recently, other projects and frameworks have given us the opportunity of rethinking entirely the purpose, scope and means of development, and even to question the necessity of speaking of development as a valid project. Post-Development critiques, very much associated to the work of Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar in Latin America, presented a powerful tool to rethink the path of development altogether[17]. In arguing for the necessity to explore alternatives to development, rather than development alternatives, theorists of post-development have been joined by a myriad of scholars in one of the most fruitful periods for development thinking that Latin America has seen. In fact, the list of those who take part of the constellation of thinkers contributing to development thinking in the region in the last few decades is too long to be covered in a single article.[18]The work of these authors expands well beyond discussions of development theory, offering a wide range of possibilities for expanding the critical development thinking field. Discussions of *Buen Vivir* are only the most visible contributions that Latin America has to offer to critical development thinking. On this side of the world, more than ever, contemporary reflections on development come not only from the dynamic academic community but from impressive innovations in governmental, non-governmental and civil society projects and strategies, built on decades-long struggles of Latin American social movements. From the waters of the Rio Grande, all the way down to the Patagonic plains, the region offers an exciting opportunity for critical development thinking. Far from being an exhaustive revision of these contributions, this post wishes to present Alternautas as an open invitation to engage, explore, expand and share them.

[17] Escobar 1995; Escobar 1992; Esteva 2010

[18] Without trying to give an exhaustive list of those who currently occupy the dynamic and growing space of critical development thinking in Latin America, it is worth mentioning the work of Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano, Catherine Walsh, Eduardo Mendieta, Alberto Acosta, Eduardo Gudynas, Esperanza Martínez, Edgardo Lander, Maristella Svampa, Fernando Untoja Choque, , Santiago Castro-Gómez, Pablo Quintero, Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Ricardo Abramovay, David Barkin, Marcel Bursztyn, José Luis Corragio, José Eli da Veiga, Pablo Dávalos, Antonio Elizalde Hevia, Libia Grueso, Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves, Jürgen Schuldt, Osvaldo Sunkel, Fernando Huanacuni Mamani, Victor Toledo and Eduardo Viola.

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