

## ***HIC ET NUNC: WHAT IS THE CONCEPTION OF DEVELOPMENT WHEN ADDRESSING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT?***

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### Abstract

*This article aims to assess the meanings of the notion of development that have been applied in analyses on ‘regional development’ in Brazil, considering the scope of action of the postgraduate programs linked to this field of knowledge. In methodological terms, the roots of the notion of development are reappraised, some of the meanings that it has assumed along its trajectory are examined and some critiques of development are reviewed, thereby bringing several alternatives to the surface. The conclusion is that the notion of development has been unable to pave the way in overcoming the existing reality. Hence, a proposal is postulated that transcends (empirically, theoretically and politically) the protagonism of the capital and the State, and contemplates a social transformation from the bottom-up, based on a drive toward social self-determination.*

### Keywords

*Social Self-determination; Brazil; Capital; Development; Regional Development; the State.*

## ***HIC ET NUNC: QUAL CONCEPÇÃO DE DESENVOLVIMENTO QUANDO SE TRATA DE DESENVOLVIMENTO REGIONAL?***

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### Resumo

*Neste artigo, intenta-se avaliar os significados da noção de desenvolvimento que vêm informando as análises sobre “desenvolvimento regional” no Brasil, considerando o âmbito de atuação dos programas de pós-graduação vinculados a esse campo de conhecimento. Em termos metodológicos, recuperam-se as raízes da noção de desenvolvimento, examinam-se alguns significados que ela assumiu ao longo de sua trajetória e revisam-se algumas críticas à concepção de desenvolvimento, aí se chamando à superfície algumas alternativas. A conclusão é de que a noção de desenvolvimento tem sido incapaz de conduzir à superação do real existente. Daí postular-se uma proposição que transcenda (empírica, teórica e politicamente) o protagonismo do capital e do Estado e contemple uma transformação social desde baixo, fundada no impulso para a autodeterminação social.*

### Palavras-chave

*Autodeterminação Social; Brasil; Capital; Desenvolvimento; Desenvolvimento Regional; Estado.*

# HIC ET NUNC: WHAT IS THE CONCEPTION OF DEVELOPMENT WHEN ADDRESSING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT?<sup>1</sup>

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[...] under the pressures of the modern world economy the process of development must [...] go through perpetual development. Where it does, all people, things, institutions and environments that are innovative and avant-garde at one historical moment will become backward and obsolescent in the next. [...] all individuals, groups and communities are under constant relentless pressure [...]; if they stop to rest, to be what they are, they will be swept away. (BERMAN, 1986, p. 77)<sup>2</sup>

We now know [...] peripheral economies will never be *developed* [...]. But how can it be denied that this idea [*economic development*] has been of great use in mobilizing the peoples of the periphery and convincing them to accept enormous sacrifices, to legitimize the destruction of ancient cultures, to explain and make people understand the need to destroy the environment, and to justify forms of dependence that reinforce the predatory nature of the system of production (FURTADO, 1974, p. 89; italics in the original).<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Regional development is an expression that has reappeared in political and academic debate. What seems to have reignited the discussion in this respect, ever since the late 1990s, has been the loss of the State's protagonist role, more in the peripheral social formations than those of the center, as the agent responsible for spatial planning. This is attributed to what has been called *globalization*, a

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2. N.B. For direct citations the English version has been used of BERMAN, M. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. New York, USA. Penguin Books Ltd., 1988, p. 78.

3. This and all other non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the author.

process of geographical expansion of capital (HARVEY, 2004; THEIS, 2009) that has constrained nation states to bring in adjustments, resulting, in some cases, in a reduction of attributions, but, in others, in qualitative changes of functions. One of these has been, precisely, to regulate the use of land in urban and rural areas, both for economic and social purposes. This function has changed to the point of pronouncing that the relevance of national borders has been lost, from which a *planet of regions* has emerged, all inserted in the brave new world of neoliberal globalization (OHMAE 1995). The fact is that, suddenly, territory has been given over to the free movement of agents in order to maximize their interests. In peripheral social formations, it has been the multinational corporations and commercial banks, foreign and national, that have tended to benefit with the withdrawal of the State from organizing the production and circulation of commodities. This is why, in many countries of the Global South, regions have been left helpless with the State's loss of relevance.

In Brazil, *globalization* was welcomed with open arms. In the 1990s, State administrators chose to weaken economic and social functions in favor of others, with serious consequences for spatial planning. If urban planning, in the medium-to-large and large cities, especially in the strip extending along the coastline, seemed able to operate in the face of the withdrawal of central government, in medium-to-small and small cities, located mainly in the interior, not so far from the *rural areas*, there were no resources to face the sudden helplessness of the *neoliberalized* State. The proximity of medium-to-small and small municipalities resulted in organization on a regional scale. In the interior of Brazil, cooperation between agents – individuals, social groups, community entities, etc. – working in smaller municipalities has produced the antidotes for survival in an aggressively *globalized* world. It is within this context that the expression “regional development” was reintroduced into the political and academic debate. It was there that, in Brazil, progress was made towards creating postgraduate programs (PPG) in regional development (THEIS, 2019b). Within the scope of these PPGs, empirical and theoretical investigations were initiated, and public policies were also formulated that would respond to the problems arising from the geographical expansion of capital toward the interior.

The intention of this article, however, it is not exactly to examine regional *development*. The aim is to assess the meanings of the notion of development that have been applied to analyzes of “regional development” in Brazil, considering the scope of action of the PPGs linked to this field of knowledge, and, subsequently, to put forward a proposal that transcends (empirically, theoretically and politically) the protagonism of capital and the State.

To fulfill this desideratum, the text has been divided into three sections, in addition to the introduction. The first section, following the introduction, seeks to recover the roots of the notion of development and examine some of the meanings that have been assumed throughout its trajectory, placing emphasis on the concept of underdevelopment. In the second, some of the main critiques of the concept of development are reviewed and some alternatives are brought to the surface. The conclusion presents a synthesis of the article together with suggestions for a critical proposal of the notion of development.

## 1. Development and underdevelopment

Although there is no intention of remaking an “archaeology of the idea of development” (SACHS, W., 1992), the aim, albeit briefly, is to recover the roots of the notion of development (Table 1) so as to then examine some of the meanings that it has taken on throughout its trajectory, with emphasis on the concept of underdevelopment.

Period	Historical Context	Keyword(s)	Current of thought	Principal representative(s)
17 <sup>th</sup> -18 <sup>th</sup> Centuries	From the Scientific Revolution (1620) to the French Revolution (1789)	Progress	Enlightenment (Aufklärung)	John Locke (1632-1704), Montesquieu (1689-1755), Voltaire (1694-1778), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794)
18 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup> Centuries	From the Industrial Revolution (1780) to the 1848 Revolution	Capital accumulation, growth of wealth	Classical School of Political Economy	Adam Smith (1723-1790), Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832), David Ricardo (1772-1823), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)
19 <sup>th</sup> Century	From the 1848 Revolution to the Paris Commune (1871)	Capital accumulation, expanded reproduction	Critique of political economy	Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Engels (1820-1895)
19 <sup>th</sup> -20 <sup>th</sup> Centuries	From the Paris Commune (1871) to the New York stock market crash (1929)	General equilibrium, growth of wealth	Neoclassical School of Economy	William Stanley Jevons (1835-1882), Léon Walras (1837-1910), Karl Menger (1840-1921), Alfred Marshall (1842-1924), Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923)

Period	Historical Context	Keyword(s)	Current of thought	Principal representative(s)
20 <sup>th</sup> Century	The 1930s crisis to the rise of monetarism in 1970	Economic growth	Keynesian School of Economy	John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946)
	From the creation of the UN (1948) and from the discourse of H. S. Truman (1949)	Economic development	Modernization Theory ECLAC	W. W. Rostow (1916-2003) Raúl Prebisch (1901-1986)
	From the decolonization process	Underdevelopment	Heterodox Economy	Michal Kalecki (1899-1970), Joan Robinson (1903-1983), Celso Furtado (1920-2004)

**Table 1. Roots of the notion of development**

Source: Own elaboration.

If it is a fact that the notion of development that frequents the political and academic debate is a product of the post-Second World War period, its forerunners may be traced back to more remote times. They refer to *progress*, a term derived from the Latin ‘progressus’, which began to circulate in Europe during the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, it was already being used to declare a future of freedom, justice and abundance (SBERT, 2010). Progress is not something that could be found in antiquity nor in the Middle Ages. Neither classical Greek philosophy, nor the legal framework that emerged during the Roman Empire, nor the Christianity of the early centuries would legitimize a social order based on this idea. Strictly speaking, nothing could change the prevailing stability and lead to a state of affairs subjected to continuous change towards the unknown a priori (RAPP, 1992). However, a set of increasingly explosive events led to the progressive dissolution of that stability and the erosion of the immutable world that had been known until that point (FURTADO, 1978). The notion of progress that heralded a future of freedom, justice and abundance was based on a combination of rationale with experience, of ideas with facts. Lastly, human beings could elaborate knowledge (science) with a view to applying it to practical purposes (the technique) and, replacing God, reorganize the world in which they lived.

From the second half of the eighteenth century, the problem of development began to concern some of the most astute observers of the changes engendered by the progress then underway. With the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, in 1776, by Adam Smith, economics emerged as an autonomous discipline within social philosophy, not only to explain the origin of social wealth, but also to justify its pursuit (HIRSCHMAN, 1979). The term “progress” appears in several passages of *The Wealth of Nations* (e.g., in Book III). However, what came closest to the meaning

that development would take on is the accumulation of capital (e.g. in the third chapter of Book II). In fact, capital accumulation, the growth of wealth and social progress are some of the expressions used by members of the so-called School of Classical Political Economy.

Influenced by classical political economy, Karl Marx – and his faithful squire, Friedrich Engels – delved into the process of capital accumulation in order to investigate its contradictions. Their starting point was that capital, a historically determined system of social metabolism, not only defined the dominant mode of production (the capitalist economic base), but also conditioned the more general culture (political-legal forms, religious beliefs, etc.) that corresponded to it. The Capital, which emerges in the sphere of production, but is realized in the sphere of circulation, is a continually renewed relationship of value creation. Part of this value is destined for the reproduction of the workforce, while another is appropriated by those who own the means of production. It is undeniable that, under these conditions, capital may be, and in fact is, accumulated as a result of the increase of (over) labor – not converted into remuneration for the owners of the workforce – to the previously existing stock of capital. It is also undeniable that, under these conditions, social wealth tends to be increasingly more concentrated, since the owners of the means of production are in a privileged position to appropriate the gains provided by the process of accumulation. Lastly, it is equally indisputable that a mode of production based on such premises is subject to increasingly more frequent, acute crises. Thus, in Marx and Engels, the problem of development was ultimately treated from the perspective of its multiple contradictions. Later contributions expanded on some of their theses that are more directly related to what is being reviewed herein, highlighting *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, published in 1899 by V. I. Lenin, and *The Accumulation of Capital*, published in 1913 by Rosa Luxemburg.

During the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, a group of scholars, inspired by proposals from the School of Classical Political Economy, and concerned with refuting the theses of Marx and Engels, began to influence the political and intellectual debate of the time. Indeed, the first “neoclassical economists” experienced an unprecedented diffusion of their findings, especially marginal utility and general equilibrium. Strictly speaking, none of its members had anything to say regarding the problem of development, until Alfred Marshall came on the scene. In his *Principles of Economics*, published in 1890, in a chapter entitled “The Growth of Wealth,” he

observed, in contrast to his predecessors, that “the rate of progress [...] [is] moving on at a rapid pace that grows quicker every year; and we cannot guess where it will stop.” (MARSHALL, 1982, p. 197).<sup>4</sup>

However, with the crash of the New York Stock Exchange, in October 1929, and the subsequent crisis of the capitalist economy, in the 1930s, the real *problem* of development came to the surface, and the limited explanatory capacity of the neoclassicals became evident. If seen from the perspective of the emerging macroeconomy, it could be called *insufficient demand*, i.e., there is little money to acquire the commodities that reach the market; if considered from the perspective of the contradictions of the accumulation process, due to the *crisis of value realization*, i.e., increasingly more commodities are generated in the sphere of production which, however, do not reach the sphere of consumption. It was, as is known, the first of these paradigms that demonstrated the limitations of neoclassical orthodoxy, and proposed a viable alternative for escaping the crisis and, therefore, established itself in the political and intellectual debate. The problem of development, for J. M. Keynes and his disciples, consisted, therefore, of paying attention to the demand side; thus, by ensuring purchasing power so that the commodities that reached the market could be acquired. If production grows, then consumption must grow to the same extent. Thus, from the 1930s onwards, there was a current of scholars, who, in fact, went on to become apologists, of economic growth.

After the Second World War, the Keynesian policies for managing demand not only favored a quick reconstruction of what had been destroyed in Europe between 1939 and 1945, but also provided the conditions for establishing the so-called Welfare State. Could the success of European development be replicated in the periphery? The United Nations, which came into being at the end of 1945, created the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on February 25, 1948, to “contribute to the economic development” of the subcontinent. Less than a year later, on January 20, 1949, President H. S. Truman, in his inaugural address, declared that most of the planet was underdeveloped (ESTEVA, 2010).

The idea of development spread as an aspiration not only for those already developed, but also for those declared to be underdeveloped, hence as a panacea for overcoming economic backwardness and eradicating poverty. This condition would be reached when, through development, an understanding would be reached regarding both the representation of social and economic reality and the intention to intervene in it. However, the most frequent uses of the term would

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4. N.B. For direct citations the English version has been used of MARSHALL, A. *Principles of Economics*. Basingstoke UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 213.



make it possible to differentiate, on the one hand, process and aspiration and, on the other, theory and practice.

In the first case, a distinction is made between empirical reality and intentionality, fact and purpose. Thus, development may be considered a country's process of economic change, which may be observed and captured through indicators and analyzed according to a determined pattern. The meaning that the term assumes here is that of a palpable aspect of reality, subject to measurement. But development may also be an objective, an intention expressed in a development plan or policy. In this case, nothing is palpable, except a concern to modify reality from what exists towards what should exist. Thus, facts are distinguished from intentions.

In the second case, theory and practice become distinguished, "thinking" and "acting". Evidently, research institutes and universities assigned themselves to the first of these tasks, while governments and politicians claimed the second. Theorizing on development, however, implies critically examining the foundations of both processes and aspirations, trajectories and strategies. However, in practical terms, the concern with "acting" materializes by intervening in reality. Although "thinking" should not be dispensed with as its prerequisite, development in practice has not lived up to its promises. Thus, a difference is identified between the abstract and the concrete (WOLFE, 1976).

The distinction between process and aspiration, on the one hand, and between theory and practice, on the other, helps to obtain an understanding of the phenomenon of underdevelopment, this counterpart of successful post-World War II European development that could not be replicated in the periphery. Perhaps the collection organized by Agarwala and Singh (1958) offered the best *first appraisal* of this then little understood phenomenon. In fact, with the periphery as it was, there would be no autonomy either for adopting policies to manage demand or, much less, for constructing a Welfare State. Indeed,

In the Third World [...] the pursuit of short-term interests led [the American elites] to frustrate the desire for independent development [...] There was no Marshall Plan for the Third World, merely a terrible catalogue of murders of nationalist leaders, absurd embargoes, engineered coups d'état, support for the most sordid dictatorships, neo-colonial wars and minor tragedies. (LPIETZ, 1992, p. 10).

The most influential current in the debate on underdevelopment postulated that traditional, undeveloped societies should strive to skip the steps that separated them from modern, developed societies (ROSTOW, 1960). Other strands rejected

the diagnosis and recommendations formulated by the scholars of modernization. They, however, shared with them the desideratum of development. If scholars of modernization identified underdevelopment as being attached to traditions, other currents enhanced the debate with other conceptions. Heterodox economists such as Michal Kalecki (1988), based on the economic causes of underdevelopment, proposed transformations of a structural nature. Critical social scientists such as Geoffrey Kay (1977), based on historical-political causes, suggested that underdevelopment opened up possibilities for revolutionary ruptures. Dependence theorists, such as André Gunder Frank (1980) and Ruy Mauro Marini (1969), based on empirical evidence from Latin America, not only shared essential points with heterodox economists and critical social scientists regarding underdevelopment, but also, given the originality of their approach and penetration of their arguments, even influenced them.

In Brazil, the problem of underdevelopment soon received attention from its most committed scholars, but the case of Celso Furtado is exemplary. In the preface to his 1961 *Development and Underdevelopment*, he stated that, when he began to address this issue, in the early 1950s, the science of economics taught in the most developed centers offered few starting points for scholars in this field of knowledge. This is where Furtado's pioneering work in studies on underdevelopment is revealed: Chapter 4 of the aforementioned book resulted from an exhibition held at the Universidade do Brasil in 1958. It was the same year in which the collection organized by Agarwala and Singh (1958) came to light, in which, incidentally, Furtado appears with a crucial chapter.

And, for the economist from the Northeastern state of Paraíba, in the 1950s, what was underdevelopment? Certainly not a stage through which backward economies should go in order, someday, to reach the stage of maturity, when they would be as developed as the advanced economies of Europe and the United States. It was, rather, a complex process of penetrating modern capitalist productive units in a context dominated by archaic pre-capitalist structures. As a result, only a small fraction of the population benefited from development; in opposition to the experiences of (since forever) developed economies, the majority of the population, living in a situation of underdevelopment, depended on subsistence activities to survive (FURTADO, 1961).

With this, and if the dual purpose has been achieved of, on the one hand, recovering the roots of the notion of development and, on the other, of examining some of the meanings assumed by it throughout its trajectory (including that referring to the phenomenon of underdevelopment), then the conditions have been met in order to take a step forward. This thus refers to the critiques and alternatives.

## 2. The critiques of development

The aim of this section is to move towards the principal critiques that have been leveled against the idea of development (Table 2). By *principal* we mean those that most frequently occur in the literature, including those pertaining to regional development. Initially, such critiques are summarized, after which, the main alternatives are addressed, with particular emphasis on the cases of sustainable development, degrowth and postdevelopment.

Critique	Diagnosis	Proposed measures	Currents of thought/ representatives
Economic backwardness, poverty	Insufficient capital, attached to traditions	Development aid, modernization	Liberal/orthodox (sometimes heterodox) economics, functionalist social science
Maldevelopment	Contempt for social and environmental aspects	Emphasis on qualitative aspects, growing without destroying	Ecodevelopment, Ignacy Sachs
New form of colonialism	Diffusion of Western Values	Respect for women, nature and non-Western cultures	Vandana Shiva, Leopoldo Zea
The hidden face of development	Neglect of topics such as class and nation, internal/ external asymmetries	Emphasis on policy determinants at home and abroad	Critical Latin American scholars

Table 2. Critiques on the notion of development

Source: Own elaboration.

There seems little doubt that the idea of development has occupied an increasingly important position, not only in the thinking of academics and the actions of bureaucrats and politicians, but also in the daily lives of individuals and human collectivities. There is also little doubt that it has proved incapable of offering content and meaning, whether for an alternative vision of the future, or for an action strategy leading to changes that could correspond to the conscious aspirations of individuals and human collectivities (ESTEVA, 2010).

On the one hand, there is one type of critique that considers the persistence of underdevelopment to be the result of *little* development. This is shared by liberal economists, although sometimes also by heterodox. They consider that underdevelopment is the punishment suffered by nations that have experienced an insufficient dose of development. The empirical observation of concrete situations reveals, however, that, by penetrating underdeveloped structures, capital propels

processes of primitive accumulation which, if they lead to positive economic results, are invariably accompanied by the destruction of traditional forms of human collectivities and the degradation of ecosystems (SANYAL, 2007).

Another type of critique, emanating from a host of economists concerned with socio-environmental aspects, is that which calls the quantitative dimension of development into question, paying attention to its qualitative nature:

Although it is hard to imagine development without growth, identical rates of growth can lead to both development and maldevelopment, since the difference between the two is qualitative. Development occurs when genuine use values are created that satisfy the needs of society, and a situation of maldevelopment will prevail if the economy presents pseudo use values in the form of conspicuous consumption of goods and services, as well as weapons. (SACHS, 1986, p. 53).

The argument finds support in concrete situations: high rates of economic growth may lead to changes in the lives of certain human collectivities, but not in others. What could be questioned is whether, in many cases, the lives of individuals and human collectivities were not qualitatively “good” before some well-intentioned development strategy was applied to them. Moreover, at the extreme, one could ask whether the qualitative character of the life of individuals and human collectivities could not improve even with degrowth, a point which will be returned to later.

The decolonization process is also taken into account, which coincided with the reconstruction of Europe destroyed by the Second World War and the constitution of its Welfare State, as previously mentioned. This cannot be dissociated from the diffusion of the notion of development as the creation of wealth. Thus, if it is true that the decolonization process was accompanied by the weakening of old forms of dependence, it is no less true that the diffusion of the notion of development led to the emergence of new ones. Hence, development has been criticized as a new form of colonialism (ZEA, 1987). This critique, which is aimed at western and patriarchal capitalism, rests on the realization that the conception of wealth creation implicit in the notion of development also encompasses a triple exploitation of: women, nature and non-Western cultures (SHIVA, 1989).

Lastly, there is a type of critique that identifies the theory and practice of development with a form of dissimulating the accumulation process and its economic, social and political implications, by adopting a wording that conceals crucial aspects of the lives of individuals and human collectivities. Thus, it is considered

that conventional thinking on development has been somewhat misleading, since it neglects aspects such as the international context (underdevelopment cannot be considered a national problem, exclusive to peripheral social formations), the class conflicts within social formations and the inequality of relations between classes and social formations in the context of the world capitalist economy (FAGEN, 1983). These often-overlooked aspects would explain the growing *gaps* between social groups, as well as between regions, within peripheral social formations, in which positive economic results may even occur be substantiated, but also poverty, the destruction of cultures, the degradation of ecosystems and political authoritarianism. The misleading face of conventional thinking on development is revealed to the extent that the economic results have been extolled, but their *collateral effects* have been silenced.

In short: both the theory and practice of development have received critiques for a number of reasons that seem legitimate. Curiously, but not surprisingly, all the critiques seem to converge towards an excessive emphasis on *economics*. In other words, the critique leveled against the well-known notions of development in the political and academic debate primarily, if not exclusively, associate development with the creation of wealth.

In the face of critique, it was necessary to make the theory and practice of development more palatable – which led to the creation of visions of the future that sought to escape an excessive emphasis on the *economic* and to formulate action strategies that could better meet the aspirations of individuals and human collectivities. It is not however, appropriate to review them here. However, it should be noted that, in the same measure that the *collateral effects* of development began to manifest, proposals that pointed toward other directions also emerged, such as “another development” could be mentioned (BIROU; HENRY, 1987); “ecodevelopment” (SACHS, 1980); “small is beautiful” (SCHUMACHER, 1973); “sustainable development” (CMMAD, 1988); “limits to growth” (MEADOWS et al., 1978); “the living economy” (EKINS, 1986); “La décroissance” (LATOUCHE, 2007) and “postdevelopment” (SACHS, W., 2009). Among these proposals, and assuming the criterion of considering the frequency with which they occur in the literature, including those pertaining to regional development, sustainable development, degrowth and postdevelopment are highlighted (Table 3).

Alternatives	Diagnosis	Proposed measures	Principal representatives
Sustainable development	Social and environmental unsustainability	Access to natural resources for present and future generations	WCED
Degrowth	Consumption of energy and common resources compromises the limits of nature	Parsimonious use of energy and common resources	Serge Latouche
Post-development	<i>Discourse</i> covers up destruction of cultures and ways of life in the Global South	Rejection of any development option	Arturo Escobar, Wolfgang Sachs, Aram Ziai

**Table 3. Principal alternative proposals**

Source: Own elaboration.

With regard to sustainable development, this is a proposal that emanated from the Brundtland Report (published in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which aimed to address the collateral effects of development on the environment. Hence, its attention was drawn from a broader temporal perspective toward preserving the physical base of “natural resources”. Sustainable development was defined as that which “seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future.”<sup>5</sup> (CMMAD, 1988, p. 46). To a certain extent, the notion of ecodevelopment anticipated the concern with strategies based on a more balanced combination of economic efficiency, social equity and ecological prudence (SACHS, 1986). However, the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, and the Club of Rome Report, published the same year (MEADOWS et al., 1978), may be considered the true forerunners of sustainable development. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, contributed to its diffusion, to the point that the notion of sustainable development was soon absorbed (and instrumentalized) by multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank (PEET; WATTS, 1996). If, on the one hand, the advocates of the sustainable development proposal may not be blamed for the fact that it has been co-opted by international agencies, governments and large private corporations that, strictly speaking, act in contradiction with its *spirit*, on the other, the concept of sustainable development must be criticized for promising theoretical-empirical consistency that could never be delivered. More serious, however, is that the notion of sustainable development has been silenced

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5. N.B. For direct citations the online English version was used of the United Nations General Assembly Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 51. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/139811?ln=en>. Viewed on: July 25, 2022.

in the face of the progressive expansion of the productive forces that drive the accumulation process, the uninterrupted destruction of common resources and the consequent degradation of ecosystems and the reproduction of class society based on the incessant exploitation of labor (REDCLIFT, 1995).

In terms of degrowth, this is a proposal that has experienced much less diffusion than sustainable development, although, in comparison, it seems to have been based on a more solid scientific argument. Its inspiration seems to be present in Chapter VI of the *Principles of Political Economy*, Book IV, by John Stuart Mill, published in 1848. There the author contests that:

[...] who thinks that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress.<sup>6</sup> (MILL, 1983, p. 252).

In recent decades, the exhortation of environmentalists and development scholars in favor of reducing the pace of economic growth has gained an audience (GEORGESCU-ROEGEN, 1971). The term “degrowth” literally began to spread from the title translated into French of a well-known work by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1979). What is original and scientifically sound here is the assertion that the economic process is conditioned by entropic limits on the use of energy and by biophysical limits on the use of resources. Degrowth does not consist of a strategy to reduce the production of commodities, generate unemployment and/or reduce wages; it indicates a planned reorganization of society, based on the verification of the aforementioned limits and, consequently, on the adoption of measures that are based both on the decreasing use of energy and common resources and on the equitable distribution of their benefits (KALLIS; KERSCHNER; MARTINEZ-ALIER, 2012; LATOUCHE, 2007). Furthermore, in addition to being based on the parsimonious use of energy and common resources, degrowth encompasses a wide range of dimensions of the life of individuals and human collectivities, including culture and politics. However, if, on the one hand, it seems evident that the proponents of degrowth are opposed to the expansion of the productive forces that drive the accumulation process, the uninterrupted destruction of common resources and the degradation of ecosystems, on the other, doubts remain in relation to how to deal with a class society based on the continuous exploitation of labor.

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6. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of MILL, J.S. *Principles of Political Economy*, Book IV. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004, p. 189.



With regard to post-development, despite being less widespread than sustainable development and supported by less solid arguments than degrowth, it is nonetheless a proposal that is more audacious in the radical critique of the idea of development. Although it emerged in the 1980s, post-development has become established since the 1990s as an important critique of the development *discourse*. Like other discourses that become hegemonic in the political and academic debate, it is argued herein that the discourse of development also emerged and became established due to the interests of certain social groups and the dominant power relations in a given historical and geographical context (RAHNEMA; BAWTREE, 1997; ZIAI, 2007). The critique leveled by post-development scholars – where, initially, Arturo Escobar (1995) stands out – was different because it did not merely propose to redefine development, but to reject it in a radical manner. If, in the beginning, the target was *development*, an idea considered as Eurocentric, for which universal validity was aspired, in the recent post-development period advocates have begun to target *globalization*, a process induced by the Global North that degrades cultures and local and regional ways of life in the Global South. Post-development scholars do not suggest neopopulist or neoliberal solutions, but have faced critiques for being limited to simply discarding the idea of development, with no concern over what to put in its place. What perhaps unites them is their somewhat vague commitment to a democratization of all social relations. This corresponds to a policy of emancipating the subalternized, especially in peripheral social formations, thereby encompassing forms of knowledge through to mechanisms of power that, until the present, have kept them in the condition of subalternity, i.e., a policy that would lead to the deconstruction of epistemological and economic-political differences (SACHS, W., 2009; ZIAI, 2004). However, doubts persist concerning how post-developmentalism conceives not only conceives the relations between human beings and nature, but also the class society based on the exploitation of labor.

With this, and if the dual purpose of reviewing the critique of development and indicating alternatives – namely: sustainable development, degrowth and post-development – has been achieved, then we are in a position to move on to some conclusions.

### 3. Conclusion: the challenges for studies on regional development

In this final section, the intention is to offer a synthesis of what has been exposed in the previous sections and, also, some suggestions for formulating a conception of development free from its political and epistemological determinations. Which results, then, have been achieved?



By recovering, in the first section, the roots of the notion of development and an examination of some of the meanings assumed throughout its trajectory, despite the strong neoliberal offensive of the last decades, its uninterrupted presence may nonetheless be observed in the political and academic debate, thereby the concept of underdevelopment still deserves attention. The second section sought to identify the most significant critiques directed against the idea of development. After attempting to summarize them, three alternatives, which have emerged from recent academic debate, were highlighted. There it may be observed that the critiques, although valid, remained on the surface and, equally, that the alternatives did not go beyond the material and symbolic restrictions of the very concept of development. Sometimes, these limitations are a challenge toward considering escape routes that have not yet been established.

The proposal outlined in the following lines was supported by a dual movement. The first proposes that development should be recognized as a positive process in history. Thus, development is fundamentally an economic process, the continuous expansion of the productive forces that leads to the uninterrupted production of commodities. Therefore, it may be considered an empirically verifiable process of economic growth, which lends itself to measurement through certain indicators and analysis according to a certain standard. A process that involves the creation of wealth based on the consumption of material and energy available in nature, and the workforce available in each human being dispossessed of the means of production. Thus, development is conditioned by entropic limits on the use of energy and biophysical limits on the use of common resources, as well as physical and moral limits on the use of the workforce. It is, however, a continuous process of converting materials obtained in nature into commodities through human labor. Its purpose should be to eradicate poverty and overcome economic backwardness, especially in the countries of the Global South. However, historically, development has been a process that, to a considerable degree, has lived up to its promises – tolerable levels of poverty, acceptable levels of inequality, economic dynamism, etc. – in the central social formations, at the cost, however, of underdevelopment in the social formations that are on the periphery of the world capitalist economy. The evidence therefore suggests that development cannot be anything else than it has been, for it does not lend itself to conscious human guidance. At best, it may be considered an unsuccessful attempt to control impulses intrinsic to the economic process under the system of capital.

It is now the turn of the second movement of this proposal. In normative terms, it indicates a *plausible alternative to the notion of development*. Therefore, it is no longer what has already taken place, but a utopian horizon (THEIS, 2019a).

Undoubtedly, empirical reality matters, perhaps, even more than before – even to see that the existing reality does not meet the conscious aspirations of individuals and human collectivities. However, it is what is desired that matters most. And the latter can no longer remain imprisoned in the notion of development, inextricably committed to both the perverse invisible hand of capital and the covert visible hand of the State, and to (almost) everything else that has kept the world as it has been until now. No development plan or policy will favor the modification of reality, nor the overcoming of economic backwardness and the eradication of poverty. The notion of development is incapable of overcoming the existing reality, especially toward something truly different and better – “the human content which is still circulating but has not yet been fixed.”<sup>7</sup> (BLOCH, 2006, p. 55) – that could and should exist.

The plausible alternative, which corresponds to the second movement of the aforementioned proposal and points toward a genuine utopian horizon, translates into a drive *toward social self-determination* (HOLLOWAY, 2006), *an incitement to autonomy* (DINERSTEIN, 2015, 2016), *an impetus for social self-regulation* (GUTIÉRREZ AGUILAR, 2012). This alternative entails the conscious resistance of women and men – where they work and live, whether in the countryside or in the city – to the establishment of the capital-relationship, which is “nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.”<sup>8</sup> (MARX, 1993 [1890], p. 742).

The starting point is to recognize the current predominance of capital relationship, therefore, of the reiterated subordination of the energy of women and men to the production of commodities and the objectification of social relations, in almost all domains in the life of individuals and human collectivities. The alternative of the drive toward social self-determination cannot signify anything other than the negation, “here and now”, of the capital relationship (HOLLOWAY, 2006). It aims at an impatient utopian horizon, which can no longer wait for “a little while”. It is based on a social transformation from the bottom up, on insubmission in relation to the instituted, on the rebellion against the domination and exploitation in force. It tends to occur when the life configurations of individuals and human collectivities have been destabilizing, when existing social relations of domination and exploitation are diluted, when the bonds and ties that organize

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7. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of BLOCH, E. *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986, p. 973. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight.

8. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of MARX, K. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume III. NY: International Publishers, [n.d.], p. 445. On-Line Version: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-III.pdf>. Viewed on: July 25, 2022.

life become malleable to the point of assuming new forms. Social transformation from the bottom up, which indicates the alternative of the drive toward social self-determination not only gives visibility to the practices and knowledge of those who are dominated, of those who do not live off the work of others, but also favors their expansion in spaces of debate and public decision (GUTIÉRREZ AGUILAR, 2012).

Why, however, *drive toward it*? It is that “if we confuse the drive toward self-determination with self-determination [...], if we institutionalize and define a movement against definition, then all will be lost” (HOLLOWAY, 2006, p. 11-12). Thus, the alternative of the *drive toward social self-determination* is incompatible with all forms of institutionalization of the life of human individuals and collectivities. This includes capital, money, the market and the State, but also all other forms that, hypothetically, could represent options for social emancipation (HOLLOWAY, 2005).

There are numerous initiatives that may be identified in history and countless experiences that may be diagnosed today in the four corners of the planet, pointing to an alternative of authentic social emancipation and individual and collective autonomy. Among the former, examples that could be included are the Anabaptist movement from the sixteenth century (BLOCH, 1973), the Paris Commune of 1871 (MARX, 2011), the soviets in the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (ANWEILER, 1974) and the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 (GEORGE, 1982). Among the latter, the Zapatista Movement in Mexico and the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil are outstanding (DINERSTEIN, 2015). In all these initiatives and experiences, there are genuine efforts aimed at self-management, the establishment of non-institutionalized and non-hierarchical forms of social and economic organization, and the weaving of bonds between collectivities that share common values. These are efforts that are rooted in *social transformation from the bottom up that drive toward social self-determination*, as postulated herein.

The scope of the results arrived at and the proposal that has been formulated is delimited by the intention to take them, results and proposal, as a background in order to provide support for regional development studies in Brazil, many of which are being conducted by researchers linked to postgraduate programs (THEIS, 2019b). An unspoken expectation is that results and proposals may support a new agenda, which takes into account the possibility of removing the notion of development from the utopian horizon in favor of an alternative that signifies a *drive toward social self-determination* on the part of those dominated, of those who do not live off the work of others. It is not a matter of closing one's eyes to the existing reality, but of looking beyond it. It is not a matter of despising the presence of capital and the State and of all the scales on which their powers have operated, but of daring to reject these institutionalities, which have blocked social emancipation and

individual and collective autonomy. In summary: that a new study agenda in the field of regional development continues to recognize *development* as an empirically verifiable process. But that, in normative terms, it dares to contemplate a utopian horizon informed by the *drive toward social self-determination*.

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