
Development: End of an Era?

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Capitalism and socialism grew out of a single European root and they share the same objective: the development of productive forces. Development is supposed to procure ever-increasing material well-being for all through the growth of the volume of production and the amelioration of the productivity of labor. But the capitalist accumulation presumed by this type of development has always been carried out to the detriment of the greatest number, upon whom intolerable living and working conditions are imposed. Thus the purportedly "collective" objective is a sham, and even in those rare countries where the standard of living is improving from a quantitative standpoint, it is deteriorating qualitatively many respects. And so is the physical environment.

All the political schemes implemented by the nation-states since the Industrial Revolution have aimed at "development," a goal that inevitably conditioned their social organization and their relations with other societies. Thus national ambition became the projection, on a world scale, of the ambition of the individual bourgeois in liberal society. While socialism condemns ambition on the individual level and tries, at least, to limit its effects upon social organization, it encourages it as a "national" phenomenon. Clearly, however, through their economic activities, nations have become as interdependent as social classes within a single country, and social and international justice can no longer be dissociated.

Our political schemas are inadequate vis-à-vis the actual sociopolitical organization of the world. It can be objected that if they are based upon principles more generous than the societies to which they apply, they run the risk of becoming mere utopias. But current conceptions are already utopian, for they are based on the implicit postulate that economic and technical "development" since the Industrial Revolution is not only irreversible, but permanent. This is an illusion that recent history is dispelling.

The notion of development, as it is understood today, is highly debatable. It is also historically false. All societies are "developed," even those that seem the most primitive to us, for all are a product of an evolution of the species. This evolution has not always followed the same axis or taken place at the same speed, and the social, political, economic, technical, and cultural results have been divergent. But since, however disparate, all are products of "development," the word has to be understood in other than comparative terms.

Development is only the progressive realization of a double potential: on the one hand, the potential of a human collectivity and its constituent members, and on the other, the potential of the environment in which it is situated, with the limited resources it must utilize—and preserve. Even as a child develops by becoming an adult, not by donning adult clothing, a society can only develop from its already existent bases, putting to use what it finds around it, including whatever it can receive or learn from other societies and integrate into its own culture.

For millenia, human societies have managed to live and develop in diverse milieux, creating diverse civilizations. Their levels of material prosperity were also very different. But at least they enjoyed the economic autonomy that every society concerned with its own preservation ought to demand as its right, and which all lack today: they controlled the elements of their own social reproduction, and consequently met the conditions for real development.

With the colonial era, the conditions for the evolution of all societies changed. Sure of their military and political domination over the rest of the world, a few European nations harnessed the physical potential of the regions they dominated to the service of economic and technical development. Thus the Industrial Revolution became possible. The urbanization that followed in its wake necessitated the production of a food and commodity surplus. At that time, agricultural yields augmented slowly (the rate of increase grew rapidly through industry inputs, but in conditions whose risks and drawbacks can now be appreciated), and the European powers extracted this surplus from their colonies. The Americans obtained it after independence through the conquest of the West at the expense of the American Indians. For those countries in which it occurred, the Industrial Revolution conferred a monopoly over many productive activities, and the rest of the world became at once a source of raw materials, sphere of action, and markets. World productive capacities concentrated in these countries, and the great North-South imbalance set in.

“Underdevelopment” resulted from the function assigned to the populations of the dominated regions. With their labor scarcely remunerated, they were supposed to furnish the dominant nations with raw materials and certain agricultural products. In exchange, they received finished goods and services, starting with those necessary to the production and exportation of the materials they were supposed to deliver. This function, making the industrial and underdeveloped economies complementary, is still filled by the Third World in the existing world economic framework.

Thus “development” ceased to be an endogenous process specific to each society, and became a process of techno-economic growth limited to a few conquering nations. As such, it could no longer be a dimension of human evolution. This mode of development was limited geographically and socially to those nations, and contrary to prevailing opinion, the disequilibrium they have created in the world is irreducible: it cannot be rectified by action from above.

Who, after all, really believes in an ideal of world development strictly defined in terms of the most industrialized countries? Clearly five billion individuals will never each produce and consume as much as the average American, whose consumption of energy is already a thousand times greater than that of the average inhabitant of Rwanda! Not only inconceivable from an economic point of view, the generalization of such "development" would entail the rapid destruction of the biosphere, the frail pellicle upon which life on earth depends and whose future is already jeopardized by the ravages of the industrial system.

"Development" is no longer even what it is alleged to be: a chosen objective, a goal that nations choose to strive for via the capitalist or socialist road. It is only a temporary, provisional stage in a techno-economic evolution that is utterly out of control, provoked as it is by a competitive dynamic—between rival companies and also between hostile states—that is by its very nature uncontrollable. The reformist hope—often expressed by politicians—that the world economic system be rendered more just, less unfavorable to the peoples of the Third World, more respectful of ecology, is therefore perfectly vain. Who would accept the risk of redressing the imbalance, with the danger of finding himself on the other end? At the same time, it is clear that the growth of commercial production, hence consumption, in the "most developed" countries is rendered ineluctable by their organization. Whatever the consequences on the ecological or world scale, they are obliged to promote it.

The North-South disequilibrium has a long history, especially in the Americas. Yet it was only after the last war, with the collapse of the European colonial empires, that it posed a problem to the international community. The richest colonies became poverty-stricken, independent countries, sometimes completely unviable. Suddenly economic and political officials discovered the unequal wealth of nations, however unmoved they generally remained vis-à-vis the shockingly unbalanced distributions of wealth within their own societies. This incoherence can be explained. Internally, social injustice is consecrated by institutions that compel social classes with contradictory interests to cooperate in view of a "national" production goal. Between countries with contradictory interests, however, there exists no real legal organization of cooperation. To prevent the breakdown of the economic relationship instituted by the colonizer, the new states had to be convinced that there was no causal link between their own poverty and the wealth of others. They too could get rich. Since the technical means to their development could only come from already-institutionalized nations, exchange ought to continue as before. The rich even committed themselves to aid the poor by selling them technical means on credit.

Even now, the industrialized countries continue to justify the position they occupy in the world and the advantages they reap from it by presenting themselves as simply "ahead" on a road of development open to all. Their wealth and military

power depend precisely on the fact that all the other countries, seeking to follow the same route, are increasingly integrated within the same world economic system. Third World elites, if not peoples, have been persuaded to cooperate within this system. Needless to say, the industrialized countries believe in it so thoroughly that they identify their techno-economic evolution with that of the entire human race.

It was under the banner of bringing "civilization" to the savage peoples that the Europeans invaded the rest of the world. All societies were summoned to fall into the same evolutionary line and raise themselves up to the level of civilization incarnated by Europe. The colonizers themselves were not fooled by their own ideology of legitimation, to judge by the methods with which they carried out their civilizing mission—genocide, slavery, etc. But by relegating the conquered peoples to the ranks of the historically backward, they gave themselves a title to superiority that they have never relinquished.

Western man, believing himself the final end of creation, conceives his destiny as the domination of the universe, of which man "becomes master through his reason" (Descartes). Scientific knowledge is the intellectual appropriation of the cosmos, the preliminary to concrete action. Scientific progress engenders technical progress, permitting man to transform his physical milieu for specific objectives. As the agent of such transformation, technical progress has become the universal measuring stick for the evolution of societies, proving the supposedly incontestable historical advance of the industrial nations. Even better, these nations, which absorb virtually all of the world's available resources and drain capital on a world scale, alone are capable of assuming the ever-increasing costs of "progress." They thus remain the lone incarnation of humanity on the march toward the Occident's imaginary ideal.

Associated with a Promethean definition of progress, this ethnocentric conception of history (which Marx labelled scientific) constitutes a dangerous falsification of world reality. The European colonizers only partially believed in their civilizing mission, but we firmly believe in our mission to aid. "Aid" is the simple continuation of colonization, and is effected for the profit of capital even when undertaken by states. It greatly contributed to the economic growth of recent decades, which drew underdeveloped countries in its wake as providers of raw materials. So-called "policies of development," however, could only lead to generalized bankruptcy.

Let us recall that when the United States championed decolonization, it was not so much for the moral pretexts it invoked but because of the difficulties American business encountered in its efforts to break into the private hunting grounds of the colonial powers. The first result of decolonization was the opening of those regions that became the Third World to capital of every origin and businesses of every nationality, free from the political control of a dominant power. This was the point of departure for the creation of a single world economy, equally favored by the liberalization of exchange between industrialized nations.

The consequences of this have been enormous. Political power and economic

power are no longer wielded on the same scale. The first, still "national" despite the opening of each national economy to international competition, inevitably has to submit to the logic of the second. The state has become a subordinate power. The sole object of its policies is national adaptation to the techno-economic evolution that is occurring on a world scale, itself obviously reinforced by the "adaptation" of particular states.

The capitalist world has thus become a near-perfect laboratory for European liberals and their American counterparts, the neoconservatives—both opponents of state intervention in the economy. "The crisis," however, is above all a refutation of these liberal theories. It has proved that business strictly obeys no interests but its own when political powers and social forces fail to restrain it, opposing the general interests of nations and even of capitalism as a system. But was not this already clear earlier? After all, the high level of postwar growth, characterized by mass production for mass consumption ("Fordism"), was largely due to wage increases that individual companies would have refused (with the general result of reducing demand) but that organized workers, sometimes with state support, wrested from them.

Under the aegis of aid to development, the capitalist system has deported productive activities hitherto concentrated in industrialized nations to the Third World. Yet the North-South disequilibrium has not been corrected, for the profits reaped from the industrializing of the Third World have been used to finance innovation in the North and the take-off of new commercial activities. A new type of disequilibrium has, furthermore, been created: everywhere, within each country, the workforce is underemployed. Its size is now disproportionate to the productivity permitted by the productive apparatus, and the arbitrary character of income distribution is more obvious than ever.

The actual character of the "complementary" relationship between underdeveloped and industrialized economies is also determined by the monetary hegemony of the "developed" nations. The colonial empires were not only political entities, but also monetary zones. The states that issued from them now possess national currencies that have no value as means of payment in the international arena. This fact radically modifies the conditions and possibilities of exchange. The Third World quickly revealed itself unable to pay for the means of production sold by the industrialized countries (except, of course, when the production was destined for them). Its indebtedness reached disturbing levels well before the hike in oil prices sent it skyrocketing beyond the 600 billion dollar mark. As a result, the entire western banking system is in a situation of virtual bankruptcy, aggravated by the indebtedness of certain socialist countries.

These credits will never be reimbursed. The Third World is incapable of exporting sufficient goods and services, and the developed world, in any case, would not accept them: the cost, for the industrialized countries, of massive importations from the Third World would be the weakening of its own productive

apparatus. This indebtedness will only increase, both for political reasons (support for existing regimes or at least of the power structure the state represents as the principal buttress of the system of exchange) and to avoid deep recession and a brutal rise in unemployment. We are faced with a vicious circle.

The current world situation cannot be compared with any other in the past, 1929 for example. For if the "cleaning up" of the economy is occasionally obtained through the bankruptcies of certain businesses, an entire country cannot go into liquidation nor can the entire Third World be declared insolvent. An international financial crash is in the offing, whose consequences threaten to be much more catastrophic than in 1929, for economies are more integrated, workers more interdependent, and individuals more socialized than ever.

The technological transfers that Third World leaders incessantly demand in international organizations have not ameliorated the societies concerned. They have only benefitted those who possess (in capitalist countries) or control (in socialist countries) the means of production: land, factories, transportation, etc. The growth of endemic hunger, unemployment, and a landless peasantry is particularly alarming in the most actively "modernizing" countries. Associated with a system of government that leaves economic decision making in the hands of the minority, the new mode of production improves the living conditions of that minority without preserving society as a whole. The same may be said, of course, for the industrial countries themselves. Everywhere, farmers maintain their income only by increasing their cultivated surfaces and yields, with a corresponding increase in the numbers of the landless. Unemployment is increasing and poverty progressing. At the same time, the needs of the employed—still the overwhelming majority—are met by increasingly sophisticated, elaborate goods and services. The social fabric is coming apart.

Mounting social difficulties are jeopardizing the functioning of the capitalist system. According to its own criteria, productive activities are supposed to generate the enlarged reproduction of working capital (its amortization plus a profit), reproduction of the labor force (workers' salaries), and payment of the taxes that permit the state to support the fraction of the population not integrated within the productive apparatus. The reconstitution of the physical environment, without which the pursuit of such activities would be impossible, is not, however, taken into account. This is partially to be explained by habits acquired during the era of colonial expansion, when industrializing nations behaved like pillaging hordes, exhausting the resources of one territory before moving on to the next. For the industrialized countries, this abuse of the environment poses no real immediate problems: raw materials belong, for the present, to those who can buy them. For the Third World producing countries, it is another matter. Their economic and social structure will not survive the exhaustion of their capital or resources. The capitalist

system is condemned by the constant growth in production and concomitant destruction of the environment dictated by its own competitive dynamic. And there is nothing reassuring about the fact that this is a long-term tendency.

No insolvable social problems presented themselves as long as production norms remained national. The distribution of produced values only depended upon internal forces. The creation of a world economic sphere, entailing the homogenization of production norms, has modified the conditions of distribution. The state has to avoid compromising business competitiveness through fiscal pressure. Its resources, consequently, no longer suffice for income redistribution, and it is obliged to go into debt (as in most of the industrialized nations), or abandon the victims of techno-economic evolution to their fate (as in the Third World).

With the spreading of unemployment and poverty, the solvent market—to which most of the Third World no longer belongs—is growing smaller and smaller. Competition, consequently, is growing sharper. To reduce production costs, business is turning to technical innovations that eliminate living labor—and consequently the available market outlets. More and more capitalistic, presuming the continuous growth of the solvent market, the mode of production is creating the conditions for its own asphyxiation. Once again, the long-term character of the tendency is far from reassuring.

No nation today enjoys economic autonomy, least of all the industrial nations, whose social reproduction depends upon countless external factors. Thus the more developed their production apparatus, the more they are condemned to pursue imperialist policies abroad. The United States, for example, is obliged to maintain a presence throughout the world, ready to fight “two and a half wars” to preserve what Reagan calls the nation’s “vital interests.”

This interdependence conflicts, for national interests are competitive, contradictory, and sometimes frankly antagonistic. But it is the product of the integration of national economies, which itself conditions the implementation of most technological advances. The idea that a society could ever regain its autonomy has become absurd: it would deprive itself of all the advantages of what Jacques Ellul calls the “technical system.”

And yet for many years now, this system has been challenged by increasingly radical criticism. Little by little, the industrial countries have ceased to be the unique, necessary model. Cultural specificity is often the rallying-point for non-Western peoples (yesterday in Iran, today in New Caledonia, where the indigenous population is refusing the sort of development sought by the exogenous fraction). But rejection is also taking place within the very citadels of industrial capitalism. Everywhere in the West, experiments in associative democracy and economic autonomy are taking place. Perhaps they represent the beginning of a more general movement, whose historic importance will depend upon its consciousness of itself and its role.

Today they are only experiments: still too few, too dispersed, too uncoordinated to be anything but part of the system itself. In any case, economic autonomy

is impossible for them. At the same time, their social base is that which real autonomy would require. For autonomy is only conceivable in a totally democratic framework, in which individuals—both as producers and as consumers—agree to produce and exchange on an extra-market basis, even if it entails a lowering in the collective standard of living. And such agreement can be reached only if the individual members have themselves chosen the objectives and means of production: in other words, if they together wield economic power.

These “alternative experiments” are consistently characterized by a desire for genuine democracy. Furthermore, they invert the usual order of importance and give priority to interpersonal and social relations over economic efficiency. Rejecting power relationships, they try to create conditions of production and exchange that avoid clashes of interest, the latter being at the root of most institutionalized domination. Inimical to them is the individual and collective behavior fostered by the system and its competitive dynamic—ever increasing production, preeminence, conspicuous consumption, etc. In brief, they postulate a new value system, the necessary first premise for the realization of a new technical and economic system.

For the moment, these experiments scarcely dare look so far ahead. Often of Illichian inspiration, they hold to the definition of autonomy proposed by André Gorz (*Adieux au prolétariat*): an *individual* autonomy permitting each individual to produce part of what he consumes even as he benefits from the advantages of production destined for mass consumption. Individuals become marginal without forming an autonomous society, largely profiting from social wealth, but from the sidelines of the productive system. But it is possible that the aggravation of socio-economic difficulties will oblige them, if they want to preserve their individual autonomy, to associate for economic autonomy on a collective scale.

Generally initiated by individuals who have deliberately excluded themselves from the system, these experiments in autonomy would necessarily acquire a different dimension if those excluded by the system followed their example: the unemployed, and farmers ruined by the evolution of relative prices. In France and Germany the state, initially antagonistic, has let certain of these alternative experiments develop (they help reduce certain social tensions and unemployment figures). It will, perhaps, end up encouraging them, for once it finally gives up its attempts to “resolve” the unemployment problem, it will probably see them as its last chance. Sooner or later, the state will have to accept the splitting apart of the nation and a new division of national territory. It is hard to imagine the industrialized nations behaving like the Latin American dictatorships in their intransigent opposition to the parcelling out of large properties, as if division could permit the creation of autonomous socio-economic entities alongside the so-called “modern” economy. Labor, within these entities, would probably be unprofitable, but at least it would guarantee the subsistence of a multitude of landless peasants and the unassisted unemployed who are currently dying of hunger. This multitude, given the creation of a world economy, can no longer be contained within the boundaries of the Third World. The state will have to admit the obvious: the fraction

of the population shunted aside by the techno-economic evolution is now spread out among all the nations of the world. Everywhere the number is rising. They will have to be allowed to organize.

This splitting apart of the nation is no mere hypothesis. It has already occurred in most of the industrialized countries (even in the East, for example in Hungary), with Italy in the vanguard. Liberal economists have baptized this phenomenon the "dual economy." Part of society is integrated within the world production apparatus, while another gets along through subcontracting and other sorts of precarious labor. In the present state of affairs, each needs the other. But what must be envisioned is their rupture. Within each country, two societies coexist. The first one is perfectly conditioned—not only intellectually or ideologically, but materially: it cannot reevaluate its organization, objectives, mode of production, etc. The second, however, ought to be able to do so. It can fashion the elements of a new socio-economic system. But for that, it must begin with a political project.

Let us imagine that the alternative experiments indeed rallied around such a project. The result could well be a society (or societies scattered throughout the international sphere both North and South) that is neither national nor regional, even if its economic choices are a function of its cultural originality and environmental specificity. Its constituent members, as in the present day "alternatives," would doubtless remain preoccupied with their immediate goals. But their very adaptation, through dire necessity, of their productive apparatus to their specific environment, would help create a context favorable to change in the Third World. This is probably the fundamental political meaning of the "alternatives." But their originality also inheres in the radical changes they presume in relationships to others, others not only within their own society, but everywhere analogous societies exist.

Two autonomous socio-economic entities could fuse within a single framework if their organizational structures were identical and their objectives sufficiently compatible within a common project. But even without fusing and losing the mastery of their social reproduction, they could ameliorate their conditions of existence through exchange—on the condition that the goods in question possess identical utility, making the cessation of exchange equally prejudicial to both parties. Instead of development of some at the expense of others, socio-economic entities would cooperate, working together for their mutual reproduction.

The adaptation of the apparatus of production to each society's particular environment (the indispensable preliminary to the social and economic reequilibration of the world) presupposes the end of exchange such as it is practiced today. The goal is not to end the relationships between different peoples, but to transform them into ties of veritable solidarity. Economic autonomy is not an end in itself. It is only the way—probably the only one—working toward a world with fewer catastrophic clashes of interest and a little less injustice: *from the bottom up*.

The perspectives for the future are dark: nuclear war, genocide in the name of the "vital interests" of a few nations, international financial collapse, and, in the meantime, gradual impoverishment through the drainage of funds toward an insolvent Third World, accompanied by the progression of unemployment and poverty on a world scale. The "crisis" engulfing the capitalist world as a whole (conjunctural variations in individual countries—for example the supposed "recovery" in the United States—are illusory), including the socialist camp, is not so much a crisis, provisional by definition, but a process of economic disintegration and social decomposition affecting all countries, industrialized or not. This process, reinstating, in a sense, an equilibrium among the nations of the world from the bottom up, ought to lead to the complete dismantling of the stupendously elitist techno-economic structure of the world, topped by the industrial nations. It should also sound the death knell for the planetary hegemony exercised by these nations through their economic and technical power, power that has consolidated the political, military, and cultural domination they have long wielded over the rest of the world.

This outlook is distressing only for those who still profit from the hegemony of the industrial nations—a small fraction of the world population. For the rest of the world, the pursuit of policies of "development" in the present socio-political framework would be infinitely more disastrous. Nonetheless, the threat of generalized social chaos does exist, especially if a financial crash accelerates the process of economic disintegration. Yet this possibility is not being faced to any significant extent, and principles of social management remain the same. No new economic projects demanding across-the-board sacrifices are emerging to counter those that the industrialized nations have, de facto, fixed for all humanity. On the contrary, the political and economic powers-that-be loudly proclaim their confidence in the future in order to keep the confidence of the governed, and seek recipes for "ending the crisis." It is possible that they will resort to protectionist measures that will, inevitably, accelerate the coming apart of the world economy and exacerbate the tensions within the capitalist world. But in any case, the minority character of the threatened interests, combined with the growth of social difficulties, makes increasing political repressiveness a certainty. Liberal democracy's days are numbered—which is, perhaps, only historical justice, after all the bloody dictatorships it has forced upon the Third World.

On the national and international scale, present political, social, and economic structures work against our imagination and preparation of another future. Only the outsiders and the outcasts are in a position to do so. But there is also an ideological reason for our powerlessness. Immersed in a world constantly transformed by technology, we cannot imagine the modification of *our* conditions of existence by an economic or technological "regression" as anything other than a step backward "for all humanity." We have attributed universal significance to the ambitions and hopes of occidental societies, exalted as the final goal of human evolution. We

believe that history has an ultimate meaning: that which western man has given it for a short period (approximately 500 years). Like all periods of domination, this one too will end.

With its two variants, capitalism and socialism, the system engendered by the West has extremely fragile ideological foundations. These are increasingly contested, even in the industrialized countries, for what was once the strength of the system now condemns it. The division of society into classes and the world into unequal nation-states favored the capitalist accumulation necessary for technological evolution. Today, this same social and world organization precludes the distribution of purchasing power that could prevent economic asphyxiation.

The status quo imposed by the "advanced" nations is a primitive one. The value system that gave birth to it too is primitive, as is the individual and collective behavior it encourages: competitive, aggressive, egoistic, and egocentric. There is nothing advanced about the useless, terrifying tensions and conflicts it renders inevitable. Humanity is maintained on the level of the animal world: the law of the jungle governs relationships between species without the saving intervention of conscience, morality, or imagination. Change will only occur with the collapse of the social and international system. To the extent that the crisis could precipitate collapse, it should be seen as a welcome chance: history, perhaps, will some day have an acceptable meaning.

The evolution of humanity, and a fortiori that of a particular society, cannot be measured by the yardstick of scientific and technical "progress." The progress of the industrialized countries today, often very remarkable, can scarcely be compared to the achievements of earlier societies in different socio-economic contexts. "Mankind" is not, as is so often claimed, the beneficiary: the poverty created in the Third World by the transfer of capital is sufficient proof to the contrary. The only beneficiaries are those who provide the financing: capital, especially multinational, whose productive capacities are thereby increased, and the state, whose destructive potential is similarly augmented.

The only real progress is political. What is specifically human is the aptitude for self-government, whether individual or collective, harnessing knowledge and technique to the service of living together. The present crisis should help undermine our belief in progress and clear the way to consciousness of world realities. But the traditional framework of political thought and action are no longer sufficient. We no longer live in microsocieties, be they great nations. Capital has created ties of interdependence on a planetary scale and it is on this level that political projects must now be conceived, with the aim of transforming conflict into ties of real solidarity. If humanity, all or a part, ever escapes from the mortal dangers it is creating for itself, perhaps a new civilization will bring forth such a project—after the civilization born in Europe a few centuries ago has finally disappeared.

Translated by Barbara Bloom.