Challenging Development Concepts

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My contribution to the first part of the conference took the form of a set of questions posed by the reports on the courses at Bath, Cambridge, the IDS and Manchester, questions which I hope will seem relevant and fair to people teaching development from virtually all practical and ideological standpoints, and which deserve answers [Leys forthcoming 1980]. Answering them should help to improve development teaching.

The main questions concern: the effects of the tension between *training* 'practitioners of development' and *studying* the 'process of development'; the conception(s) of development embodied in teaching courses; the place of 'politics' in such teaching; the kind and amount of attention paid to the 'international dimension' of development; and, finally, the question of fundamental problems in particular theories of development—how far can these be confronted, and what does confronting them involve. This article goes beyond asking these questions, to suggesting how I personally would approach answering them.

The central issue must be what, ideally, should be the shape and content of development courses in the 1980s. Dudley Seers [1979] suggests that there are still serious shortcomings in the economics of development, and I would take the same view of the 'political science' and the sociology of development as these actually figure in much of our teaching of development today. In Seers' view, the problem largely arises from the existence of a 'lag' between the development of valid theory and its application, especially in teaching. On this view, correct or valid theories always tend to become accepted, and to pass into teaching, when the conditions for which they are appropriate, and which produced them in the first place, have already passed. Therefore, the problem becomes one of a) recognising and overcoming intellectual and professional inertia—the tendency of academics to rely on their acquired intellectual and theoretical capital, rather than seek to renew it constantly in the face of changing reality; b) trying to discern the shape of reality in the future, so that adequate theory for it can be developed in time, and so that, in turn, suitable teaching about it can also be introduced in time.

I disagree with this diagnosis, at least in essentials. It seems to me that, if we could make reasonable prognoses (let alone predictions) for the 1980s, this would imply that we already had the theory we need. The main problem is that the ideas produced in the 1950s and 1960s were incorrect at any time. To the extent that they are still with us, they are misleading, not because they are out of date, but because they embody fundamental mistakes. What is most important now is not only to exorcise these ideas, but to avoid building into our teaching for the future new forms of these mistakes, developed in the 1970s.

I agree that the intellectual inertia of economists and other social scientists plays a part in the perpetuation of misleading theory. But I do not think that this is the most important mechanism at work. What seem to me primary are the dominant social forces operating in society in which the main stream of social thought, including thought about development, arises. We are dealing with western views of social change in the ex-colonial world. For the critical period (1945 to about 1965), these reflected a) western, and especially the United States', political domination over the whole world outside the Soviet bloc, b) the wartime and post-war accumulation boom. In this context was born the initial conception of the development problem as one of overcoming an 'original' or pristine backwardness in the colonies and ex-colonies, conceived of as a matter of remedying a shortage of capital, then as a matter of getting capital 'absorbed' (by successively better public administration, better general or business education, the mobilisation of popular support for 'planning', etc). Economics was initially seen as the branch of knowledge most relevant, if not exclusively relevant, to the first problem, and the other social sciences were gradually introduced, as the other dimensions of the problem of 'capital absorption' were successively placed on the agenda.

With the end of the post-war accumulation boom in the late 1960s, and the decline of western dominance and US hegemony at the same time, came the first widely-based theoretical challenge to these conceptions of development—in the shape of the theory of underdevelopment and dependency. By the mid-1970s, a major 'theoretical crisis' in the dominant paradigm was being recognised. The response to this was to look for ways of repairing, or rehabilitating, existing theory. The key principle at work in this was, and is, *co-optation*—the co-optation of key themes from dependency and underdevelopment

theory, while preserving intact the essential organising concepts of the established view of development. The pioneer here, crude but imaginative and influential, was S. P. Huntington, who 'stood Marx on his head' to produce a revision of the concept of development as 'modernisation' in which the contribution of 'politics' became that of imposing *order* [see Leys forthcoming 1980a]. The 'acceptable face of co-optation' was best represented in the early 1970s by Robert McNamara in his speeches on the themes of dependency, poverty and basic needs.

Needless to say, I do not think that the revisions of earlier development theory produced by this co-optative process constitute a real advance. The conception of underdevelopment as ultimately an original condition, the failure to confront its specifically class character, the focus on diffusion of capital and technology from the centre, rather than on the struggle of conflicting interests between the centre and the periphery, and within the periphery, and so on, continue to animate, and in my view to vitiate, the revised corpus of ideas. In the current debate about the teaching of development, I suspect that the name of this process of revision, through which we could well risk building into future teaching the errors of the past in a new guise, may be 'interdisciplinarity'—and its twin, 'development' *(sans phrase)* itself. Let me try to explain.

The case for *inter*-disciplinarity (as opposed to the practical recognition, for most teaching situations, of the need for *multi*-disciplinarity, ie drawing upon the teaching resources of many disciplines) rests on the central idea that past failures to understand and intervene successfully in 'Third', or ex-colonial, world development have been largely due to its being studied from the standpoint of particular disciplines, each of whose views is *partial;* ie what is seen as wrong is specialism of any kind. 'Inter-disciplinarity' then comes to stand for the view that development problems can only be understood and solved if disciplines are abandoned; thus 'development economics' has to 'die' (as Dudley Seers proposes) to be replaced, not by 'development sociology' (etc), but by the study of development *per se,* by 'development studies', period. The object of study must be the *totality* which is development.

But this is strictly impossible. Reality has an infinitely large number of 'regions' or spheres, each complex and subject to its own specific patterns or tendencies, and hence requiring specialised study and becoming the subject of specialist knowledge. As far as the *study* of development is concerned, we cannot hope to understand it better by denying this complexity, or refusing to disaggregate it into different elements capable of being analysed at sufficient depth, and with appropriate degrees of sophistication. This does not mean that there is no need for people who can draw upon, and integrate, areas of special knowledge, in dealing with practical problems, or that there is no need for a historical overview of the total process of which the particular knowledges of economics, politics, etc, grasp only particular parts. Specialists need this overview as well as their special knowledge, and for policy-makers both the overview, and an ability to combine the findings of different kinds of specialist knowledge, is obviously important. But I am not sure that, apart from some continuing bias towards economics, the sort of courses we are discussing fail to do this.

The call for 'inter-disciplinarity' thus seems to propose an abandonment of special knowledge which is impossible (if we are serious about understanding development). Why then does it seem so appealing (over and above its tendency to connote an obviously necessary multi-disciplinarity, or *collaboration between* related disciplines)? I think it is because political scientists, say, and economists, who work on the 'Third' world, do indeed find that they have not only more shared interests, but also apparently more substantial shared concepts, with economists and political scientists (respectively) than with many of their fellow specialists not concerned with development. But the concepts which they *share* tend, in my view, to be precisely those which belong to the general problematic of 'modernisation' (underdevelopment as an internal problem of original backwardness, etc) which, even when revised and updated through co-optation (as in formulations such as the 'informal sector', etc) are precisely those which it is essential to repudiate.

In short, in so far as *inter*-disciplinarity really means '*multi*-disciplinarity', it denotes a pragmatic need in teaching and in problem-solving which is important, but not new. In so far as it implies *non*-disciplinarity, the abolition of specialism, it it not compatible with scientific understanding. And in so far as it calls for the establishment of research or teaching to be organised explicitly on the basis of the concepts which the practitioners of different specialities concerned with development share, the question must first be asked whether these are valid concepts; or whether they are not, in reality, the concepts of that general view of development which has been inherited from the 1950s and 1960s, and which we still have to overcome.

What is significant in this context is that the call for 'inter-disciplinarity' tends to be coupled with the concept of 'development' *sans phrase*—ie just 'deve-

lopment', not 'peripheral capitalist development', or 'Cuban-type peripheral development', or whatever. But if there is one thing we have surely learned, it is *not* that all countries are 'developing', so that we can call for a unified theory which will embrace *both* 'development' in Cuba *and* 'development' in, say, contemporary Britain; but that there are many different historical forms and experiences of development, some of which have been identified, however imperfectly, as having specific 'logics'. Hence, it is unhelpful, turning our backs on what has been learned, to call for a unified theory of 'development-in-general' let alone one to be built out of what currently happens to be the 'common' stock of concepts shared between students of 'development' in different disciplines; when what is needed is rather the production of more particular models and theories of particular *kinds* of development, combined with the radical purging of inadequate and misleading theory common to much current work in the different disciplines.[1]

The question of 'basic' issues in development theory is closely related to the issue of inter-disciplinarity. In resisting the temptation to try to rehabilitate the general theoretical structure which was found so painfully inadequate by the end of the Second Development Decade, confronting basic theoretical issues in development courses seems important. Only in this way, in fact, can radical weaknesses in development studies be overcome. Lest it be thought that I imagine there actually exists a body of theory free from such weaknesses, let me suggest the sort of topics I have in mind here: alongside the critical examination of concepts such as 'the informal sector' and 'basic needs' (typical concepts of the co-optation process, in my view), there must be an equally critical examination of 'dependency', 'the articulation of modes of production', 'classes', 'household production', etc, which are equally typical concepts of neo-Marxist and Marxist theorisations.

Turning finally to some of the other questions posed above, space will permit only very brief comments, indicating the way my general views, already indicated, would lead me to approach them:

a) 'Training' versus 'academic studies'

Is there an intrinsic contradiction between these? I do not believe so. We can surely think of certain jobs for which the appropriate formal training would include, *inter alia,* the broad, comprehensive, scientific and disinterested study of development which an 'academic' approach would seem to imply. Such jobs, however, are relatively few and extremely high-level—President, Prime Minister, Secretary to the Cabinet, Head of the Planning Commission, heads of major spending ministries, Commander-in-Chief of the army (or of the National Liberation Front), etc. The contradiction that does exist is that those usually sent for training in development are rarely likely to occupy such jobs even in the long run (those who will do so are by the same token seldom sent for formal training); if 'importance' in the development process were the main criterion for selection, we should have to re-think selection pretty radically. What would seem to matter is the formative educational experiences of key political leaders. It is hardly too much to say that Julius Nyerere's studies at Edinburgh in the 1950s ('I evolved the whole of my political philosophy while I was there', he wrote later) have had more influence on development in Tanzania than all the *general* development training formally given to all other Tanzanians since 1960. However, the existence of a contradiction in practice does not mean that nothing can be done about it. The important thing is to be aware of the way the actual clientèle's interests feed back into the content and structure of a teaching course implicitly, so that there is an unexpressed and sometimes serious gap between what an unconstrained view of the subject matter would produce, and what is actually offered. One common consequence of this is that, while some passing attention is paid to other forms of development, the implicit assumption is that only that form which currently prevails in the countries from which most students are drawn is worth studying seriously. If one decides to give serious attention to other forms, on the other hand, one must then deal with the problem of what it means to take them seriously, and the theories corresponding to them; to examine them systematically, to disclose the grounds of their historical and logical validity or invalidity. This is difficult and time-consuming. But where else is it likely to be done if not in postgraduate 'development' courses?

b) The problem of inadequate attention to the politics of development

This is partly a legacy of the earlier dominance of economics in the study of the subject, and partly due to the dominance in development courses of students who are civil servants, for whom the study of politics proper often tends to be thought inappropriate. It is also due in part to the awful kind of United States political science heavily represented in development studies in the early 1960s (as Sheldon Wolin bluntly remarked, it was 'a shambles'). But in seeking to remedy this, the question arises, what does it mean to 'give more attention to' the

[1] This should not be taken as implying that I consider existing disciplinary 'boundaries' as unproblematic; on the contrary, theoretical transformations affect these radically.

politics of development? There is an evidently wide gap between the concept of politics implied in the phrase 'room for manoeuvre' (used in the policy studies of the second year of the IDS MPhil) and, for example, Lenin's conception of politics as 'contentrated economics' (ie class struggle). Would, for instance, a systematic study of liberation movements be considered as one appropriate response to the broadly accepted desideratum of giving more priority to political analysis in development courses?

c) The international dimension

Another legacy of the concept of development as an internal problem of overcoming original backwardness, is the *continuing lack of a strong and central emphasis, in many courses, on the international dimension.* When it does appear, it is often as a 'special topic' such as international trade, etc. But by even the most pragmatic criteria this is surely a major shortcoming. If one had had to *choose* between giving students in the 1970s a sound understanding of the structure of the world commodity markets, international finance, energy resources and the growth and nature of the multinational firm, on the one hand; and a corresponding series of 'internal' topics on the other (eg the delivery of extension services, the organisation of planning, etc), one would surely, with the advantage of hindsight, have chosen the former. It seems worth asking how far today's development courses, even considered purely as training, equip students to grasp the current importance of, for instance, multilateral economic diplomacy such as is involved in, for instance, renegotiating the Lomé agreement, and its bearing on domestic development strategies. My own view is not only that these issues deserve a much higher priority than they are apt to get in many existing courses, but that it is no less important here than elsewhere to avoid a purely empirical approach to the problem, which will incorporate new topics but old errors. I would, for instance, think it more valuable to start out from a critical analysis of the theoretical issues raised in some recent debates about how to view international relations, such as Bettelheim's critique of Emmanuel, or Arrighi's critique of Hobson and Lenin. (I am not suggesting that this is the right *pedagogic* starting-point, but that the *theoretical issues* posed in determining how to approach the question of 'international relations' be made as explicit at possible from the outset.)

References

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