

ANALYSIS

Accumulation and Growth to What End? Reassessing the Modern Faith in Progress in the “Age of Development”

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*...they have not sinned. But their great worth alone
was not enough, for they did not know Baptism,
which is the gateway to the faith you follow,*

they did not worship God the way one should...
—Virgil speaking to Dante in Limbo¹

The Promise of Development

Virgil’s somber explanation for why some souls are forever lost in limbo serves as a useful introduction to a reassessment of modern ideas about development and progress. The notion of not worshipping “the way one should” can be applied not only to the understanding of lost souls in medieval times, but also to contemporary discourses on development. In the latter case, not worshipping “the way one should” refers to a failure by peoples and governments in the Global South to properly adhere to the modern faith in accumulation, growth and (eventually) prosperity. While the global poor are not necessarily sinful in their poverty, they are assumed to be ignorant of the magical powers of markets and capitalism²—what Richard Cobden considers the “divine law” of free trade.³ The capitalist market is the gateway to life in luxury (development), the secular version of paradise enjoyed by a select, or chosen, few. Because the poor have not properly worshipped the great secular religion—capitalism—they are cast out and miserable.⁴ They are pagans in the world of markets, thus kept from the fruits of development, just as pagans of the pre-Christian era were kept from salvation due to their ignorance of Christ.

The trials and tribulations of Dante’s Pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy* serve as a useful analogy to the lives of poor people today.⁵ In Dante’s account, the Pilgrim must descend into hell and then pass through purgatory before he can reach paradise. Poor

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Volume 1: Inferno* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 98.

² For example, Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs In the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (London: Black Swan, 2001).

³ Cobden, quoted in Eric Helleiner, “Economic Liberalism and its Critics: The Past as Prologue?” *Review of International Political Economy*, 10, 4, 2003, p. 687.

⁴ This characterization of poor people’s circumstances is a classic case of blaming the victim that is illustrative of how many influential commentators—e.g., Western standard bearers of neoliberalism like *The Economist* and the *Financial Times*—lament the ignorance of those who doubt the blessings that markets can bestow upon them. Poverty refers to a lack of material goods required to maintain life, basic health and some degree of life options. Other aspects of poverty, such as poverty of the soul or mind, may as well afflict people living in materially wealthy conditions—as suggested by the notion of “affluenza.”

⁵ Dante and his *Divine Comedy* are a precursor to the modern era and its faith in progress. For a literary commentary on Dante as a “gateway” to a modern world view, see Erich Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1929).

people have descended into their own hell of underdevelopment, prompted by their own fallibility and ignorance as manifested by a combination of what in the development literature is referred to as “ethnic divisions,” “neo-patriotism,” “kleptocracy,” “bad governance” and other such manifestations of “sinfulness.”⁶ From this “hell on earth,” the poor must redeem themselves via a journey through the purgatory of imposed structural adjustment programs, to perhaps one day ascend to the paradise that is development-cum-OECD membership.⁷

The *progression* of the Pilgrim is an account that resembles both how we still understand progress and the way in which the South might be able to progress from “underdevelopment” to “development.” Hardship and suffering—the bitter pills of structural adjustment and other austerity programs—are still necessary companions on the road to redemption.⁸ Theories of development predicated on ever-increasing accumulation and consumption are secular manifestations of the modern faith in progress. Ideals such as progress and development are best left unexamined and treated as uncomplicated, whole entities, because they are also very imprecise concepts. Similarly, concepts such as accumulation and growth are best explored in the aggregate (i.e., as a whole). Leaving such concepts unexamined protects the curious development scholar and/or policymaker from being exposed to an excessive amount of cognitive dissonance when discovering that aggregate trends (e.g., Growth Domestic Product, or GDP, per capita growth) may correspond little or not at all to actual changes in people’s living conditions.

The connection between faith and development is still with us, as suggested by the Third Annual Richard W. Snowdon lecture at the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington on March 30, 2004. At this event, then World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn spoke on “Millennium Challenges for Faiths and Development” (i.e., the link between faith-based organizations and poverty reduction). This topic fits neatly with recently unveiled, highly publicized research at the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research that proclaims “economic growth responds positively to the extent of religious beliefs, notably those in hell and heaven.”⁹

This article revolves around three interrelated propositions. First, despite the continual failures that characterize the post-WWII “age of development,” scholars and policymakers alike persist in the pursuit of development based on essentially liberal models of growth and accumulation. These models pay rhetorical heed only to crucial issues of redistribution. Second, broad-based development on a global scale is economically and ecologically impossible within the world economy as currently constituted. Yet the “developed” Northern consumer society continues serving as the

⁶ On these problems in Africa, see William I. Zartman (ed.), *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); George B. N. Ayittey, *Africa in Chaos* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

⁷ For a discussion of the religious overtones in development studies, see Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London: Zed Books, 2002). On “economic fundamentalism” in Africa, see John Mihevc, *The Market Tells Them So: The World Bank and Economic Fundamentalism in Africa* (Accra: Third World Network, 1995).

⁸ In the context of Southern African austerity programs and on structural adjustment in Zimbabwe as “Eternal Suffering for the African People” (ESAP), see Patrick Bond, *Uneven Zimbabwe: A Study of Finance, Development, and Underdevelopment* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998), pp. 379-421.

⁹ Robert J. Barro and Rachel M. McCleary, “Religion and Economic Growth,” National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper No. 9682, May 2003, online at: <http://papers.nber.org/papers/w9682.pdf>.

utopia that peoples in the South must attempt to reach. Third, a 21st Century development paradigm that remains wedded to modern ideals of growth and progress—ideals hegemonic in political and economic thinking for half a millennium or so—will not bring about an improved quality of life globally. Such a development paradigm has failed, is doomed to continue failing, and will likely produce terminal crisis for humankind.

Following Matthews's suggestion that "post-development" theory has much to learn from African cultures and experiences, it is useful to pay particular attention to the continent where the impact of forceful integration with global capitalism and the many disasters related to development projects in the "age of development" can most readily be observed.¹⁰ The common notion that African countries are underdeveloped because they are not sufficiently integrated into the global economy,¹¹—the "insufficient integration thesis"—is questionable, as Bond, Amin and others have pointed out. It is not lack of integration but the *form* of integration that produces dependence and poverty across Africa.¹²

A Historical Survey of Development: The Pursuit of Growth

Rist suggests that the concept of development as commonly employed in the modern development discourse contains presuppositions of *social evolutionism* (that developing countries can and should catch up with the industrialized countries of the North), *individualism* (developing personalities appropriate for the pursuit of development) and *economism* (where growth and greater income are most important goals). From this point of view—evolutionary, individualist and economist—the term "development" is the sum of "virtuous human aspirations." The problem, then, is that "development" inevitably becomes the embodiment of the ideal social existence of a particular age (or regime, or person) and as such, is a desideratum rather than a proper definition.¹³ A more concrete definition, which is to some degree contained within all major approaches to development, is:

"Development" consists of a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require—for the reproduction of society—the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand.¹⁴

The notion of growth is central to all development strategies. In fact, growth is considered a necessity rather than a choice, and to improve living conditions, growth must be pursued at all times. Even in the case of improving our environment, growth can be introduced as a *deus ex machina*—never mind the destructive impact on the biosphere caused by virtually all forms of growth-generating production from primitive forms of accumulation, such as slash and burn agriculture, to advanced forms of

¹⁰ Sally Matthews, "Post-development Theory and the Question of Alternatives: A View from Africa," *Third World Quarterly*, 25, 2, 2004.

¹¹ Robert Gilpin, *Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Nicolas van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹² Patrick Bond, *Against Global Apartheid: South Africa Meets the World Bank, IMF and International Finance* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2001); Samir Amin, "Africa: Living on the Fringe," *Monthly Review*, 53, 10, 2002.

¹³ Rist, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

industrial production. Following U.S. withdrawal from the Kyoto Treaty on climate change, President George W. Bush suggested “economic growth is the key to environmental progress,” and that “growth is the solution, not the problem.”¹⁵ This, Latouche pointed out, “is not only a right wing position: the principle is shared by much of the left.”¹⁶

The proposition that there should be a level of optimum growth to a point where increased consumption would not be necessary is not seriously considered. Even reservations about some forms of consumption, like “junk mail” or the trade in small arms, which are acknowledged to have destructive consequences far exceeding any potential benefits, are drowned out by generalized and ceaseless growth propaganda from corporations and governments alike. Destitute people do need increased consumption to stay alive or maintain a minimum of comfort. Yet even the suggestion that redistributing existing resources rather than increasing aggregate levels of growth and consumption could improve the lot of the world’s destitute is, for most development thinkers and policymakers, not “viable” (i.e., politically feasible).

Rist says development predicated on growth thus implies that “‘more’ necessarily means ‘better.’” Of prime—but often unspoken—importance, this process of growth and accumulation cannot be interrupted without endangering the economic position of those who benefit from it. Hence, we have a process that is “entirely focused on production of the maximum rather than the optimum—for it can exist only by spreading extensively (geographically) or intensively (into new natural or social domains).”¹⁷ Indeed, the “compulsion” to pursue accumulation (growth) is, according to Wood, a “systemic imperative” inherent in the capitalist mode of production.¹⁸ This suggests that the question of how to distribute any growth dividend—or, the utility of growth *per se*—can never be a serious consideration for elites with vested interests in the promotion and spread of capitalism.

Although emphasis on growth as progress intensified with the neoliberal revolution of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the concept that development must be predicated on ever-greater growth has been with us since the “first” (Keynesian) and “second” (neoliberal) “Washington consensus” eras.¹⁹ Strong emphasis on liberalization and fiscal discipline, as opposed to distribution of resources, has been consistent throughout various “Washington consensus” and “post-consensus” policy configurations.²⁰ Annually published World Bank development reports²¹ illuminate the numerous incantations of these policies.

¹⁵ United States White House, “President Announces Clear Skies & Global Climate Change Initiatives,” February 14, 2002, online at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/20020214-5.html>.

¹⁶ Serge Latouche, “Would the West Actually Be Happier With Less?” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 2003, online at: <http://www.mondediplo.com>.

¹⁷ Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Globalization and the State: Where is the Power of Capital?” in A. Saad-Filho (ed.), *Anti-Capitalism: A Marxist Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 131.

¹⁹ Mark Blyth and Hendrik Spruyt, “Our Past as Prologue: Introduction to the Tenth Anniversary Issue of the *Review of International Political Economy*,” *Review of International Political Economy*, 10, 4, 2003.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 614-15.

²¹ For African examples, see The World Bank, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action* (Washington: World Bank, 1981); *Adjustment in Africa: Reforms, Results, and the Road Ahead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); The World Bank, *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century* (Washington: World Bank, 2000).

But African development reports are seriously lacking in real solutions for widespread poverty alleviation.²² These reports contain little besides wishful rhetoric on the idea that policy formation and implementation should include a broad range of societal stakeholders. Nor do they offer any clear guidelines on how any growth generated would be distributed so that it benefits those most in need. In almost every instance where economic reforms are evaluated, GDP per capita growth is deemed the ultimate indicator of success or failure.²³ This is especially problematic in the Global South, since benefits of economic reforms will, in high-income inequality environments, almost certainly bypass the poor.²⁴

Manifest Destiny in the “Age of Development”

The immediate origins of the “age of development” can be traced to Point Four of U.S. President Harry Truman’s inaugural speech on January 20, 1949. In addition to points regarding U.S. backing of the new UN organization, the support of European reconstruction under the Marshall Plan, and the creation of NATO, a fourth point was adopted regarding the need for the U.S. to extend technical assistance to parts of Latin America and other poor countries. The rationale was that “for the first time in history, humanity possess[ed] the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people.”²⁵

This new “age of development” was organized under stewardship of the emerging U.S. global hegemony, which was justified by the nation’s role as natural leader (given its military and economic dominance) of a “free world” against the threat of communism. An immense concentration of wealth in the post-war U.S. also made the country the obvious model for poorer societies. “Point Four simply imposed a new standard, namely Gross National Product, whereby the United States stood at the top.”²⁶ No doubt the “natural” leadership of the U.S. fit well with its (self-styled) image as successor to the crown of Western civilization following the irreversible decline of European imperial powers in the wake of two utterly devastating world wars. The U.S. national myth of “manifest destiny” and its conception as the “city upon a hill” that serves as beacon for all humankind²⁷ further bolstered its position.

Writing in the early 1960s, economic historian Eric Heilbroner similarly sensed something genuinely new emerging in the post-war era. He described the process of global (as opposed to merely Western) economic development as “a worldwide struggle to escape from the poverty and misery, and not less from the neglect and anonymity, which have heretofore constituted ‘life’ for the vast majority of human beings. It is not mere rhetoric to speak of *this attempted Great Ascent* as the first real act of world history.”²⁸ This “first real act” would, of course, have to be led—indeed willed—by the

²² Stefan Andreasson, “Economic Reforms and ‘Virtual Democracy’ in South Africa and Zimbabwe: The Incompatibility of Liberalization, Inclusion and Development,” *Journal of Comparative African Studies*, 21, 3, 2003.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 387-88.

²⁴ Martin Ravallion, “Growth, Inequality and Poverty: Looking Beyond Averages,” *World Development*, 29, 11, 2001, p. 1812.

²⁵ Truman, quoted in Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁷ John Winthrop’s sermon “City Upon a Hill” (1630) and Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776) constitute early articulations of America’s destiny for greatness. For current articulations of these grandiose ideas, see almost any speech by the current president regarding the U.S. and its role in the world.

²⁸ Eric Heilbroner, *The Great Ascent: The Struggle for Economic Development in Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 9, emphasis added. As in Dante’s *Comedy*, the notion of descent and ascent is quite important.

United States. The West, and especially the U.S., had to be the “model for their [the ‘backward world’] long-term development.” According to this vision, the West could, by genuinely concerning itself with the needs of the world’s poor and downtrodden, serve as “lodestar for the global revolution.”²⁹

But, alas, development reports today describe a reality for the world’s poor that is eerily similar to the reality described by Heilbroner almost half a century ago. Note then United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Administrator Mark Malloch Brown’s speech on the 2003 “International Day for the Eradication of Poverty” (October 17):

Three years ago, we—the people of the world, represented by leaders and officials from 189 countries at the Millennium Summit—pledged to pursue an ambitious global poverty-fighting agenda, embodied in [the] Millennium Development Goals ... Yet, the human deprivations that persist are unacceptable. Millions of people go to bed hungry every night, tens of thousands of children die every day from preventable causes, every minute a woman dies in childbirth, and the HIV pandemic continues to spread and destroy countless lives, families and communities. Achieving the Millennium

Development Goals will neither be easy nor automatic, but it can be done.³⁰

It can be done, presumably, by doing something very different than what has been done so far. But who is constructing, advocating and implementing truly different alternatives?

Socialism and Growth

Both liberal and socialist thought on progress and development is predicated on the importance of accumulation and growth. However, these theoretical approaches differ in their understanding of how the growth “dividend” ought to, and is likely to be, distributed. Regarding the inability of socialism in general and *dependistas* in particular to formulate concrete alternatives to development based on increasing accumulation and consumption, Rist notes that the implicit goal of “anti-capitalist” development strategies is, essentially, to “modernize, to industrialize, and to capture foreign markets.”³¹

Indeed, could things be otherwise once the [dependency] theory was so deeply rooted in Marxism ... [given that] while Marx proposed a remarkable *internal critique* of the Western system, he did not succeed in making a critique of the Western system. “Development of the productive forces” was the common objective of capitalism and socialism, even if, as [Enrique Fernando] Cardoso stressed, the benefits were not distributed to the same classes ... [Hence the failure to] consider the cultural aspects of “development,” or the possibility of models resting upon different foundations, or the ecological consequences of treating industrialization as necessary to collective well-being.³²

In this crucial sense, socialist theorizing on development fails to offer sustainable alternatives to liberal theories. Proponents of traditional socialist

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁰ UNDP, “International Day for the Eradication of Poverty: Message by Mark Malloch Brown, UNDP Administrator,” October 17, 2003, online at: <http://www.undp.org/dpa/statements/administ/2003/october/17oct03.html>.

³¹ Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³² *Ibid.*

development have never broken away from the awe with which Marx (initially) beheld the powerful ability of capitalism to fundamentally reshape society.³³ Socialists influenced by this popularized reading of Marx understand the unleashing of productive forces in society to achieve growth as an essentially *progressive* phenomenon.³⁴ But what about the crises inevitably generated by the capitalist mode of production, which Marx himself spent the greater part of his work outlining and explaining? These crises are, of course, acknowledged by 20th Century socialists and constitute a key component of their argument against capitalism. Indeed, to overcome such crises is a key goal for those promoting non-capitalist alternatives for societal organization. On the other hand, traditional socialists seldom question the idea that *more* production and growth is desirable, and indeed necessary.

There is, however, scope for a genuine reassessment of development strategies among emerging “red-green” coalitions. Following the end of the Cold War and the developmentally counterproductive ideological confrontation between capitalism and “really existing socialism,” important new movements have emerged.³⁵ Bond outlines strides made in Third World global justice movements in general.³⁶ In a recent survey of the prospects for emerging anti-capitalist struggles in a “post-neo-colonial” Africa, Saul cautions that while “the historically necessary [socialism] should not be confounded with the historically possible,”³⁷ the “language and vision of socialism will have to become part and parcel” of this “next liberation struggle.”³⁸ A growing ecosocialist body of work is engaging Rist’s critique that socialism is insufficiently disconnected from capitalist imperatives of expanding accumulation and development of productive forces.³⁹

Development North and South

It is difficult to point to any one society on earth and claim that it represents the best approximation of the ideal of “development.” Some may prefer the *relative* security and stability of more developed, yet less competitive Millen, Western European capitalist welfare states. Others may prefer the more volatile, but also more competitive and aggregately more wealthy, United States. Societies with less poverty, disease and violence are undoubtedly preferable to those in which such ills are all-pervasive. But what about this “developed” Western consumer society? Can we hope for nothing

³³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 1998 [1848]), pp. 37-41.

³⁴ Emphasis on Marx’s earlier (oftentimes journalistic) work at the expense of his (and Engels’) subsequent, more mature work neglects Marx’s emphasis on how the spread of capitalism would also produce and perpetuate poverty and “backwardness.” Branwen Gruffydd Jones, “The Civilized Horrors of Over-work: Marxism, Imperialism & Development of Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 30, 95, 2003, pp. 35-38.

³⁵ The confrontation is counterproductive because both liberals and (“really existing”) socialists pursued the best strategy for exploiting labor and the environment. Neither liberals nor these socialists were overly, or at all, concerned with the long-term costs—human and ecological—of their preferred strategies.

³⁶ Bond, 2001, *op. cit.*, chapter 11.

³⁷ Roger Murray, “Second Thoughts on Ghana,” *New Left Review*, 42, March/April, 1967, p. 39.

³⁸ John Saul, “Africa: The Next Liberation Struggle?” *Review of African Political Economy*, 30, 96, 2003, p. 187.

³⁹ For example, James O’Connor, *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (New York: Guilford, 1998); Wolfgang Sachs, Reinhard Loske and Manfred Linz (eds.), *Greening the North: A Post-Industrial Blueprint for Ecology & Equity* (London: Zed Books, 1998); Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999); Joel Kovel *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* (London: Zed Books, 2002); and Saad-Filho, *op. cit.*

better than the post-WWII “historical compromise” between the state, labor and capital that produced the “embedded liberalism” underpinning European welfare states?⁴⁰ In some form or another, the Western state becomes the utopia with which the South is to be enticed into progress and development.

While it is easy to identify commonplace socioeconomic problems— increasing polarization, alienation, violent crime and related societal ills—within even our wealthiest societies, they are still designated “obvious” models of development. But the idea that the Western capitalist consumer society ought to be the best possible state of being towards which all humanity should therefore strive is fundamentally problematic. After all, humans hold dear more values than those most highly prized in Western societies. The example of the West also necessitates the “politics of forgetting.”⁴¹ In the case of development, this means forgetting the fact that production and development in one place cannot conveniently be separated from processes of destruction and underdevelopment elsewhere.⁴²

In fact, capitalism needs—and depends on—violent coercion. Primitive accumulation, which sets the capitalist economy in motion, constitutes a fundamental act of violence against those who become exploited, exchangeable and superfluous under advanced capitalism.⁴³ Examples of this violence range from enclosure movements in early industrial England and the institution of “hut taxes” in colonial Africa to the forceful removal today of indigenous populations from areas where natural resources are being extracted in Russia, China and Nigeria.⁴⁴ The promise that development within the framework of global capitalism can truly become positive sum is, accordingly, not utopian but a contradiction in terms.

Policies necessary for creating Western welfare states also ensured marginalization of the South.⁴⁵ The modern welfare state and broad improvements in Western living standards were only possible because of the spoils of capitalist production and imperialist expansion, which fundamentally reshaped societies outside the West. Furthermore, divergent trajectories reinforcing dominance by the North and subservience in the South were never a mere coincidence or an unfortunate side effect of “free-market” competition. As suggested by Biel and frequently noted in Marx’s many trenchant commentaries on the brutality of capitalism, capitalism provides little in terms of freedom and opportunity for those least able to master the market and the

⁴⁰ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944); John G. Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization*, 36, 1982.

⁴¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger et “les juifs”* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).

⁴² Rist, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Michael Perelman, “The History of Capitalism,” in Saad-Filho, *op. cit.*; Wood, in Saad-Filho, *op. cit.*; and Stefan Andreasson, “Stand and Deliver: Private Property and the Politics of Global Dispossession,” *Political Studies*, 54, 1, 2006 (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Nancy Holmstrom and Richard Smith, “The Necessity of Gangster Capitalism: Primitive Accumulation in Russia and China,” *Monthly Review*, 51, 9, 2000. For vivid accounts of the violence associated with capitalist expansion in early industrial England and beyond, see Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 0[1867]) and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968).

⁴⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1972). For all its manifest anachronisms—e.g., Hoxha’s Albania as a great example of progress and development—Rodney’s book remains a lucid statement of how, under capitalism, development for some generates underdevelopment for others.

exploitation of human relations, which is capitalism's imperative.⁴⁶ "The free market is an expression of profoundly unequal market relations ... [which] leads to a virtual monopoly by the North on mass consumption."⁴⁷ Hence Waltz concludes "the main difference between international politics now and earlier is not found in the increased interdependence of states but in their growing inequality."⁴⁸

Africa: Window on Dystopia

The African continent is the global media source for the most vivid images of "underdevelopment" and "backwardness." The often-lamented "failure of Africa" (which generally neglects important variation across countries) has, seemingly, occurred despite the best of intentions. But the picture of Africa throughout the post-independence era that Westerners see is projected through a filter imbued with the language of "development" accepted and handed down from scholars and governments of both leftist and rightist persuasion in the North.

Surveying the erosion and collapse in the 1980s and 1990s of the post-colonial African state, Young highlights the "developmentalism" that became essential for the "legitimation imperative" of both the colonial and, later, post-colonial state.⁴⁹ That the state should be able to work wonders was a belief widely held among European colonial administrations and African leaders of independence (e.g., Ghana's Nkrumah and Tanzania's Nyerere). Proponents of planned economic socialism as well as Western purveyors of various forms of interventionist, Keynesian welfare capitalism believed in the potential to turn exploitation of Africa into progress for Africans; "a vision of a 'high modernity' achievable by state action inspired the young generation of post-colonial rulers."⁵⁰ Thus, any signs of the economically correct aggregate measures of "progress" would be heralded as beacons of hope. Why worry about the human cost of a "great leap forward" if a newly independent and assertive China could achieve double-digit growth rates?

However, most of the major development projects across Africa—whether they be steel mills in Nigeria or hydroelectric dams in Ghana and Zaire—seldom became more than enrichment projects for elites that, at least in the short term, enabled them to fuel their many expensive support networks among domestic and international businesses, civil servants, and armed forces. Resources claimed and profits made by these elites in the name of "the people" failed to trickle down long before the current wave of violent, disruptive and highly publicized land "redistribution" in Zimbabwe.

It was apparent that the African state would crumble and the suffering of African peoples increase even before the great disaster of collapsing economies and the

⁴⁶ Robert Biel, *The New Imperialism: Crisis and Contradictions in North/South Relations* (London: Zed Books, 2000).

⁴⁷ Biel, quoted in Saul, *op. cit.*, p. 194. Whereas mass consumption is an integral part of more or less all people's lives in the North, mass consumption in the South is relegated to a relatively small segment of the population or, where it extends beyond wealthy elites, to somewhat frequent consumption of a lesser selection of cheaper/inferior goods.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Waltz, "Globalization and American Power," *The National Interest*, 59, Spring, 2000, p. 56.

⁴⁹ Crawford Young, "The End of the Post-colonial State in Africa? Reflections on Changing African Political Dynamics," *African Affairs*, 103, 410, 2004, p. 27. See also Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) on the reproduction of the colonial in the post-colonial African state.

⁵⁰ Young, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

emergence of a new debt peonage, which became known as the “lost decade” of the 1980s. In 1979 the Organization for African Unity reported that “Africa ... is unable to point to any significant growth rate or satisfactory index of general well-being.”⁵¹ The feasibility of the entire developmental project, as constituted within the prevailing liberal world economic and political framework, was cast in doubt.

Although the tug of liberal democracy and market economy is strong, as a referential emblem of “normality” and as a global cachet of respectability, given the enormous problems of stateness that afflict these regions, there is no longer a certainty that these [liberal democracy and market economy] represent the eventual destinations.⁵²

Such pessimistic sentiments, however, do not seem to dampen the enthusiasm for recycling old plans for development into new promises of hope for those who dutifully agree to undertake the appropriate market reforms. To openly acknowledge the empty promises of development would entail questioning the fundamental premises of market-led development strategies. Such a fundamental reevaluation of the global economy is not on the agenda in Western capitals, at the headquarters of the international financial institutions, or in the boardrooms of global corporate elites. Nor is such a fundamental reevaluation of much interest among the African leaders who are pushing the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) as the blueprint for the entire African continent. These elites have, according to Taylor, been “just as interested in maintaining the global system as their colleagues in the North.”⁵³

Unsustainable Polarization and the “Politics of Impatience”

The international discourse on development today is less heady than during the more optimistic decades preceding the disastrous 1980s. Opportunities for progress are still on offer by the North, albeit with much less enthusiasm and the acknowledgment that much harsher conditionalities must be imposed and more austerity-related hardships suffered.⁵⁴ Poor nations have not lived up to expectations, and patience among wealthy nations is running short. In order to be given a “second chance,” peoples of the South must now show a much better appreciation for the possibilities offered them by neoliberal policies. Nowhere are these sentiments more obvious than with regard to Africa.

Furthermore, aid flows to Africa have been steadily dwindling since peaking in 1990.⁵⁵ Globally, total resource flows as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI) from OECD countries to developing countries have declined by about 40 percent between 1991 and 2002 from .58 to .35 percent of donor country GNI. In the same time period, total Official Development Assistance, as a percentage of donor countries’ GNI, has declined by 10 percent.⁵⁶ Despite increases in aid since 2002, the OECD reports major aid donors “still have a long way to go” if they are to meet the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵³ Ian Taylor, “Globalization and Regionalization in Africa: Reactions to Attempts at Neoliberal Regionalism,” *Review of International Political Economy*, 10, 2, 2003, p. 312.

⁵⁴ On increasing conditionalities in Western policy prescriptions for the South, see Andreasson, *op. cit.*, pp. 388-89.

⁵⁵ Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa 2002: Tracking Performance and Progress* (Addis Ababa: Economic Commission for Africa, 2002), p. 29.

⁵⁶ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *2003 Development Co-operation Report* (OECD, 2003).

development goals set at the 2002 UN Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey.⁵⁷ New promises of critical aid risk being stillborn; President George W. Bush's declaration in 2003 to triple aid for fighting HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean seems unlikely to materialize. U.S. contributions to the Global Fund for combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic have been scaled back, and the 2006 U.S. budget request cut contributions to the fund by almost half (from US\$550 million to US\$300 million).⁵⁸ This "loss of patience" with Africa and other poor regions, combined with sustained pressures of neoliberal globalization, have shrunk "development space" across the Global South.⁵⁹

Growing Western impatience with the demands by Southern countries for "pro-development" reforms was summed up in then EU Agricultural Commissioner Franz Fischler's outburst prior to the 2003 WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancun—a conference intended to discuss the possibilities for enhancing poor countries' access to wealthy markets.⁶⁰ Increasingly frustrated by the demands of poor nations who are locked out of Western agricultural markets by high tariffs and other means that developing nations themselves are forced to abandon, Fischler said proposals that Western nations cut their agricultural tariffs were outrageous.⁶¹

I cannot help [getting] the impression that they [developing nations] are circling in a different orbit ... If they want to do business, they should come back to mother earth. If they choose to continue their space odyssey, they will not get the stars, they will not get the moon, they will end up with empty hands.⁶²

Fischler noted that Western countries spend large amounts of money protecting their economies because they have high standards of living, not because they are "stupid." He added: "What next? Criticizing governments for spending public money on hospital beds, costly noise protection walls, or fancy trees in parks instead of sending it to Africa?"⁶³

Such exasperation is moving today's development discourse in an ugly direction. Benefits of empire—for the colonized—are being discussed with increasing approval among Western scholars and political commentators.⁶⁴ According to this line of thinking, if people in the South cannot grasp, or adopt, the "only choice" (the liberal market) by themselves, others must help them along. South African scholar and political

⁵⁷ OECD, "OECD Report Shows Rising Aid Flows but More Effort Needed to Reach Monterrey Goals," January 28, 2004 online at:

http://www.oecd.org/document/19/0,2340,en_2649_34487_25612371_1_1_1_37413,00.html.

⁵⁸ The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, *HIV/AIDS Policy Fact Sheet*, February 2005, online at: <http://www.kff.org/hivaids/upload/Fact-Sheet-U-S-Federal-Funding-for-HIV-AIDS-The-FY-2006-Budget-Request.pdf>

⁵⁹ On using increasingly elaborate international regulation of trade and property rights to restrict the options for countries in the South to pursue effective development strategies, see Robert Hunter Wade, "What Strategies are Viable for Developing Countries Today? The World Trade Organization and the Shrinking of 'Development Space,'" *Review of International Political Economy*, 10, 4, 2003.

⁶⁰ On the goals of Cancun, see James D. Wolfensohn, "A Good 'Pro-Poor' Cancun Could Help Rich as Well," *Financial Times*, September 8, 2003.

⁶¹ The demand for better access to Western markets is a stopgap measure to deal with problems in the global economy as currently constituted. It does not address the more fundamental question of whether *any* free trade environment can foster broad-based development in countries that have already fallen so far behind in the capitalist era.

⁶² "Africa at Large: EU Farm Chief Slams Poor Nations' Demands," *Mail & Guardian*, September 5, 2003.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ For example, Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

commentator R.W. Johnson stated it most bluntly when he said Africa needed nothing less than a new era of colonization.

What is staring us in the face is a reversion to the old mandate system: an acknowledgement that decolonization has not really worked and that Africa needs sustained outside help in reconstructing its ravaged economies and collapsed states. At present such a reinvention of colonialism—for that is what it is—brings gasps of politically correct horror. But sooner or later this is what will have to be faced.⁶⁵

Noting this renewed enthusiasm for the days of colonial empire and Western-imposed global “order” is not important simply to point out the scores of well-catalogued injustices suffered by colonized peoples. Nor is it an attempt to trivialize serious levels of mismanagement, corruption and brutality imposed on some peoples in the South by their own rulers and comprador classes. Such nuances are lost in today’s discourse on development, where the essential “truth” proclaims that there is “no alternative” to Western-led liberalization and marketization.

Instead of recognizing that decades of capitalist prescriptions have failed to deliver broad-based prosperity and have instead increased polarization of rich and poor and perpetuated the immiseration of billions of people worldwide,⁶⁶ the evidence is written off as aberrations, or used as “evidence” to depict a Global South that has not yet grasped the “mystery of capital.”⁶⁷ This argument stands in contradiction to those, like Amin, who suggest Africa is more integrated into the global capitalist economy, in terms of the share of its external trade in GDP, than any other region of the world, but that the *form* of this integration is one of extreme dependency and vulnerability.⁶⁸ In the final analysis, the idea that global capitalism *must be* a positive sum game is a myth. But no one longing for global stability, and a perpetuation of the status quo in existing North/South power relations, dares to challenge it.

Insisting On the Impossible

The claim at the “heart of the development system” is, according to Rist, that growth (of production and consumption) must be endlessly extended worldwide, not as a matter of choice but as a matter of necessity.

The fact is, however, that *this is not an achievable objective*. Today 20 percent of humanity consumes 80 percent of the planet’s resources and finds itself having to boost growth to keep the system going. But it is not possible to mobilize at least four times more extra resources: the environment simply could not sustain it. Still, one is required to act *as if* the belief were reasonable and the goal attainable.⁶⁹

Therefore, “to avoid having to admit that ‘development’ can never become general, a pretence is made of believing that it is simply far away.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ R. W. Johnson, “Sooner or Later Africa Must Face Some Form of Recolonization,” *The Daily Telegraph*, May 22, 2002.

⁶⁶ On the perpetuation of underdevelopment during the 1990s across most of the Global South, see Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion, “How Did the World’s Poorest Fare in the 1990s?” in Development Research Group (ed.), *Capitalisme* (Karthala: The World Bank, 2000) and Ravallion, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ de Soto, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Amin, cited in John Loxley, “Imperialism & Economic Reform in Africa: What’s New About the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD)?” *Review of African Political Economy*, 30, 95, 2003, p. 119.

⁶⁹ Rist, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

The ecological equation that calculates what sort of growth-based development is sustainable is fairly straightforward. The “ecological footprint” measures the biologically productive area required to produce the various items that one person needs to sustain his or her lifestyle and absorb the emissions (i.e., carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels) of that activity. According to the most recently available estimates, the earth’s current carrying capacity is about 1.9 hectares for each of its approximately 6 billion inhabitants. A global per capita ecological footprint of that magnitude would allow for renewal of resources (of those that are renewable) and leave sufficient resources available for the survival of other species on the planet.⁷¹

Not surprisingly, the per capita size of ecological footprints varies greatly across regions of the world. In 1999 the ecological footprint of the average African or Asian consumer was less than 1.4 hectares and thus within sustainable levels (if perhaps not acceptable given the serious levels of deprivation in much of the South). In Western Europe, however, the average ecological footprint per capita was 5 hectares, and in North America 9.6 hectares.⁷² Moreover, barring any currently conceivable technological revolution in production, as the global population increases, the average per capita ecological footprint will have to shrink to less than 1.5 hectares to stay within the earth’s carrying capacity. Thus, it is nonsensical to suggest that the approximately 80 percent of the world’s population living in the South—who account for over 95 percent of the global population increase⁷³—will ever be able to enjoy anything even approximating the consumer lifestyle of the North. In addition, people living comfortably in wealthy regions of the world are not willing to significantly compromise their lifestyles. President George Bush Senior made that clear when he addressed the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro: “the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation.”⁷⁴

Furthermore, alternatives may seem “impossible” to devise, because we are insisting on using the dynamics of developed, modern economies to understand how development might proceed in the vast majority of countries that are still poor and “underdeveloped.” British development scholar Dudley Seers noted early on in the “age of development” the problem of using the “*special case*” of a few wealthy and modern economies to derive an understanding of the *general case* of poor and traditional economies.⁷⁵ But more than four decades on, the development literature still insists on analyzing the special case to derive insights regarding the general case. While development studies have become increasingly concerned with the dynamics of “underdeveloped” economies, policy recommendations are still based on the (contemporary) dynamics of developed economies.

Why, then, do we persist in this quest for development predicated on the necessity of economic growth, ever-increasing consumption, and the unreasonable idea

⁷¹ World Wildlife Fund, *Living Planet Report 2002*, online at: <http://www.panda.org/downloads/general/LPR2002Summary.pdf>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ United States Census Bureau, *World Population Profile: 1998* (Washington: U.S. Census Bureau, 1998); United Nations Population Information Network (UNPOPIN), *World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision* (New York: UNPOPIN, 2002).

⁷⁴ Bush, quoted in Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 2.

⁷⁵ Dudley Seers, “The Limitations of the Special Case,” *Oxford Institute of Economics and Statistics Bulletin*, 25, 1963.

that peoples of the South can enjoy the same consumer lifestyle as peoples of the North? Is it because there really is “no alternative” besides chaos and destruction? Or is it because the changes required for accommodating the ecological limits of our existence are simply beyond that to which self-interested (“rational”) humans are willing to commit?⁷⁶

Beyond Development: Status Quo, Reform or Revolution?

Proposed solutions to poverty and suffering based on modern assumptions of progress as growth will not, and cannot, work. The planet cannot sustain development for everyone if that means increasing global production to provide a modern consumer lifestyle for all. This is perhaps a vindication of Malthus:⁷⁷ processes of production are inevitably linked with processes of destruction, and we cannot forever separate the two—geographically, economically or ideologically. If this is the case, then it would seem useful to acknowledge that new approaches are necessary to overcome what Saul terms the “impossibility of the present system.”⁷⁸ This is the impossibility of a capitalism that in its ceaseless drive for increasing accumulation—be it in real productivity gains or, as is increasingly the case, mere financial speculation—intensifies global polarization and pushes rich and poor alike toward their common fate: an abyss of irreversible ecological destruction and political, economic and social breakdown.

If humankind and our environment cannot survive further capitalist “progress,” then what is to be done? What are the future scenarios that will permit at least the *possibility* of global equality and justice as well as environmental sustainability? While providing any sort of blueprint for a better future is beyond the scope of this article and perhaps the ability of its author, a few potential scenarios may be outlined.⁷⁹

We can continue pursuing development based on the current “neoliberal consensus,” which will likely intensify global inequalities and the increasingly determined (but also violent) rejection of a contemporary world order based on the hegemony of capitalism and U.S. military and political power. This will perhaps be the fastest route to the great ecological and societal disasters hinted at in this article, unless the capacity for continued subservience of peoples in the South is seriously underestimated.

The reform route is another possibility. The idea that gradual reform of capitalism will eventually provide sustainable development—and thus avert the crises of capitalism, which its critics suggest are inevitable—has become the hope not only of some liberals with a “human face,” but of social democrats hoping to avoid disaster (and having to confront capitalism) by finding a “third way” to prosperity. This route

⁷⁶ In this case of ignoring the obviously disastrous impact of human activities on the environment, the “Emperor”—best symbolized by the current President Bush giving the imperial thumbs down to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change—really has no clothes.

⁷⁷ For a perspective on ecological limits from the early industrial age, see Thomas Malthus, *An Essay On the Principle of Population and A Summary View of the Principle of Population* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970). For more recent concerns, see UNDP “World Summit on Sustainable Development: Political Declaration,” September 4, 2002, online at: http://basd.free.fr/docs/pol_dec.pdf.

⁷⁸ Saul, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

⁷⁹ Constructive, and guardedly optimistic, (socialist/communist) frameworks for change are provided by Michael Lebowitz, “Transcending Capitalism: The Adequacy of Marx’s Recipe,” and Paresh Chattopadhyay, “Towards a Society of Free and Associated Individuals: Communism,” in Saad-Filho, *op. cit.*

will likely prolong an eventual collapse of the capitalist world order. The possibility of averting global disaster by continuing to export the ecological and societal costs of capitalist accumulation to those countries in the South least able to resist will, however, become increasingly difficult.

Revolutions, either from above or below, are another set of possibilities. Given existing global inequalities in economic, political and military power, a radical revolution from above that aims to wipe out the remnants of resistance to global capitalism and secure the rule of capital with some form of quasi-fascist or overtly fascist rule by international financial elites and the states supporting them is not entirely unlikely.⁸⁰ The U.S. invasion of Iraq as well as its current leaders' call for global domination in a "new American Century" indicate moves in this direction.⁸¹

A revolution from below requires more careful maneuvering, given the concentration of power in capitalist interests. While revolution from below would, literally, open up space for a reorganization of the global economy and its political support structures, from a historical point of view, there is no reason to expect that we can predict the course of such a revolution. Nevertheless, those interested in global transformation in the interests of poor and marginalized people ought to pursue *some* form of revolution from below.

Modernity and Progress To What End?

The logical conclusion of accepting the impossibility of development policies as currently constituted is that we either make a radical change in our collective behavior (and what we perceive as the end of development), or we face ultimate disaster. Because the perceived trade-off between hedonistic consumption and survival is considered a negative-sum scenario, we are (apparently) very reluctant to posit this necessity of radical change. Nevertheless, evidence based on centuries of growth-based policies and decades based on the promises of neoliberalism suggest that we are inevitably nearing a point in time where humanity has to make crucial, indeed fateful, choices.

On the other hand, the flood of reports of utter disaster befalling poor people worldwide seems to completely desensitize us to the actual suffering and death that is occurring; it becomes banal. A recent UNICEF report detailing the suffering of a billion poor children—more than half of the children in the "developing" world living in "severe deprivation"⁸²—evokes Josef Stalin's infamous pronouncement that "The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of a million is a statistic."

Ignoring unfolding global disaster might in the short term be convenient, and therefore very likely. Failing to act, however, will be fatal. Eric Hobsbawm concludes his magisterial survey of the "short" 20th Century by reminding us of the dire consequences of inaction.

⁸⁰ On "fascist relations" immanent in global capitalism today, see Rajeev Patel and Philip McMichael, "Third Worldism and the Lineages of Global Fascism: The Regrouping of the Global South in the Neoliberal Era," *Third World Quarterly*, 25, 1, 2004.

⁸¹ For example, see Project for a New American Century, "Statement of Principles," June 3, 1997, online at: <http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>.

⁸² Maxine Frith, "Global Trade Keeps a Billion Children in Poverty, says Unicef," *The Independent*, October 22, 2003.

If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness.⁸³

This article cannot provide comforting evidence for the emergence of a global society that will overcome the limitations of modern pursuits of development, but it has hopefully contributed to the notion that we must fundamentally rethink “development,” rather than simply continue policy tinkering within the existing development paradigm.

The challenges facing humanity, many of which seem insurmountable, should by no means suggest the inevitability or acceptability of a paralyzing “pessimism of the intellect.”⁸⁴ The utility of piecemeal reform or the (intellectual) convenience found in resignation is hopefully not what is projected by the arguments put forth herein. On the contrary, the borderline hopelessness of the present situation requires revolutionary measures—drastic and genuinely transformative upheaval of some form. If a brighter future is difficult to envision, or conduits toward something “beyond the present” seem elusive, then it should at least be possible to concede the apocalyptic disaster that will surely come if current trajectories of global polarization are left unresolved. If we cannot strike out anew on different paths seeking new solutions and goals, there will be no future left to develop.

⁸² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 585.

⁸³ Saul, *op. cit.*, p. 190.