

The Myth of Development

By Oswaldo De Rivero

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‘Development’ as a catchy phrase in the lexicon of nation-building is much sought after by all countries whether in the First, Second or Third World. However the quest for ‘development’, as contemporary and prevailing views indicate, has been more intense in economies of the ‘Third World’. There is no doubt that given this context, Oswaldo De Rivero’s book covers the subject in a frank manner. It does so by pointing out the realities confronting a number of economies in Latin America, Asia and Africa. It is a brilliantly written exposition of the myriad of problems confronting post-colonial and artificially carved out ‘nation-states’. The factual analysis is incontrovertible and the evidence presented in the book do reflect the profiles of the many ‘non-viable economies of the 21st century’. This line of reasoning adopted in the book lays the foundation for the discussions in its six chapters.

In chapter one dealing with the ‘twilight of the nation-state’, the book traces the history of ‘nation-states’ to the period of the Renaissance accounting for its four hundred years of transition. But the author does this only through the prisms of Western political thought. The chapter advances the argument that globalisation is a direct attack on the sovereignty of ‘nation-states’ causing them to lose control of their fiscal and monetary policies. This is aside from the environmental problems that are causing further erosion of national sovereignty. The rise of transnational corporations is therefore to be seen as the ‘new phenomenon’ that will eventually shape the future of nation-states.

Chapter two focuses on ‘global empowerment and national impoverishment’. Here, the central argument is that the rise of huge transnational corporations and their close alliance with international lending institutions like the World Bank and the IMF which in turn are supported by the WTO is breeding the evolution of a supranational authority. The converse effect is the marginalisation of ‘Third World’ countries. As a result, such countries are now powerless to direct their national affairs or exert any form of influence over this rising hegemonic global power scheme.

In chapter three, the book attempts to put forward the concept of ‘international Darwinism’ where globalisation is turning the world economy into a global jungle. In the argument of the book, it is only the ‘fittest’ that will ultimately survive in this harsh and demanding economic environment. An interesting contrast was made with Darwin’s theory of evolution of the human species. While human evolution took place over a considerable period of time in order to adapt and weed out the ‘weaker’ species, it takes globalisation a relatively short time to diminish the sovereignty and autonomy of many ‘nation-states’. Moreover globalisation does not allow any room for adjustment especially in the case of the ‘non-viable economies’.

‘The search for El Dorado’, which is the title of chapter 4, explains in very graphic terms the difficulties

facing 'underdeveloped countries' in their attempts to bridge the gap between them and the 'developed' economies. The author states that for the underdeveloped countries to even consider the issue of bridging the gap is fraught with difficulties. They cannot do so in their present state and are confronted with only two possible options- embark on a technological revolution to boost high-tech exports or remain as they are and explode into a cycle of violence and destruction. As the argument in the chapter goes, it is a choice between two 'impossibilities' or unpalatable alternatives with the latter being at least the more feasible one.

Chapter five deals with the subject- 'worldwide deprecation'. It analyses by means of examples, the issue of violence and demonstrates the chaotic effects this has on the ability of a number of nation-states across the globe to effectively govern themselves.

The final chapter dealing with 'survival' outlines an alternative 'development' strategy for the 'non-viable economies' in this new century. The message is simple- forget about 'development' (whatever that implies) and just be content with whatever food that comes onto the table; have water to drink; and generate some energy for domestic and industrial needs on a daily basis.

The problems of 'development' confronting 'the non-viable economies of the 21st century' have nowhere been better acknowledged than in page 186. The statement reads: :

The myth of development is so rooted in the collective sub-consciousness of the political classes that think that they only have to set in motion the economic and financial policy that is in fashion, and has been dictated by the great economic powers, the transnationals and the international economic and financial organisations. They do not realise that the technological revolution is making anachronistic the only two comparative advantages their countries possess, to wit, abundant unskilled labour and natural resources. Nor do they realise that this process will gradually intensify their condition as non-viable national economies as quasi nation-states, frustrated national projects.

While the book has been very forthright in pointing out the realities of 'development' confronting 'nation-states' in Latin America, Africa and Asia, there are a number of points that need to be made in respect of the general context of the book. This is done by way of an addition to the discussions in the book.

First, the historical evolution of 'nation-states' was traced to only about 400 years, which generally is the starting point for Western political thought in their understanding concerning the formation of 'nation-states'. What escapes the book's attention is the fact that strong and economically viable nation-states have existed in places that are today regarded as technologically backward and failing States. The Aztec, Inca, Taj Mahal, Asante, Songhai, Timbuktu, Andalusia, to mention a few, had, during their times, effectively engaged in international trade of goods, services and technology. They also had standing armies, coherent internal administration, foreign relations and effective judiciaries. Thus, to truly and objectively understand 'underdevelopment' or to proffer any lasting solutions today would at least require a brief comparative inquiry.

Second, the definition of 'development and underdevelopment' and the desire to create a one-sided global hegemonic power found its root in the 1940s in then United States president Harry Truman's speech which highlighted the meaning of 'development'. This is why all the current neoclassical economic theories of development that have been modelled along the same lines have failed to provide answers to the problems confronting a number of countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In any case, they are not meant to provide any answers. The economic policies are only intended to perpetuate the status quo. One cannot define 'development' either in an ethnocentric way or only with reference to economic variables and expect the policies to succeed. There is today no living example of any so-called Third World country which has 'swallowed' the IMF and World Bank's prescriptions and has recovered. Why? The answer is simple- because these financial institutions blamed the recipients of the policies (the people in the recipient countries) while their policies have always been absolved. In their theoretical perspective, there is no

organic link between the conditions of the people and the policies.

Third, following from the above, ‘development’ should be seen as a multi-faceted concept and a process embodying the material and non-material needs of all the people in a country. The Gross National Product (GNP) and the Human Development Index fall short of being objective standards in measuring real ‘development’. To properly understand the path to ‘development’ in the context of most of the ‘developing countries’ discussed in the book, it is important to build into a development process the effects of ‘democracy’ (or rather political participation) in artificially constructed postcolonial nation-states; assess the impact of current political models that are not properly and organically, so to speak, linked with their host societies; and allow nation-states to choose what development strategies and intellectual property systems to adopt which would be commensurate with their actual material and non-material needs. The lack of practical solutions to the problems of ‘development’ in the book portrays an analytical and historical deficit as to whether the book is actually talking of ‘development’ or is mixing that up with ‘economic growth’.

Fourth, neither science nor development has any ethnocentric appellations. Each can be fine-tuned to productively serve humanity, wherever and whenever there is a functional correlation between the three most important ingredients of progress: appropriate policies; knowledge; and people.

Lastly, it is also necessary to observe that countries which have achieved high rates of economic development, do so at the expense of gradual institutional social breakdowns and anomie. These may not be structurally visible now. However, the extent to which these subterranean social dysfunctions may pose significant threats to the polity of these societies can only be discerned in the future. Such societies are also characterised by a dominant homogenous and ethnocentric majority which keeps tabs on and dominates the minority at all levels- political, social and even economic. These societies also have manifest unequal power relationships often at the expense and to the detriment of the social and psychological wellbeing of the minority. It is surprising that a book of this nature has not factored in these subtle and non-material determinants in its discourse on development.

Having made these comments , there is no doubt that the book will, for years to come, rightfully considered as an important ‘development’ reader. It is highly recommended to all who are interested to learn about the intricacies of the different perspectives of ‘development’.

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