

# Debates on development and its alternatives in Latin America: a brief heterodox guide

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More than thirty years ago, the Brazilian economist Celso Furtado warned that development was a myth that focused on “abstract objectives such as investment, exports and growth.” These same goals are heard today in Latin America from the most varied political camps, making it clear that the question of development is still an open one. Furtado added that economic development, understood as the idea that “the poor may one day enjoy the same lifestyles as those who are rich today” is “simply unrealisable” (Furtado, 1975). This idea has been used, Furtado goes on to say, “to mobilise the peoples of the periphery and convince them to accept enormous sacrifices, to legitimise 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.” This dimension of the problem of development persists at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These and other warnings show that the concept of development, its means and its ends, has been under discussion in Latin America for some time. This essay aims to contribute to that discussion, and reviews some of the main schools of thought in which the problem of development and alternatives to it have been addressed. The aim is not to analyse all the positions exhaustively, but to examine those that seem to have been the most influential in Latin America, especially when they involve the exploration of alternatives. It is also a heterodox review, as it delves into the ideological underpinnings of development.

## Constructing the idea of development

The usual meanings of the word “development” point to advances and progress in the economic and social sphere. Thus, among several meanings, the Oxford dictionary defines development as growing larger, fuller or more mature, making something active or visible, or as a process such as urbanisation. The Royal Spanish Academy dictionary presents development as an economic term, understood as the “progressive evolution of an economy toward higher standards of living,” while when it is used to refer to people it is defined as progress, well-being, modernisation, and economic, social, cultural or political growth. The word comes from other fields, and was often used in biology, for example, to refer to the stages of growth and maturity of a living being. In the social sciences

and politics, development alludes to a wide range of academic and practical matters; there are even agencies that include the word in their name (like the Inter-American Development Bank - IDB).

The conventional meaning of development, and the so-called “development economics” in particular, gained currency immediately after the Second World War. Ideas were outlined, backed by economic theory, and presented as practical responses to challenges such as poverty and wealth distribution. A division was established between developed countries and underdeveloped nations (including Latin America). The speech made by President Harry Truman on 20 January 1949, in which he said that the “underdeveloped” countries of the South should follow in the footsteps of the industrialised nations, is often cited as a prime example of how this model was established (Esteve, 1992). Thus, the idea of development became tied to economic growth and, consequently, the issue of human well-being was left in a subordinate position, since it was felt that inequality and poverty would be solved essentially by economic means. These ideas in turn harked back to the work of thinkers such as Michal Kalecki, John Maynard Keynes and Nicholas Kaldor, who defended the vision of progress. Since the attachment to progress and modernity was already evident in Latin America since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, development ideas were easily slotted in place to represent a supposed economic and social evolution.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, development concepts had become almost indistinguishable from those of economic growth, and the two terms were used interchangeably in more than one key work (Lewis, 1976, for example). Growth was said to take place in a series of stages, as described by Rostow (1961), whereby the backward countries ought to be inspired by the advanced economies and follow their example. For these authors, the key issue was economic growth rather than income distribution, and this type of thinking led to a hardening of the insistence on resorting to indicators such as Gross Domestic Product, turning it into a target in itself.

Thus, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of development that had become consolidated was one of a linear process of essentially economic evolution, brought about by making use of natural resources, guided by different versions of economic efficiency and profitability, and aimed at emulating the western lifestyle (Bustelo, 1998; Unceta, 2009).

## Early warnings and the dependency critique

Shortly after these ideas about development became widespread, the first critiques started to appear. In the setting of the United Nations, “The United Nations Development Decade: Proposals for Action” (1962) insisted on separating “development” from “growth” and the qualitative from the quantitative aspects, broadening the concept to include social and cultural matters rather than solely economic ones.

In the academic setting, several critical studies were produced between 1965 and 1969. E.J. Mishan published his classic analysis that drew attention to the “spillover effects” of economic growth, such as the increase in urbanisation, migration and the number of vehicles on the road (Mishan, 1983). Then came other warnings, such as those of Galbraith (1992) on affluence and Hirsch’s (1976) acknowledgement of the social limits to growth.

These first alerts reached Latin America, although the region’s attention was focused more on the debates initiated by Raúl Prebisch. His position, known as structuralism, placed emphasis on the heterogeneous structure of Latin America’s economies, in which more advanced sectors coexisted alongside others that were backward and subsistence-based. These economies specialised in exporting just a few primary commodities, although they had some modern enclaves. This had given rise to asymmetrical relations between a centre, occupied by the industrialised countries, and a periphery comprised of the developing countries (Rodríguez, 2006). This theory was very influential and explains, for example, the substitution strategies that sought to replace imports by means of domestic industrial production. It also introduced a much-needed international view of development

In the years that followed, further steps were taken with what became known as dependency theory. In this case, the starting point was the insight that underdevelopment is not a phase that precedes development, but rather its consequence and, to a great extent, the result of colonialism and imperialism. Capitalism, including the asymmetries in international trade, was the explanation for this unequal situation, and in fact it acted as a brake on progress. Dependency theory branched out into several variations (Bustelo, 1998), depending on how international conditionalities or the role of local historical-political contexts were interpreted (exemplified, among others, by Gunder Frank, 1970; Furtado, 1964; Cardoso and Faletto, 1969). While conventional development economics did not adequately take into account historical situations or power relations, dependency theory brought them into the foreground.

Although all these heterodox positions strongly criticized the onward march of development, they nonetheless repeated some of its basic ideas, such as the importance of economic growth as the expression of material progress. In general, they assigned a major role to industrialisation and called for greater efficiency in the exploitation of natural resources. The debates centred on questions such as how the supposed benefits were to be distributed, the asymmetries in international relations between countries, ownership of the means of production, etc. What was not up for discussion were the ideas of “advancement”, “backwardness”, “modernisation” or “progress”, or the need to take advantage of Latin America’s ecological wealth to feed that economic growth. This is why alternative development proposals kept economic progress at their core, and the debates focused on the best means to achieve such progress.

## **Ecology and the limits to growth**

At more or less the same time as the debates about dependency were going on, environmental warnings began to be sounded, growing louder with the presentation of the 1972 report “*The Limits to Growth*” (Meadows et al., 1972), commissioned by the Club of Rome think tank from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This was not an evaluation of the state of the environment. Instead, its objective was to analyse global growth trends (world population, industrialisation, food production and the exploitation of natural resources).

The report questioned the key idea of development as perpetual growth. By modelling the trends, it found that “the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years,” and “the most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity” (ibid. 1972). The report was almost aseptic. It did not go into geopolitical matters but did make it quite clear that the trends in terms of population increase, accelerating industrialisation and pollution, and resource depletion, would come up against the planet’s limits. Perpetual economic growth was impossible.

At the time, these conclusions had a huge impact. One of the pillars of conventional development economics was under assault, and the report was therefore attacked from all sides, both left and right. It was variously accused of being neo-Malthusian, of denying the role of science and technology in generating alternatives to exhausted resources or dealing with the impacts of their depletion, and of being a simple manifestation of bourgeois or imperialist developmentalism.

Many Latin American intellectuals on the left felt challenged by “*The Limits to Growth*” report. In their view, it was attacking aspects that they considered to be positive, such as modernisation, the use of Latin America’s ecological wealth, and the very idea of growth.

Several of them organised a response, which was presented as an alternative model. *Catastrophe or New Society? A Latin American World Model*, coordinated from the Bariloche Foundation under the leadership of Amílcar O. Herrera, was published in Spanish in 1975. It is a forward-looking and prescriptive model, which maintains that the problems “are not physical but sociopolitical, and based on the unequal distribution of power, both internationally and within countries.” As a solution, it proposes “a fundamentally socialist society, based on equality and the full participation of all human beings in society’s decisions,” in which the consumption of material goods and economic growth would be regulated to make them compatible with the environment (Herrera, 1975).<sup>2</sup>

This model offers some advances, such as rejecting the development pattern pursued by the rich countries, although it leaves environmental preservation until a later stage, once an acceptable standard of living has been achieved for all. It also proposes some questionable alternatives, however, such as the widespread use of nuclear energy or giving vast areas of wilderness over to agriculture, without considering the serious impact this would have on biodiversity. The report defends economic growth by other means, and believes that technological solutions can be found to deal with its negative impacts.

The case of this alternative Latin American model should be borne in mind, because some elements of this perspective reappeared years later in the policies of certain progressive governments.

## **Deconstruction, nuances and diversification**

Parallel with the debates on the ecological limits of economic growth, other critical approaches attempted to reformulate the economic and social aspects of development. One text that can be highlighted in this set of approaches is the “Cocoyoc Declaration,” led by Barbara Ward (UNEP/UNCTAD, 1974), which insists that there is a diversity of routes to development, and that its purpose is to improve wealth distribution and ensure that basic needs are met. Along the same lines, the proposal for “another development” (1975), put forward by Sweden’s Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, insisted on separating development from growth, arguing that the aim was to eradicate poverty and ensure that

needs are met. Additional attributes of this “other development” were said to be endogeneity (it is defined within each society) and self-reliance. Discussions like these, which were non-conformist to start with, were later accepted and fed into the launch of the Human Development Index in 1990. In its first version, this took its inspiration from Amartya Sen’s work on “capabilities,” where well-being should focus particularly on people’s potential and ability to do something.

These positions were influential in Latin America, and subsequently built upon. The most important contribution was the concept of “human scale development,” popularised by the Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef. This is based on three key propositions: development should focus on people rather than objects, the means to satisfy needs can be identified, and poverty is a plural concept that depends on unmet needs (Max-Neef et al., 1993).

Other analysts in the 1980s chose to rethink development from the point of view of self-reliance, which implies drawing on local capabilities and resources, following Johan Galtung (1985). With this notion of self-reliance, positive results should be taken advantage of locally, and the transfer of negative externalities should be prevented. Some of these aspects reappear under the term “endogenous development,” although this school of thought has had only a limited influence in Latin America (seen today, for example, in the take-up of small-scale farming practices by the COMPAS Network). The label has also been applied generically by the government of Hugo Chávez, and in the promotion of local food markets, for example.

Finally, it is necessary to bear in mind that since the end of the 1990s the questions posed by the field of ecological economics have gained currency. This is a broad and diverse school of thought, from where successive critiques have been launched at the obsession with economic growth. The economist Herman Daly was an important protagonist in these debates, and many of his texts circulated in Spanish (Daly and Cobb, 1993).

## **The emergence and diversification of sustainable development**

As the 1970s debate on the environment and development continued to evolve, the first versions of the concept of “sustainable development” appeared at the beginning of the 1980s.

The term “sustainable” came from population biology, and is understood as the possibility of extracting or harvesting renewable resources provided that this is

done without exceeding their renewal and reproduction rates. Such extraction should also be directly aimed at meeting human needs and ensuring quality of life – goals that differ from simple growth. An approach of this sort appeared in 1980 in the first “World Conservation Strategy” (IUCN, UNEP and WWF, 1981). This report maintains that it is not possible to include the environmental dimension in the conceptual framework of conventional ‘development’, and it is therefore necessary to redefine the essence of the concept.

A next step was taken with the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), convened by the United Nations. Its final report, “Our Common Future”, offers what is possibly the most quoted definition of sustainable development. Although it is almost always cited as a commitment to future generations, the complete text is longer and more complex (WCED, 1988), and should be analysed.

In the first place, in common with some other alternative proposals made at the time, it calls for ‘development’ to be aimed at meeting human needs, and extends this to a commitment to future generations. Secondly, it admits the existence of limits, and thus comes closer to the line of thinking started by the Club of Rome report, but then goes on to differentiate between those that are rigid (the limits inherent in ecosystems, for example), and others that are flexible because they depend on human beings themselves (in the case of technologies or the organisation of society). Finally, the definition closes with a conciliatory U-turn: sustainable development must be aimed at economic growth. Thus, the old contradistinction between growth and conservation, the environment and the economy, disappears. It is once again argued that development implies economic growth, and the conservation of natural resources becomes a necessary condition for achieving it. What were previously opposites now turn out to be mutually dependent.

The way in which sustainability is conceptualised in this report is polysemic: various meanings are offered which, if taken on their own, lead to very different development stances. This is why it has been argued that the report’s definition is contradictory in its own terms, but it is not an oxymoron in the strict sense, since the important thing is how the components connect together in the definition as a whole. There is an internal logic in the WCED, beginning with its particular understanding of the limits, and the components can be linked together. The same logic would be evinced a few years later with the Latin American version of this same report, “Our Own Agenda” (CDMAALC, 1990).

In any case, this reduction of sustainability to economic factors was resisted on

several fronts. The second “World Conservation Strategy,” for example, produced in 1991, addressed the limitations of the Brundtland report unambiguously. It warns that “sustainable growth” is a “contradiction in terms: nothing physical can grow indefinitely.” In response, this report offers a new definition of sustainability which is shorter and has a more precise ecological meaning – “improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems” – and advances substantively on other fronts, particularly in its call for changes in ethics (IUCN, UNEP and WWF, 1991).

Beyond this debate, the multiple meanings of sustainable development allowed it to be used in many different ways, from publicity campaigns to denunciations of capitalism. So successful was it that the word “sustainability” broke away from its roots in ecology and became tinged with a developmentalist gloss. Nowadays, we see it being used in bizarre ways, such as “social sustainability” or “sustained economic growth.”

## **Retreats and resistances**

At the end of the 1980s, the collapse of “real socialism” in Eastern Europe led to the options previously spoken of as alternatives becoming discredited. At the same time, neoliberal and neoconservative policies were starting to become consolidated in Latin America. These are the years when market reforms, the Washington Consensus and the drive to privatise came to prominence, and the range of possible alternatives shrank accordingly. These ideas circulated throughout the continent, with the support of local elites and the adherence of academic institutions. The discussion about development was becoming meaningless, as it was assumed that the market would more or less spontaneously generate development; planning and intervention were seen as pointless as well as dangerous.

The impact of neoliberalism was so strong that even heterodox approaches had to adjust and adapt to it. One example was the proposal for Productive Transformation with Equity (PTE) put forward by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) at the start of the 1990s. PTE is part of the neostructuralism which, based on a review of Prebisch’s ideas, defends the role of the state and rejects hardline neoliberalism. It calls for flexibility in fiscal and monetary policies, sees competitiveness as a systemic process, reiterates the importance of industrialisation, and pursues involvement in export markets.

But a more careful examination of PTE reveals that it nevertheless still focuses on promoting growth. Although it resists neoliberal fundamentalism, it also supports



the expansion of the market into social and environmental spheres (defending Natural Capital and Social Capital). Furthermore, it is a position supportive of globalisation (under the proposal of “open regionalism”), as it ignores or minimises the importance of the social and political contexts of development (thus breaking with one of the key messages of dependency theory). It is above all a technocratic stance rather than a development alternative, and supports regulated and globalised growth.

In those same years, however, other positions managed to maintain alternative viewpoints. Three cases that differ from each other but all reflect that vitality should be mentioned. We will start with the critique of development from a feminist perspective.<sup>3</sup> In the Latin American setting, different contributions have focused on acknowledging the importance of the role played by women in national economies, but not all of them involved a critical review of development. The standpoints that questioned the male-centred bias, on the other hand, revealed the contributions made by women that had been left invisible, particularly the care economy and other aspects of the non-commercial economy (Carrasco, 2006). In the case of ecofeminism, these led to a radical questioning of development (see those inspired by Merchant, 1989).

The regulation school, promoted initially by French economists, achieved some influence in Latin America, with the academic works and activism of Alain Lipietz (1997), for example. This approach “seeks to integrate analysis of political economy with analysis of civil society and/or State to show how they interact to normalize the capital relation and govern the conflictual and crisis-mediated course of capital accumulation”, according to one of its proponents.<sup>4</sup>

Starting in the late 1990s, debates on the “dematerialisation” of development began to gain receptivity in Latin America. The term is used in the sense of substantially reducing the consumption of materials and energy, and redirecting economies to meet human needs. The best-known models, such as the so-called “Factor 10” or the “Sustainable Europe” proposals by the Wuppertal Climate Institute in Germany, encouraged the work of civil society organisations and some academics.<sup>5</sup> Several of these elements have been taken up again in the current debates about post-extractivism in the Andean countries.

## **Turn to the left and contradictions**

Since 1999, a political retreat from the neoliberal market reforms has taken place in Latin America. The political expression of this has been the coming to power

of governments that define themselves as left-wing or progressive.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, this shift resulted from various processes including harsh criticisms and reactions against neoliberal strategies, and, on the other, a broadening out of the debates on development.

Thus, the wave of neoliberal reforms was halted and various regulations and controls were introduced. Different processes to strengthen the state were initiated, including a return to state-owned enterprises, and more energetic, more extensive plans to combat poverty were implemented. The context of the debate on development changed substantially.

The group of progressive governments is very diverse, however, and different degrees of emphasis can therefore be found in the measures they have introduced, ranging from the tight control of currency exchange and commodity trading implemented in Venezuela, to the more economically orthodox policies taken forward in Brazil or Uruguay.

In Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, criticism of capitalism in the broad sense intensified, and proposals for building a “21<sup>st</sup> century socialism” emerged. The best-known theorists of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism may include A. Borón (2008), H. Dieterich (1996) and J.C. Monedero (2008). Each in their own way set out very detailed criticisms of capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular. All aim at regulating or limiting the role of capital, and assign substantial roles to the state. But beyond these criticisms, their approaches suffer from various limitations, as substantive discussions of issues such as the environment or interculturalism and the inclusion of indigenous peoples are absent.

In other countries, by contrast, the situation is different. In Argentina, for example, a type of “national-popular” development is gradually taking shape. This repeats the call for growth and exports, though with a major leading role for the state, which is understood to be at the service of the people. In the case of Brazil, “novo desenvolvimento” (new developmentalism) is more moderate still: it proposes a greater role for the state, but clarifies that this must not hamper the workings of the market; it rejects neoliberalism, but also sets itself apart from what it calls “the old populist left;” and finally, in all sincerity, it declares itself to be liberal (Bresser Pereira, 2007).

These theoretical approaches are very diverse in both countries, but in the context of our analysis here what should be underlined is that they do not question the rationality of development as growth, the role of exports or investment, or intervention to make use of Nature. Likewise, social questions - such as poverty -

are dealt with, but there is no intercultural approach. In general, what is earnestly discussed is the means to bring about the desired progress, the role of the state in this (whether by regulation or by direct involvement through state enterprises, for example), and how to distribute the surplus revenue. This descends into functional strategies and a certain type of populism, albeit re-conceptualised in a positive and mobilising sense, where relations with the business community vary (widespread support in Brazil, but conditional support in Argentina).

When it comes to the actual practices of the progressive governments, and their plans of action, the situation becomes still more complicated. Some have stuck to macroeconomic orthodoxy (the Lula da Silva and Tabaré Vázquez administrations, for example), and others are attempting larger-scale interventions, as in the case of Venezuela. But all of them defend economic growth as synonymous with development, and believe that it will be achieved by increasing exports and maximizing investment. These are precisely the key components of the “myth” of development highlighted in Celso Furtado’s warning. The same idea of development that was circulating in the 1960s and 1970s has reappeared in new guise.

This explains the progressive governments’ strong support for the extractive industries, including mining or oil and gas, as these are the means to achieve this export-led “growth.” This has given rise to a progressive neoextractivism (Gudynas, 2009b), which does differ significantly from the previous conservative government strategies - based on the primacy of transnational corporations and the subordination of the state -but nevertheless perpetuates the appropriation of Nature on a massive scale, the enclave economies and subordinated involvement in global markets. The progressive governments award the state a major role in these sectors, either through national enterprises or through higher taxes and royalties; and they present the collection of this revenue as an essential means to finance their social welfare and poverty reduction plans. Thus, progressive extractivism forges a new type of link, which promotes and legitimises mining or oil industry projects as necessary to sustain welfare benefits or cash payments to the poorest sectors of society.

The extractivist drive is so intense that the Correa administration, for example, is looking to launch opencast mega-mining in Ecuador, while in Uruguay, a country traditionally based on agriculture and livestock farming, President Mujica is arguing for the start of iron ore mega-mining as one of his main goals.

In particular, however, all these governments are in denial about the social and environmental impacts of extractivism. Since there are no effective responses,

the protests due to social and environmental impacts are intensifying. One recent example is the protest by indigenous people against the building of a road through the middle of the Isoboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) in Bolivia. This was brushed off by the Evo Morales government, which argued that mining and the oil industry need to be promoted so that social welfare benefits can be funded.<sup>7</sup>

Under neoextractivism, the debates about development have been significantly reconfigured. While in the past the enclave economies were associated with trade dependency and transnationalisation, they are now defended as export success-stories; while in previous years there were calls to abandon extractivism and promote national industrialisation, today the record highs in raw materials exports are celebrated. Subordination to transnational companies and globalisation in the area of trade and, with it, world governance as a whole, has ceased to be an object of criticism and is now accepted. Although extractivism veers away from social justice because of its high social and environmental impacts, the governments of the left are attempting to return to it through wealth distribution measures, especially benefit payments. But essentially this is an economic justice that is very manipulative, and looks a lot like charity and benevolence.

Environmental impacts are minimised or denied, and attempts are made to damp down citizen protests. Again and again, we hear the myth of the region replete with immense wealth – without environmental limits – that must not be wasted, but rather taken advantage of intensively and efficiently.<sup>8</sup>

This leads to a curious situation, where the progressive development “alternative” is undoubtedly a shift away from free-market reductionism, but is also conventional with regard to many of the classical development ideas. To some extent, with its appeal to national development, it is similar to the traditional plans of the 1960s, though without the emphasis on national industries and import substitution. The measures to combat poverty are more energetic, but the system is open to imports of consumer goods, and the conventional procedures for the exploitation and commercialisation of natural resources are maintained. These and other factors mean that it is no longer possible to question either the investment goals or the export targets, and the only thing that can be discussed is how the state’s surplus revenue is to be spent. The Uruguayan president, José Mujica, expresses this clearly: “We need investment from abroad;” there should be no controversy about this because foreign capital is indispensable, and “later, when we have the benefits of that investment, the taxes it pays and the profits, we can discuss whether we are spending them well or badly – yes, of course we can discuss that.”<sup>9</sup>

This is a style of development that accepts the conditions of today's capitalism, whereby the state has to reduce or compensate for some of its negative facets. This is a "benevolent capitalism" that aims above all to tackle poverty and inequality through corrections and compensation (Gudynas, 2010a).

This situation is starting to show cracks, as the social and environmental impacts of these strategies pile up and the effectiveness of the economic compensation is wearing thin. This is redoubling the importance of debates about the essence of development, and explains the recent attention to more independent and critical views of the progressive governments' performance.

### **A persistent debate, intermittent dialogue and co-option**

The examples offered here show that development debates, criticisms and alternatives have a long history, and Latin Americans have often been closely involved in them. The debates can be roughly divided into two groups: on one side, the discussions internal to the disciplines that focus on development, and on the other, the criticisms from the outside. The former include, for example, the debates between neoclassicists and Marxists, or between those who defended the market and those who called for state involvement to channel development. Many of the harshest criticisms, though, have come from outside – from disciplines or actors who are not development economists, as in the case of the warnings on the social and environmental "limits" of development.

In any case, these debates tended to take place in stagnant compartments; the development economists were not much inclined to listen to other disciplines. In contrast, the sociologists, anthropologists, environmentalists, etc., redoubled their interest in development matters, and were joined by different civil society organisations. The debates proliferated for a time, reaching a high level of intensity, but then declined again, only to reappear in other terms years later.

At the same time, the promises of development have generally not been fulfilled. Government projects seldom bore fruit, and the plans of institutions such as the World Bank or the IDB were not successful either; it was common for all of them to experience setbacks and produce social and environmental impacts. Hundreds of cases, studies and denunciations of this problem have accumulated, making it clear that what has prevailed in these decades is "maldevelopment" (in the sense described by Tortosa, 2011).

Thus, development is still a dream that is longed for but also resisted: an idea that

gets deployed, is then criticised and questioned, adapts itself, reconfigures in a new version that is presented as better than before, and once again gets mired in crisis shortly afterwards.

The death of development has been announced repeatedly since the 1980s. In the influential *Development Dictionary*, Wolfgang Sachs (1992) declared that the age of development was coming to an end and it was time to issue its death certificate; Gustavo Esteva (1992) went further, calling for the whole idea to be abandoned. Throughout the 1990s, it seemed that this was on the point of happening, not just because of the criticisms coming from the left, but also because the strong anti-neoliberal stance was making the whole issue of development seem almost irrelevant.

But the idea of development is very resistant. Just as broad sectors of civil society were criticizing it, there were others demanding access to development, or calling for more development. Each new developmentalist vision – with neoextractivism being the most recent – serves to keep that dream alive.

## **The ideology of progress**

This remarkable endurance of the idea of development has been interpreted in various ways, with some likening it to a myth or a religion (Rist, 2006). In this essay, in contrast, I argue that, at least on the basis of the evidence in Latin America, it is more appropriate to refer to the idea of ideology. In fact, current development ideas may even be seen as the contemporary expression of the ideology of progress.

The concept of ideology is understood here in a relational sense as providing a basis for organising the beliefs, subjectivities and values of individuals, and thus producing and reproducing a certain social order in its multiple dimensions, from the individual to the institutional (Eagleton, 1991). This ideological basis explains the irrational and emotional attachment to the idea of development, with warnings or contradictions constantly ignored or brushed off.

The idea of progress has been present for centuries, and can be found behind almost all the examples presented above (Nisbet, 1981; Burns, 1990). In Latin America this is particularly evident in the environmental sphere. Diverse schools of thought, from the dependency theorists and the Marxists of the 1960s and the neoliberals of the 1980s, to the recent progressives, have rejected the existence of ecological limits to perpetual growth, minimized environmental impacts or

believed that they can be compensated for economically, and see their mandate as to foster progress.

When it is recognised that development has an ideological basis, it becomes clear that the formulation of alternatives must put this up for discussion. Conventional tools such as economic analysis can only operate on the surface, and find it enormously difficult to drill down into the ideological substrata. It is therefore necessary to deploy another type of critique.

## **The post-development critique**

Thinking about the essence of development - including its ideological basis - crystallised at the end of the 1980s, in the approach known as “post-development.” Several Latin American scholars played an important role in shaping this approach, but among the most important were Gustavo Esteva from Mexico (1992) and Arturo Escobar from Colombia (1992, 2005).

This school of thought understood that development had spread until it became a way of thinking and feeling. Its approach is post-structuralist in a Foucauldian sense; in other words, it questions a discourse, including the organised ideas and concepts, but also the institutional structures and practices. Therefore, post-development does not offer ideas for the next version of development; instead, the prefix “post” is used in a way that follows the French post-structuralists (especially Foucault).<sup>10</sup> Neither does it bear any relation to the economic structuralism of Raúl Prebisch, nor to Latin American neostructuralism.

This radical critique serves to examine the ideological foundations of development, but it is not obliged to propose “another development.” Instead, it enables questions to be posed where other schools of thought are not able to, and thus opens the door to new types of alternatives. This approach enabled a wide range of questions to be discussed, such as development goals, aid programmes, development planning, the institutional structures that underpin it (from university departments to the World Bank’s development assistance programmes), the role of experts and specialists, the production of arguments and forms of knowledge labelled as valid and objective, and the mechanisms used to exclude other knowledge systems and sensibilities (Rahnema, 1997).

This means that it is necessary to distinguish between “development alternatives” and “alternatives to development.” The former refers to the different options for rectifying, repairing or modifying contemporary development, whereby its

conceptual foundations – such as perpetual growth or the appropriation of Nature – are accepted, and the discussion focuses on the best means to take the process forward. With “alternatives to development,” in contrast, the aim is to produce conceptual frameworks that are not based on those ideological foundations. This implies exploring social, economic and political orders different to what we have been calling development.

When post-development’s deconstruction is applied, very strong tensions arise with ideas that are usually taken for granted as valid or part of the “common sense” of development. This means that there will be resistance to accepting post-development’s questioning in all its depth, and therefore in some cases it will be used in its “light” variety (such as making use of the prefix “post” to refer to a future version of development).

Neither is it a minor matter that post-development makes it possible to take forward a critique of fundamental principles found not only in liberal and conservative traditions but also in socialist (especially Marxist) ones. This is an important aspect in today’s Latin American context, especially because we currently have several progressive governments, supported by broad sectors of society, that are continuing to reproduce the ideology of progress. Classical socialist tradition agrees with some of post-development’s criticisms of capitalism, but diverges from it in other areas, since it continues to believe in things such as the linearity of history or the manipulation of Nature. It is true that certain revisions have been made in this field, but some of them introduce such substantial changes (as in the case of some ecosocialisms) that it is necessary to ask whether the end result can continue to be called socialism.

There are similarities between post-development and the school of thought known as “degrowth”, in those cases where the latter is presented as a political slogan to denounce development (Latouche, 2009). But the impact of degrowth in Latin America is debatable.

Post-development does, however, turn out to have strong similarities with the critiques put forward by some indigenous peoples, since their rationalities are not embedded in the ideology of progress. These forms of knowledge in turn emerge as ideal sources for building alternatives to development.

Thanks to this type of debate, it has been made clear that the development alternatives being tried out are insufficient to solve today’s social and environmental problems on either a local or a global scale. Attempts to find instrumentalist solutions and make adjustments within the ideology of progress



are considered insufficient, because they do not solve the underlying problems and are merely partial, short-term corrective measures of doubtful effectiveness. Therefore, in the Latin American context, the alternatives must necessarily be “alternatives to development.”

## **The questioning of development as a critique of Modernity**

Having marked out the field of post-development, it is possible to take an additional step. In fact, criticisms of development imply delving into the ideology of development, and this in turn makes it obligatory to address the project of Modernity. It is from there that the idea of progress emerged, and this in turn has taken shape in development. Therefore, a pre-requisite for the exploration of any alternative is to address the project of Modernity.

Here, we adopt a broad definition of the “modern” condition, which starts from the understanding that there is a model that needs to be universalised (thus dividing cultures into modern and non-modern), and that this is represented by European culture. It is a school of thought that adheres to a Cartesian knowledge system (whereby what is true/false can be determined and other forms of knowledge are excluded); its ethical stance restricts value to the human sphere, emphasises different forms of utilitarianism, sees history as a temporally linear process – of progress from past conditions of backwardness to a better future – and stresses the duality that separates society from Nature.<sup>11</sup>

The elements that form the backbone of Modernity are present in all ideas of development, including the Iberian strands that were also expounded and built up in Latin America. The thinking that characterised positivism and the philosophy of Herbert Spencer or Auguste Comte, among others, was grafted onto the top-down and authoritarian Iberian branch (Burns, 1990). These amalgams had very dramatic effects in Latin America, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the idea of progress and Eurocentric culture reinforced the inherited colonial drive to appropriate vast areas of land to extract their resources, together with the domination of indigenous peoples. At that time, the task of progress was to “civilise” both the “savages” and the wilderness. These ideas are repeated even today, when heads of government as different as Rafael Correa and Alan García describe indigenous people in a similar way, as “backward” and “a hindrance to development.”

This Modernity was conceived both in continental Europe and in the Americas, and was introduced in our continent under the conditions of colonialism. This

problem has been examined by the theories of coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge, which describe how certain ideas are imposed about what constitutes society, history, knowledge and, concomitantly, development. This is a process anchored in power relations, through which ways of understanding the world are disseminated and structured. These are defended not just as superior, but as the only ones that are valid, while others are excluded.<sup>12</sup> In this process, the ideas of progress merged completely naturally with conventional economic thinking, which then determined all Latin American perspectives.

Thus, to question development or the ideology of progress implies a critique of Modernity itself (Escobar, 2005). Alternatives to development in their turn must also be alternatives to western Modernity. One way forward along this path is to take up marginal or subordinate schools of thought within the western tradition itself. In the Latin American context, it is necessary to mention two of these: radical biocentric environmentalism and critical feminism. The first one recognises particular values in Nature itself, thus breaking with the modern stance that considers Nature as merely a set of objects at the service of human beings. Among its main proponents are the work of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (1985). The second one refers to feminist postures that defends an ethical alternative, as in the case of the care economy. Lastly, but not least, the contribution of indigenous peoples is critical.

The examples presented above correspond to cosmovisions that are different to Eurocentric worldviews, and where concepts such as progress or development do not exist. The diversity of these other forms of knowledge is huge, and it is not possible to review them all here, but it is necessary to bear them in mind.

## **A provisional classification**

Having completed a journey that started from current debates about development, then moved on to the ideology of progress and from there to Modernity, it is now possible to arrive at a proposed classification of the Latin American debates. The criterion for dividing them up is heterodox, and is based on applying a critical perspective of post-development (and superimposing others, such as degrowth and decolonisation, for the purposes of this review).

In accordance with this criterion, on one side we find the alternatives that accept the basic premises of development as the manifestation of progress, although these include very different ideas about how that progress should be achieved. These would be the “development alternatives.” On the other side are the proposals

that try to break with the commonly accepted ideas of development as growth or progress, and thus argue for “alternatives to development.” Table 1 summarises this classification.

Table 1: Provisional classification of development alternatives and alternatives to development

Reference is made to the main schools of thought as outstanding examples

A) Alternatives within the ideology of progress and modernity	
Classical instrumentalist alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repairing negative effects (e.g. social-democratic reformism, the “third way”), national-popular development, new developmentalism, progressive neoextractivism</li> </ul>
Alternatives that focus on economic structures and processes and the role of capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socialist alternatives, early structuralism, Marxist and neomarxist approaches, dependency theory, neostructuralism, various exponents of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism</li> </ul>
Alternatives that focus on the social dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social limits to growth, decoupling development from economics, emphasis on employment and poverty</li> <li>• Endogenous development, human development, human scale development</li> <li>• Other economies (domestic, informal, smallholder, indigenous), liberal multiculturalism</li> </ul>
Alternatives that react to environmental impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecodevelopment, weak sustainability and some of strong sustainability</li> </ul>

B) Alternatives that get beyond progress and modernity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conviviality</li> <li>• Super-strong sustainability, biocentric approaches, deep ecology</li> <li>• Feminist critique, the care economy</li> <li>• Dematerialisation of the economy, degrowth (partly)</li> <li>• Interculturalism, pluralism, relational ontologies, expanded forms of citizenship</li> <li>• “Buen Vivir” (some proposals)</li> </ul>

Prepared by the author.

The first large set of “development alternatives” reflect the debates taking place between the main schools of contemporary thought, especially liberalism,

conservatism and socialism. The alternatives, in this case, focus on questions such as the role of the state in development, ways to intervene (or not) in the market, ideas on justice, ways to tackle poverty, etc. These are not minor debates, but the point we wish to underline here is that all of them in one way or another take for granted that development is an essentially linear process, a form of progress achieved by means of material accumulation. In other words, all of them remain within the project of Modernity.

The second set corresponds to the “alternatives to development.” Included here are some of the first attempts along these lines, one of the most important of which was Ivan Illich’s thinking from Mexico in the 1970s, exemplified in the proposal for “conviviality”.<sup>13</sup> Then there are the radical environmentalist stances that do not accept the permanent growth aspired to by neoclassical economics and defend the values intrinsic to Nature. These include the so-called super-strong sustainability,<sup>14</sup> biocentrism<sup>15</sup> and deep ecology, in the meaning outlined by Næss (1989).<sup>16</sup> These components are argued for by some social movements, and were included in Ecuador’s new constitution, for example, under the heading of the rights of Nature.

Other important contributions came from feminism which, among other things, questioned the patriarchal order in society and warned that development strategies were reproducing and consolidating its asymmetries and hierarchies (Saunders, 2002). Some of the proposals for dematerialising the economy (reducing its levels of consumption of materials and energy) also fall into this category when they are accompanied by changes in consumption patterns and lifestyles. This is a more diverse set of proposals and includes some of the contributions made by the degrowth movement, the environmental justice movement, etc. (Sachs and Santarius, 2007).

Note that these positions distance themselves from the project of Modernity to differing degrees (moderately in the case of degrowth and dematerialisation; more clearly in the case of biocentrism). In any case they still have aspects in common, such as arguing for another type of ethics that is neither instrumentalist nor utilitarian, for example.

Finally, other proposals start by adopting some of the positions and cosmovisions of indigenous peoples. This is not possible from a classical multiculturalist standpoint, since the decolonial warnings mentioned above must be addressed, and therefore an intercultural stance is called for.

These different approaches have led to the recognition that Modernity expresses

a particular type of ontology – a way of being in and understanding the world – that clearly separates society from Nature and subordinates the latter in a hierarchy that allows it to be manipulated and destroyed. Therefore, the most recent schools of thought maintain that it is necessary to move away from Eurocentric ontology to be able to build other alternatives. At the moment, the interest here is in taking up what have come to be known as “relational ontologies,” where the duality that characterises Modernity does not exist, and elements of what is conventionally called Nature – such as agency, moral status and political expression – are explored. Social elements in turn come to be located within the field of what the western knowledge system terms the environment (Blaser and de la Cadena, 2009). Relational ontologies of this sort are found among several indigenous peoples in Latin America, and explain the reasons why it is not possible to follow ideas analogous to progress based on usurping Nature.

These and other contributions have recently been organised and coordinated under the name of “Buen Vivir” (a Spanish word that refers to a good life based on a social and ecological expanded vision), as an alternative to the idea of development. This is a very vital school of thought, which has the advantage of abandoning the use of the word development, and offers enormous potential for the future (Acosta, 2008; Gudynas, 2011b). It moves away from the classical views of development as perpetual economic growth, linear progress, and anthropocentric, to focus on people’s well-being in a broad sense that also includes their emotions and beliefs. The break with anthropocentrism makes it possible to recognise values intrinsic to the environment, do away with the society/Nature duality and reconfigure communities of political and moral agents.

“Buen Vivir” is an expression that owes a great deal to traditional forms of knowledge, especially Andean ones. Its best-known points of reference are the *sumak kawsay* of the Ecuadorian Kichwa and the *suma qamaña* of the Bolivian Aymara. But it is not limited to these, and similar worldviews are found among other indigenous peoples, while some were configured only recently. It also draws on the contributions made by the critical and non-conformist traditions on the margins of Modernity, such as biocentric environmentalism and feminism.

The thing is that *Buen Vivir* can be reinterpreted as a political “platform” which is arrived at from different traditions and a diversity of specific positions; where the substantive critique of development as ideology is shared and alternatives to it are explored. Thus, *Buen Vivir* is a set of attempts to build other social and economic orders that break free of the bounds imposed by Modernity.

## **A provisional assessment**

A provisional assessment of the debates about development is highly positive. The question of development is once again at the centre of many discussions; it is reappearing in academia and in social movements, especially those in countries with progressive governments which have recovered their critical independence. Links are being made between academics and activists to address these questions, and the contribution made by indigenous knowledge is nourishing an intense process of renewal.<sup>17</sup>

The discussion about alternatives is not something that is taking place on the sidelines – instead it is moving centre stage; an example is the exploration of post-extractivism, particularly in Ecuador and Peru. It is true that conventional development continues to be present, moribund in some cases, being revitalised in others, but many debates are no longer focusing on whether or not an alternative horizon is valid. Instead, that need is accepted, and the question is to determine whether the changes will take the form of development alternatives, or alternatives to development.

The issues being discussed here include age-old problems such as the role of the state or the market, together with other, newer questions such as relational ontologies or expanded forms of citizenship. Even traditional questions such as the roles of the state or the market are now being addressed from new viewpoints. This is leading, for example, to an acknowledgement of the diversity of markets present in the region which are based on other rationales such as reciprocity or barter.

A clear trend is emerging whereby any alternative has to understand that development cannot be limited to economic growth, and that goals focusing on the quality of life and the protection of Nature are becoming key. Well-being is not tied to a material or individual plane; instead it includes the collective and spiritual dimension as well as the ecological dimension.

The alternatives require profound changes in our relationship with Nature. The near future will be one of scarcity and austerity, and quality of life must therefore be ensured within much narrower options for making use of Nature's resources. The protection of biodiversity is now justified from another ethical perspective, as it is recognised to have rights of its own. The alternatives in this direction are biocentric and based upon doing away with the society/Nature duality characteristic of European Modernity.

Intense debates are going on in the field of ethics, as several alternatives challenge

conventional forms of valuation that assign value to something based on how it can be used or traded (i.e., its price). This implies, firstly, a necessary renovation of the economy and, secondly, accepting that there are other ways of assigning value that go beyond such utilitarianism, including recognising the values (and, therefore, the rights) intrinsic to Nature.

At the same time, and in different ways, the alternatives renounce the pretension of western science and technology to solve all problems and explain all situations. Manipulative and utilitarian rationalities are being abandoned, and uncertainty and risk are being acknowledged.

The debate about alternatives has always paid much attention to political actors, their dynamics and institutional structures. Today's transformed debates are generating new ways of addressing these questions, ranging from the leading role assigned to previously subordinate actors (smallholder farmers, indigenous people, the urban poor, women, etc.), to the necessary redefinition of concepts such as citizenship and justice.

These and other factors are placing the restoration of other knowledge systems, particularly those of Latin America's indigenous peoples, at the centre of attention. The alternatives, whatever they may be, cannot emerge from a cultural monologue; instead, an intercultural exchange must necessarily take place. Likewise, a gender perspective must be included, and this cannot be thought of as merely a pragmatic concession.

These attributes are what makes the idea of conventional development based on utilitarianism – the manipulation, usurping and separation of Nature – meaningless. One way or another, all of the alternatives break with the ideology of progress, and thus take us to terrains beyond Modernity. This transition is undoubtedly not simple, and neither does it mean breaking with elements from the past that are valuable, but it shows what direction the changes need to take. The case of *Buen Vivir* exemplifies the vitality and potential of these initiatives.

From this perspective, the traditional political categories such as liberalism, conservatism and socialism are insufficient to bring about alternatives to development. In other words, the new changes must be both post-capitalist and post-socialist, as they make a clean break with the ideology of progress.

## Notes

1. Researcher at the Centro Latino Americano de Ecología Social (CLAES), Montevideo, Uruguay ([www.ambiental.net](http://www.ambiental.net)); MSc in social ecology.
2. It is worth pointing out here that the ideas of Celso Furtado, mentioned in the introduction, were also a critique of the environmental limits to growth.
3. The feminist argument is analysed in more detail in the chapter “Development Critiques and Alternatives: A Feminist Perspective;” in this book.
4. Bob Jessop (1994), in Hollingsworth, Schmitte, Streeck, *Governing Capitalist Economies*, (Oxford, OUP)
5. Examples of this were the Sustainable Southern Cone programme, which brought together several NGOs from the Southern Cone, and the Sustainability 2025 programme promoted by CLAES, which laid out strategies based on the strong and super-strong sustainability options, to be implemented by 2025.
6. This group includes the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Tabaré Vázquez and José Mujica in Uruguay, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Some would include the past administrations of Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet in Chile in this group and, with greater reservations, the Fernando Lugo government in Paraguay. Finally, the new Ollanta Humala administration in Peru will surely be included in this group.
7. Vice-President Álvaro García Linera rejected the indigenous peoples’ demands because they would lead to the hydrocarbons industry grinding to a halt. He accused them of “seeking to prevent the payment of the Dignity Pension to 600,000 older people who receive 200 bolivianos every month, as well as the Juancito Pinto benefit that goes to 1.8 million schoolchildren, since both programmes are funded from our exports of natural gas.” This is tantamount to blackmail, implying that all extractivism must be accepted as justified since it serves to tackle poverty. Statements in *Página Siete*, 20 September 2011, La Paz.
8. An example of this is President Rafael Correa’s call for Ecuadorians not to be “beggars sitting on top of a sack of gold,” alluding to the argument that it would be foolish or irresponsible not to take advantage of that wealth. This is the discourse he uses to promote opencast mining. Statements in *El Universo*, 16 January 2009, Quito.
9. *El Observador*, 12 February 2010, Montevideo.
10. From the Foucauldian point of view, the category of ideology merges with that of discourse, in the broad sense that is allocated to it, and operates within a power complex.



11. This conceptualisation is a working definition for the purposes of this essay. It is acknowledged that many different meanings have been assigned to the term “modernity” (del Río, 1997), and that it may take different specific forms in different countries.
12. The main theorists in this school of thought include Anibal Quijano from Peru (2000) and Walter Mignolo from Argentina (2007); see also the excellent review by Restrepo and Rojas (2010).
13. Conviviality is understood to be the opposite of industrial productivity. Industrial relations are a conditioned reflex, the individual’s stereotyped response to the messages broadcast by another user who he/she will never meet except through an artificial medium he/she will never understand. Convivial relations, in contrast, are those engaged in by people who participate in creating social life. Shifting from productivity to conviviality means replacing technical values with ethical values, material values with non-material values (Illich, 2006).
14. The strand of sustainable development characterised by rejecting the reductionism of the concept of natural capital, and using the category of patrimony in its place. It maintains that there are multiple ways of valuing the environment, it accepts the values intrinsic to nature, and its approach is participatory, among other aspects.
15. A stance defended by deep ecology based on Nature’s own values and life as a value in itself.
16. A school of thought and environmental activism put forward by A. Næss (1989).
17. One example is the setting up of the Latin American Critical Development Studies Alliance. See <<http://www.otrodesarrollo.com>>.

pp 15-39, In:  
Beyond Development. Alternative visions from Latin America.  
M.Lang & D. Mokrani, eds.  
Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, august 2013.