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## Does Development Studies Have a Core?

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### Core or Cafeteria?

In considering how development studies can best be taught at the postgraduate level, one question which arises at a very early stage of curriculum planning is whether the subject has an intellectual core.<sup>1</sup> There are at least a hundred different ways in which one might design a postgraduate course in the subject. But these hundred or so designs can be divided into two main groups. One group follow what has been called the 'cafeteria principle', ie allowing a student to choose any combination of the course elements that are on offer, no matter how apparently bizarre; the other group follows the 'core principle' ie compelling a student to study one prescribed element or combination of elements as a condition of qualification. The issue addressed here is whether there are good reasons for preferring the core to the cafeteria principle, and, if so, which course elements ought to be included in the core of development studies.

A number of unsatisfactory reasons for embracing either principle may be usefully cleared away at the start. The cafeteria approach may be very popular with students and staff, and its popularity with students may be used to win over staff, while its popularity with staff may lead to its acceptance by students. But it may be popular with either for the wrong reasons. The students may be calculating that it gives them the opportunity to choose those course elements that are the least demanding in terms of individual effort required to achieve pass level. As long as this level cannot be equalised over all course elements, this temptation will remain strong, not only among the weak and poorly motivated but also among the bright, well-motivated students who are reluctant to put themselves at a competitive disadvantage.

The staff may at the same time be calculating that the cafeteria principle is a useful device for accommodating their disagreement over which are the essential elements of a development studies course. Such disagreement is perhaps more likely in development studies than in longer established areas of enquiry. It may be reinforced to the extent that a course is being planned around a staff with given specialist interests (as is usually the case) rather than

designed in the abstract, in advance of recruiting the appropriate specialist teachers. The cafeteria principle avoids giving any one course element, and therefore any group of staff members, an entrenched or privileged position *vis-à-vis* all the others, and is less contentious for that reason.

There are unsatisfactory reasons for espousing the core principle also. The balance of pedagogical practice has swung back in favour of cores in recent years, and those who are impressed by argument from precedent or authority may be inclined to cite, for example, the recent retreat by Harvard and other US universities from the practice of allowing students unrestricted free choice in the make-up of their required total of course credits. On the whole, fashions are best ignored, and since arguments from precedent rarely involve exact analogies, they beg the question of why that particular precedent is to be accepted as relevant.

Part of the recent revival of the core principle in postgraduate courses in the UK must have derived from the well-known preference for cores of major grant-giving agencies such as the Social Science Research Council. But it would reveal excessive confidence in bureaucratic wisdom (even when fortified by panels of academic experts) to argue that it is right to have a core because granting institutions prefer it that way. The basis of their preference seems to be a concern for standards. Specifically, they take the view that every student should be evaluated against every other by some common yardstick, and the core elements of a course conveniently provide such a yardstick. Grant-giving institutions are suspicious of cafeteria courses because they permit soft options, and so they insist on cores for the same reasons that students incline to oppose them.

In describing these as unsatisfactory reasons for preferring one principle to another, a clarification should be made. It is not implied that such considerations should *never* be allowed to intrude on course planning: in practice it is extremely difficult to prevent their doing so. They are, however, to be regarded as reasons of prudence, not reasons of right. As such, their place is as possible constraints on the feasibility of a preferred design, not as its primary determinants. These prudential considera-

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements for helpful comments on the original version of this article are gratefully made to Kurt Martin, Alec Nove, Mike Safier and Percy Selwyn.

tions are matters of judgement in particular educational contexts. There is nothing that one can say in general about the extent to which such pressures have to be accommodated.

Two issues of principle enter into the core/cafeteria debate. They are related, but should first be looked at separately. The first is whether, at the graduate level, students ought to be completely free to choose their areas of study. The second is whether teachers know enough to be able confidently to prescribe a core, supposing that the freedom of choice principle is to be disregarded. The relation between the issues is that a sceptical view of the second question would reinforce a defence of free choice: while a conviction that free choice was untenable as a principle would encourage us to take a more sanguine view of such knowledge as we have, and the possibility of fashioning a core from it.

Should then graduate students in principle be free to select their options? An undiluted affirmative is surely difficult to sustain. If there is agreement that students should have no control over what items appear on the menu in the first place, it is difficult to make a principled argument that no further limitations on choice should be introduced. The arguments to favour maximum freedom of choice from a given menu also favour student freedom to write the menu and indeed the kind of arguments used by Illich [1973] against all existing arrangements for formal education. People engaged on curriculum planning are *ipso facto* denying the validity of such arguments.

A more limited argument is that, being graduates, the students concerned already know the basics of the subject, and by this stage in their study are only concerned with acquiring some of the range of optional extras. Thus it is foolish to attempt to regiment them after they have reached a certain level of knowledge and competence. This claim may be valid for postgraduate courses in certain subjects. One thinks particularly of the MPhil degree in economics at Cambridge. In this case, the standard required for admission is exceptionally high, and students come with very clear ideas of the specialist subject which they wish to study, and the particular teachers under whom they wish to study it. They have already developed a clear orientation towards a particular sub-area of economics—the history of economic theory, mathematical economics, development economics—and want to hear a preferred teacher's treatment of them. In this situation, insisting that all students take a course in theory or econometrics does seem an unjustifiable intrusion on their freedom of choice.

### **The Nature of Graduate Development Studies**

However, the teaching of development studies at the postgraduate level is not comparable. (Development studies are taught at the undergraduate level at only seven UK universities, only one of which, the University of East Anglia, grants an undergraduate degree in the subject.) Consequently, students at the postgraduate level do not normally begin from an established base of understanding. On the contrary, they are recruited from a very wide range of undergraduate disciplines, such as geography, sociology, anthropology, economics, politics, engineering and sometimes even mathematics and natural sciences—none of them centred specifically on the concept of development. To permit immediately a free choice of specialisms within development studies would therefore seem to be premature. It clearly implies that the subject is only a rag-bag of applications (either to developing countries, or to developing areas in developing countries) of a whole range of disciplines. If this were true, there would be no need to organise the teaching of development studies as such; the required coordination of disciplinary applications could be achieved equally well through centres of area studies.

It follows that a defence of the core principle cannot be made without taking a position on the nature of development studies itself. The best justification for teaching a core is that the subject actually has a core, with which postgraduate students cannot be expected to be already familiar. So we are led to take up the second issue of principle mentioned earlier, namely, do we know enough to be able confidently to prescribe a core? The answer proposed here is an affirmative, though an affirmative given with rather more trepidation than confidence.

Development studies has as its core three elements, the first theoretical or philosophical, the second empirical or historical, and the third practical or technical. In suggesting a theoretical core, one is likely to be misunderstood in quite a few different ways. At one extreme, it might appear as a claim that we already have a grand theory of development, accepted by consensus as the correct conceptual macro framework. Very few would be likely to endorse such a claim. Grand theory is not lacking, but it is plural rather than singular: it is the work of many hands—Kuznets, Rostow, Lewis, Bauer, Baran, Frank, Amin, Lipton and many more. At the other extreme, to say that development studies has a theoretical core may be taken to mean that the theoretical foundations of the related disciplines—economics, politics, sociology, geography, anthropology, engineering, agronomy, etc—can either be amalgamated or at least juxtaposed within

some meaningful framework to redeem the claim of development studies to inter-disciplinarity or multi-disciplinarity. There are good reasons for disregarding disciplinary boundaries in particular analyses, so that development problems are often best tackled by methods which are inter-disciplinary [see Lipton 1970, Moore 1974]. However, inter-disciplinarity in that sense is quite different from the notion of an amalgam of relevant disciplines; indeed throughout, it accepts the integrity of the separate disciplines and discusses how to apply them to the somewhat intractable reality of less developed countries.

What then is the theoretical element in the core of development studies? The starting point is the very plurality of theories of development which has already been noted. This plurality confronts students with a problem of discrimination and of choice. Are all these theories of development saying the same thing, but in different words? Can one group the theories into families, and, if so, what are their family characteristics? Is it necessary to identify which family theories, or which particular author's theory, seems valid at a broad level? Is it necessary to embark on a personal reconstruction of theory? Do any of the theories have any connection with practical policies in the development field or with the content of research programmes?

To teachers of development studies, these questions may seem very naïve, and many may be confident of their ability to offer clear and cogent answers. On the other hand it would not be difficult to point to examples of distinguished teachers, including some professors, in whom such confidence would be misplaced. One frequent approach is to regard development theory as a patchwork quilt, to which each of the great names has contributed his own little square; what could be incongruous in stitching together the ideas of Lewis with those of Baran, or the ideas of Kuznets with those of Frank? Another frequent approach is to dismiss the different conceptualisations which each successive theorist brings as the swings of intellectual fashion, unrelated to anything, except the jaded academic's search for novelty, perhaps fuelled by a recurrent need to extract research funds from institutional sources. (This theme lends itself to much lofty moralising.) If these approaches are easy to find in textbooks and monographs in developing studies, it is no surprise to find them much more in evidence in the views of students who are coming new to the subject. Confusion, exemplified by the hordes of dependency fanatics who believe implicitly in modernisation and/or the stages of growth, and cynicism, by the host of clever students who want to know this year's slogan

in order to ride it to the death, are in abundant supply.

Another problem, which afflicts students more than teachers, though by no means them exclusively, is the conversion syndrome. People who have been vaguely aware of a set of issues, or who have worked unreflectingly in a context where certain issues are important, but who have never subjected these issues to systematic examination, are particularly vulnerable to the first theory that they encounter. Once grasped, this first theory becomes *the* theory, and one which continues to be held despite the accumulation of logical objections to it. With the conversion syndrome, the student is not confused or cynical. His theoretical understanding is that of a catechist who came on his particular catechism by chance. It may have implications for his applied or practical work, or it may not: but in either case to leave a student in this state would be seen by most as undesirable.

### **Theoretical Plurality and Order**

As a corrective to all this, what is needed is an historical perspective of the plurality of theories. When teachers of development studies contemplate their own history, they rarely look further than to 1945 [eg Streeten 1979, but cf Rimmer 1979]. Their history of the subject is the history of the evolution of ideas and policy within the post-1945 international organisations, the UN, the World Bank and the IMF, of the adaption of Keynesianism to the economic problems of post-colonial societies and of a few alternative development strategies—Soviet planning, the Cuban experience and Maoism. We should, of course, be grateful for the enlightenment that even such a grossly foreshortened perspective brings. However, just as no-one believes that everything worth seeing is viewable from roughly six feet above the ground, it is difficult to accept that the only history relevant to development studies has occurred within the lifetime of the average development studies teacher. Development studies did not spring fully-armed from the contemporary mind. On the contrary, the underlying assumptions and methods of contemporary development theorists have been fashioned in debates about socio-economic development which have been actively prosecuted over at least the last two hundred years. What we read today are merely the latest variations on a small stock of basic concepts with a long and distinguished intellectual pedigree.

Mere awareness of an historical dimension to development studies is not in itself enough. A sensitivity to this dimension can still be combined with a vision of the history of development ideas as a

patchwork quilt or as a pendulum of transient fashions [Selwyn 1979]. The theoretical core of development studies must be no less than an idea of the development of the idea of development. This is the minimum requirement for imposing order on the plurality of theories.

In meeting this requirement, we are greatly helped by recent research into what has been called, no doubt not entirely accurately, 'the first theory of development' [Meek 1976 but cf Edelstein 1967]. This primitive model of socio-economic development—developed in the second half of the eighteenth century by leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, including Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and John Millar—identified the mode of subsistence as the determinant of socio-economic development, outlined four stages of development (hunting and gathering, pastoralism, settled agriculture, commerce), predicted that commercial civilisation would become universal, and added the normative view that the passage 'from barbarism to refinement' was not just a series of transitions but progress to a desirable end. This model, by the start of the nineteenth century, had fragmented under the pressure of its own internal contradictions. But from its fragments were constructed the three major traditions of theorising about development which still remain to dominate development studies today.

The three major reconstructions were the evolutionist, the technocratic and the Marxian. In each of these reconstructions, an incoherent element in the Scottish model is broken down and substituted by a new element which could be presented as being in some sense 'more scientific'. In the Scottish model, for example, the idea of the mode of subsistence as a determinant was never clearly worked through. Usually, all that was being proposed was the weaker view that the mode of subsistence, the level of income and wealth, the laws and government and the culture of any society were mutually determining, and even then, in the comparative analysis of societies, the influence of specific environmental factors—such as climate and soil fertility—were acknowledged also as causal determinants. In the evolutionist re-build, the new 'scientific' element which is introduced is social Darwinism [see Burrows 1966]. The environment is elevated to being the prime determinant of socio-economic development, to which the moral constitution of man adapts ever more closely as a result of the process of natural selection. The predictions and values of the Scottish model are maintained, but it is given a different dynamic. The contemporary bearer of the evolutionist view is Professor P. T. Bauer [see Bauer 1972].

The technocratic reconstruction retains the notion of the stages of socio-economic development, but substitutes for commercial civilisation as the final stage the notion of scientific civilisation, in which social organisation is dominated by the scientific values of rationality, order, impersonality, functional differentiation, calculation, etc. In this re-build, the dynamic which the Scottish model lacked is provided by the steady accumulation of a stock of authentic scientific knowledge and its application to economic reform and social engineering. The characteristic feature of this tradition is that it abandons the so-called law of unintended consequences which was central to the Scottish model; no longer is history viewed as 'the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design'. On the contrary, men of science, both natural science and social science, are specifically seen as a technocratic élite who can indeed purposefully guide socio-economic development at both the national and the international level. The nineteenth century proponents of these ideas were, most notably, Saint-Simon, and his followers Bazard and Infantin [see Markham 1954].

This technocratic tradition is the one in which most contemporary practitioners of development studies, at least until the recent upsurge in neo-Marxist development studies, would have to be located. The national planner, the visiting international development expert, the consultant to governments, the official of the international organisations promoting their conception of development are still good Saint-Simonians at heart, however much they recognise the limitations on their freedom of manoeuvre. So are those 'neutral', 'disinterested' and 'uncommitted' researchers who make such people the target audience of their research. Rostow, Lewis and Myrdal could be cited as distinguished bearers of this intellectual tradition.

The Marxian reconstruction substitutes for the determinism of the mode of subsistence the determinism of the mode of production; turns the stages of history into the epochs of class dominance; makes the conflicts within each mode of production (between the forces of production and the social relations of production) the dynamic which the Scottish model lacked; and, finally, restores the law of unintended consequences by making history the product of the struggle between classes. Here the claim of a 'more scientific' approach rests neither on a scientific analogy, as in evolutionism, nor on the promise of science as an instrument of social control, but on the claim that a scientific sociology can be built out of the fundamental insight that

*it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being (but) their social being which determines their consciousness*

[Marx 1971 edition: 21, and cf Seers 1979]

Despite the upsurge of neo-Marxist development studies in the last 10 years, it is surprisingly difficult to identify contemporary bearers of the Marxian tradition. Baran is more correctly described as a Marxist-Leninist, whose analysis of the prospects of development on a world scale was heavily influenced by the Leninist theory of imperialism. More recent theorists, such as Frank and Amin, have formulated theories whose anti-imperialist message is even more radical, but whose analytical form increasingly departs from that of Marxism. Indeed, it reverts to that of the original Scottish model, though as a negative to its positive [Brenner 1977]. The goal of a scientific sociology can hardly be said to be any nearer, despite optimistic neo-Marxist claims that the late 1960s witnessed a change of scientific paradigm in development studies, a claim which itself shows the durability of naïve positivism in neo-Marxist views of social science [Foster-Carter 1976].

The above remarks about the vicissitudes which the idea of development has itself undergone since the eighteenth century are not intended to be at all definitive. To go into the substance of the many and complex theories that are relevant would be impossible in any convincing way in such a brief digression. The aim here is merely to show the possibility of using the methods of *Ideengeschichte* to provide us with a comprehensive and rational ordering of ways of thinking about development, and to argue that, if there is one skill which all concerned with development studies ought to be helped to acquire, it is the ability to think systematically about what 'development' might conceivably mean.

Certain intellectual problems recur in development studies. Do we assume that development practitioners know in advance what type of development they are trying to bring about? If so, where do they get that knowledge from? Is it reasonable to expect them to succeed? Is there only one type of development? If there is only one end-state development, are there many paths to it, or only one? Does working for development necessarily involve imposing one's own view of the good life on those who have a different view? In the end will development take place anyway, whether we work for it or not? In what sense can development be 'false', 'stunted' or 'underdevelopment?' A graduate student in development studies ought to be able to answer all of these questions both intelligently and consis-

tently. The best way of helping him to do so is first of all to get him to confront the theories of those writers, contemporary and historical, whose thought has implications for the answers. The issues of validation, teleology, ethnocentrism and historicism are there at the centre of development theory and practice. Wishing that they would go away, or modestly denying our ability to delve into such 'philosophy', will not save us from the traps that await those who fail to examine with maximum ruthlessness what they are doing and why—in development studies just as in any other activity.

### **Other Core Elements: Experiences and Techniques**

The second and third elements of a core, being more conventional, seem to need less justification. The second is basically the economic, social and political history of capitalist industrialisation, with due recognition of the significance of recent episodes of non-capitalist industrialisation. We are particularly interested in the period since this phenomenon came to dominate the world economy, which as Lewis [1978] has recently pointed out, is only during the last hundred years. In this component, the major problem is one of achieving the right balance in selecting topics from a vast and complex historical field. Because of the excellent literature which exists on a small number of key country development experiences (eg the USSR, Japan, Mexico, and perhaps India or China, leaving aside Europe and North America), it is tempting to base this component almost entirely on them. Besides the abundant literature, a reason often given for doing this is that only by being highly selective can the student gain a sufficiently deep understanding of any one case.

Of course, one is against superficiality just as one is against sin, and it is most important for students to go deep enough to grasp the variety and specificity of development in history. At the same time, the impression should be avoided that national experiences are relatively autonomous, operating on their own historical tramlines. This conceptualisation comes too close to the Rostovian picture of a series of national 'take-offs', like an ignition sequence of different coloured fireworks. Room must be found for some analytic account of the interdependences in this sequence, and of the ways in which the industrialisation of one country precludes, as well as the ways it assists, the industrialisation of others. To fashion such an account is very difficult, but the ingredients are easy to point to. They are the changing structure of world commerce, colonialism and neo-colonialism, the history of capitalist monetary arrangements and the internationalisation of production, including the multinational firm, move-

ments of capital and international labour migration. For all the theoretical weaknesses of neo-Marxist writings, they have at least boldly called attention to this neglected area of study [see Smith and Toye 1979].

The third and final element in the core which is here proposed is practical or technical. To make this proposal is not to endorse or underwrite the technocratic tradition of development theory and thereby confirm the world picture of the great majority of development studies practitioners and teachers. It should rather be seen as a criticism of the political theory which attaches to the Marxist tradition. This political theory is inclined to recommend the destruction of capitalist society without being in possession of adequate plans for a better form of society, economy and polity. The knowledge of what would be better depends not just on sufficient moral insight; it also pre-eminently requires 'the best of human practical causal understanding' [Dunn 1979]. Specifically, one needs a soundly based assessment of which features of human psychology, relationships and institutions are the way they are because in principle they could not be any other way, and which have a merely contingent existence, and thus are potentially reconstructable. Marxism as a political doctrine combines, in an intellectually opportunistic way, extremely different judgements on human social plasticity. The evidence for this in development studies is the embarrassingly large number of socialist authors who have had to follow their books or articles on 'The Transition to Socialism in Someplace' with a sequel entitled 'Socialism in Someplace: the End of an Illusion'.

The practical element in the core of development studies must be informed by the question, what techniques of social analysis and social decision would be relevant to any coherently imaginable set of social arrangements? Let us take 'development banking' as an example. At present, opinions tend to divide as follows on the desirability of teaching the principles of banking for development. On one side stand those who support it, either as an affirmation of capitalist values or as an instrument for improved social control within the existing structure of society. On the other side stand those who oppose it, because they do not wish such values to be affirmed or social control in existing society to be improved, and who presumably think that banking, perhaps even money itself, can be removed from the agenda of future socialist construction. Kampuchea is not a good exemplar of the prudence of that assumption. Other topics whose teaching is bedevilled by the same conflict could be readily listed—project appraisal, taxation, public expenditure control, land

reform, incomes policy, balance of payments management, education, health care and so on.

To refuse to teach what little we know of the technical aspects of these subjects on the grounds that the knowledge we have inherited is ideologically tainted and practically abused, as indeed it is, seems both arrogant and foolhardy. On the other hand, to teach it in its conventional form does imply consent to the ideological meanings it carries and the uses to which it is put. The correct course then is to teach techniques for the purpose of exposing the extent to which they depend on unacceptable moral or factual assumptions, and of salvaging what might be necessary in a future social order. The conflict between 'red' and 'expert' which surfaced in China during its period of socialist construction illustrates the political power which attaches to expertise. Only by appropriating, criticising and reconstructing technical knowledge in its most advanced form can that power be unified with the power that arises from a genuine moral authority.

Clearly, not all the techniques and practical skills which it is desirable to treat in this way can be accommodated in the technical element of the core. Most would have to be dealt with in the optional papers of a postgraduate course, the economic topics which have been cited in the economics options, the social topics in the social options, and so on. In the core, the central organising question should be that of the possibilities of public policy, or of the room for manoeuvre of public authorities to formulate and carry out effective development policies. This can be approached by an examination both of general techniques of policy coordination derived from economics (macro-planning, project appraisal, programme budgeting, regional planning) and from theories of organisation, administration and management; and of micro-level interventions which, because of their scale or relatively self-contained nature, side-step the problem of rational policy coordination.

It is certainly true that development practitioners have, over the last 30 years, come to make increasingly sober, indeed pessimistic, estimates of the possibilities of comprehensive policy interventions [Seers 1972, 1979a]. As a result, discussions of development strategies have shifted in emphasis from the organised sector to the unorganised, from industrial projects to agricultural, from giantism to the beautifully small, from centralised direction to decentralised initiatives and from the accumulation of fixed capital to the development of human skills. These shifts reflect a particular, currently popular, answer to the question of what public policy can and

should do. But this answer should not be taught as a new conventional wisdom. It is after all, predicated on the existence of the typical institutions of proto-capitalist mixed economies located in an imperfect international system. While one wants students who are able to recognise the restrictions imposed on public policy by existing institutions (because people who batter brick walls with their heads tend to permanently impair their capacity to think), one also wants students who can estimate realistically what restrictions on public policy would remain under any possible alternative set of institutions. We need to know what it is that *any* rational development practice must take account of, and what are the limits on the rational coordination of policy interventions *as such*.

### Conclusion

The conclusions of this paper can be readily summed up. In designing a postgraduate course in development studies, one should begin by clearing one's mind of the merely prudential considerations which in fact affect educational planning (student preferences, the group psychology of teachers, policies of grant-giving bodies, supply and demand in the market for postgraduate degrees and so on). This is not in order to forget them, but to bring them back to their proper place, as constraints on a pedagogy which stands full square on its own intrinsic intellectual merits. If one is prepared to be directive at all at the postgraduate level, and there are special arguments in the case of development studies for being so, the answer to the question whether a core or a cafeteria organisation is to be preferred in teaching turns solely on whether one thinks that the field of study does have an identifiable fixed centre. This immediately opens up fundamental issues which have to be argued through as well as one can. The ideas which have been sketched out here point to a core of three elements, essentially a philosophical exploration of the concept of development as it has developed since it became recognisable as such; an historical element focused both on national development experiences and the changing international nexus to which they were related; and a technical appraisal of the nature and limits of coordinated policy intervention. Whether these sketches carry conviction in whole or in part must be pronounced on by others.

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