

AFRICA AND DEVELOPMENT: MAJOR THEORETICAL APPROACHES

One of the untraditional academic fields that has gained a foothold in many western universities is called “international development” or “development studies”. It takes an interdisciplinary approach to major global problems of poverty and inequality and addresses subjects such as: human rights, participation in governance (democracy), access to basic human needs, gender issues, security, health, education, environment, economic development, and globalization. Throughout the birth and growth of this discipline in the post-World War II period there have been several major theoretical perspectives that have provided different frameworks for analyzing, explaining and creating solutions for the polarity of our world in terms of wealth distribution. The net of socio-economic problems (and even crises) consistently present in sub-Saharan African societies has been the primary subject of theoretical approaches within development studies, and it is important to review the past, present, and expected directions of academic thought given that it guides practical actions in this field.

Once popular, basic racist theories of development that described a direct relationship between race and development, lost academic credibility by the second half of the 20th century, although aspects of racism continued to appear in major theoretical works. The modernization approach guided decades of development schemes and international aid in the post-World War II period. It grew out of evolutionism and its fundamental premise held that all human societies develop in a linear progression through a series of stages, from simple to complex. According to this formulation, Europe and North America were at the advanced stages of development and therefore offered a formula for imitation by so

called “under-developed” societies, which included countries of Africa. The practical implication was that African societies would need an infusion of monetary and technological capital that would industrialize their economies and initiate economic growth. After years of expansive, lengthy and costly projects, it became evident to Africans in particular and the international community in general that the desired results had not been achieved and in many cases the situation deteriorated instead of improving. Consequently, workers in the field began searching for ways to adjust or replace the main theoretical framework favoured by development scholars. As a result, another stream in development studies gained foothold.

Couched in Marxism, the dependency school contained a strong political dimension and looked to the history of political economic relations in order to explain the current global disparity in wealth. Many contemporary Africanists and development scholars continue to apply the dependency approach and argue that the problems of modern-day African societies stem from the long history of exploitation that was instigated by the slave trade and entrenched during the colonial occupation. The central notion is that Europe underdeveloped Africa. Furthermore, dependency theorists (“the Dependistas”) conceptualize underdevelopment as an ongoing process, rather than a fixed developmental stage, whereby countries in the global North accumulate their wealth at the expense of countries in the global South. Consequently, some prefer to speak about how Europe underdevelops instead of how it underdeveloped Africa, to highlight the legacy but also to emphasize the continuation of those historical processes in shaping current world affairs.

European exploitation of Africa began prior to direct colonization, through incorporation of Africa into the Triangular Slave Trade. According to dependency theorists, this process of natural and human resource depletion depressed African economies and enriched European economies by fuelling the industrialization of the latter in two ways. Africa supplied the labour power necessary for extraction of raw materials used in European industries, and also

provided a market for European goods. Thus industrial European countries economically developed and prospered at the expense of Africa. The slave trade lay the foundation for the exploitative economic relationship between Europe and Africa that continued throughout the colonial period. Enterprises established by European entrepreneurs and protected by colonial governments were set up to benefit solely the Europeans. Africans were systematically barred from entering into the capitalist race on equal terms with the Europeans by openly discriminatory lending laws as well as education policies that automatically relegated them to the unskilled labour sector. To put it in the Dependistas' Marxist terminology, unskilled and therefore undervalued work confined Africans to the proletariat class and prevented their penetration into ranks of the bourgeoisie. Although enterprises thrived due to cheap and numerous human and natural resources, the accumulated capital did not benefit Africans because it was normally exported and either stored in European banks or invested in European industries. Because the production inputs extracted in Africa were used to produce manufactured goods in Europe and skilled jobs were reserved for Europeans, the industrial sector on the continent was prevented from developing.

Some critics of the dependency school, including proponents of the modernization theory, have argued that a history of economic exploitation cannot adequately explain why poverty on the continent persists today. After all, European newcomers brought with them literacy, medicine, technology, and capitalism — all elements that had led their home countries to relative prosperity. So why has there not been similar growth achieved in Africa since de-colonization? A response to this valid question has been formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein and developed into the World Systems Theory, which is an offshoot of the dependency school. According to the theory, as the foundations of the current global economy were being laid in the 17th century, all world regions took on particular roles that corresponded with each other to form a functional global economic system. In the

process, colonized regions were forced into the international capitalist structure at unfavourable terms, being assigned unprofitable roles. Thus Africa became an exporter and Europe the manufacturer, guaranteeing that Europe's industrial producers would make the profits and accumulate the capital that fed European capitalist enterprises and consolidated their dominance of world markets. Initiated by the slave trade and reinforced by colonialism, the process of forced integration into the present global capitalist system has established a pattern where European and North American trans-national and multinational corporations are the owners of production and Africans are the labourers. Thus African countries are trapped in this position and cannot move forwards unless drastic re-structuring of the entire world economic system occurs. This theory clearly has practical implications that are uncomfortable, or even threatening, but it has enjoyed support as a useful way to look at the world and Africa's place in it.

Critics of the theoretical approaches discussed above have pointed out common faults with all three, suggesting that they are too simplistic, deterministic and still bogged down in evolutionist thought. A Marxist macro-scale analysis does not fully describe the ongoing effects of the history of Euro-African relations. Many have argued that the limits on economic development that are placed indirectly through the structure of the world system, are exacerbated by very modern problems such as internal warfare, ineffective governance and micro-scale social problems. In this line of argument, inter-state aggression, civil unrests, violent interethnic clashes, and full-blown wars that pervade many parts of Africa have been portrayed as "tribal" or inherent to the nature of African people. Responses from the dependency-marxist camps point out that there is often little evidence to suggest that these modern conflicts can be traced to pre-colonial situations. On the contrary, most of them originated during the colonial era and as a result of colonial policies. As part of the campaign to "divide and rule", European administrators erected completely arbitrary national boundaries when

they carved up the African continent. In the process, united groups were partitioned and unfamiliar groups were merged. This chaotic restructuring of African societies into extremely diverse entities enforced by state boundaries and legislature gave rise to internal conflicts. The higher status given by Europeans to certain African groups reinforced ethnic divides and sometimes bred hostile competitiveness between them.

Although economics are often the focus of development discourse on Africa, other spheres of life, such as inter-personal dynamics, have also been affected. Transformations within the family occurred when males were expected to enter the cash-economy according to the European model of gendered labour division. Men earned money and gained the power associated with it. Their work was seen as modern and valuable because it enabled participation in material consumerism, while women's was seen as traditional and of secondary importance. Colonial administrators ignored women's traditionally active participation and treated agriculture as the monopoly of men, which was enforced through allocation procedures and ownership laws. Political power of women was also undermined and their important roles within the traditional governing systems and even explicit offices such as the Queen-mother were not recognized by the colonial officials. Europeans projected their subjective understandings of family, gender and social organization onto African societies and enforced them through government policies. This propagated the erosion of established methods of balancing power and ensuring equitability, which in consequence often lowered the status of women.

A dependency-marxist analysis effectively demonstrates how the modern socio-economic condition of Africa is rooted in the legacy of slave trade and colonialism. Although this approach continues to be popular among contemporary Africanists, it has been criticized for its narrow scope and also for its patronizing connotations. Economic determinism and a focus on exploitative power relations can render the African people as helpless, passive

and altogether invisible in the transformation process of their societies. This last critique has arisen out of the postmodernist school of thought, which emphasizes the two-way interaction between the colonized and the colonizer and the complex dynamic nature of historical processes. Postmodernist analysis has added the dimension of agency and has highlighted the importance of considering local situations instead of building mega-theories that attempt to capture all problems within a single framework and are made ineffective and inapplicable in these over-generalizations. In the west, contemporary mainstream scholarship on Africa and development favours a fusion of dependency and postmodernist perspectives, combining the understanding of structural constraints with the insight of social agency. The focus has shifted from trying to find an optimal one-size-fits-all solution to trying to enact concrete, effective and long-term improvements on the local level. Development studies are becoming a field where elements of different perspectives are integrated according to the specifics of a particular issue, region, or case. There are of course theoretical problems left unresolved, for example, the dilemma of whether developing countries are better off liberalizing or protecting their domestic economies, and the tension between individual human rights and collective rights (right to continuation of a group's traditional way of living). While these and other issues are continuing to be addressed and debated, there is somewhat of a consensus in the rejection of single exclusive theories and a preference for combinations of perspectives that reflect particular realities. Perhaps the new theoretical orientation will provide fertile ground for the long-awaited changes and the transformation of our world into a more equitable and livable one.