

# What's Critical about Critical Development Studies?

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## I. Introduction

What is *critical* about critical development studies? How does critical thinking relate to knowledge about development? The available answers to these questions are as follows: the critical tradition is an alternative school of dissident scholarship on development that stretches from dependency theory of the 1960s and post-development of the 1990s, to decoloniality in the 2010s. As Horkheimer (1937) describes, critical theory is reflexive, emancipatory, and transformative. It departs from the mechanistic positivism of traditional theory that mimics the natural sciences and that claims to be a universally applicable, timeless, and value-free social science. The critical tradition instead brings back the particularities of history, politics, and values. In development studies, it amplifies the voices and interests of the marginalised countries and peoples of the global South; it challenges the positivist, depoliticised, hierarchical, paternalistic, Northern-led expert knowledge; it exposes development as a malign agenda of domination and exploitation that hides behind the benign façade of technocratic altruism.

That largely familiar set of answers is, however, incomplete, if not inadequate. The problems are two-fold. Firstly, the dichotomy between critical and traditional theory is unstable. Many critical ideas are fundamentally incompatible and even antagonistic to one another, and do not cohere into a shared identity. Many development ideas and thinkers have an ambiguous position in this dichotomy, and cannot be comfortably categorised within either one. For example, is Amartya Sen a critical thinker because of his critique of economic growth, his explicitly emancipatory redefinition of development as freedom, and his incorporation of justice and equity in economic thinking (Deneulin and Stewart 2002)? Or is he orthodox because he does not address power, capitalism, or exploitation (Selwyn 2011)? Is the idea of the developmental state an authentically critical idea because it defies the Washington consensus on industrial policy, and the role of state intervention (Fishwick 2018: 658)? Or is it orthodox because it is based on authoritarian top-down development, the collusion between the state and large corporate groups, the absence of democracy, the suppression of workers claims, and the blindness to ecological destruction, so that as Bowles (2020) argues, it is a 'roadblock to genuinely emancipatory development'?

Secondly, this description of critical development studies is effectively a self-portrait, a manifesto, or a declaration of intent. It uncritically restates how critical thinkers like Horkheimer have defined and envisaged their own intellectual-political project, and how they wish it to be seen. The critical

scholar's account of critical scholarship may be valuable as a glimpse into the inner cosmology of that realm, its origin myths, heroic legends, ethical parameters, demonology, and performative modes. All of this is necessary in order to understand it with *verstehen*. But how far can one really understand critique through these narratives of its interiority? This is not to say that Horkheimer is necessarily wrong, or that critical thinking is a hall of mirrors. But as James Scott (1998) and James Ferguson (1990) have demonstrated, even well designed projects have perverse and unintended effects that their framers cannot predict, control, or even comprehend. In order to go beyond that, it is necessary to step outside Plato's metaphorical cave of critical development studies, to seek out a different positional vantage point that provides distance and perspective.

In this chapter, I offer and elaborate on a series of connected propositions drawn from such an alternative optic that necessarily involves subjecting critique to some of its own repertoires of analytical scrutiny. The first such proposition is that critique is pervasive and is the basis on which social science knowledge in development is assembled. That is, critique is not a subversive body of alternative ideas that stands outside to confront and undermine the mainstream of development knowledge. Rather, it is immanent, ubiquitous, productive, and constitutive of that mainstream. This implies not just that critique is discursively incorporated into ideas, but that it affects real world changes in measurement regimes, institutional rules, and even resource allocation. Knowledge and action are, in that sense, a response to critique, and are produced as Adams (2009 :2) describes of the framing of crisis in development texts:

*Development action is driven forwards by texts ranging from humanitarian tracts to national development plans. The way these texts portray the world, often in a crisis of some kind, determines what knowledge (and whose knowledge) provides a frame for problems and solutions, constitutes the basis for action and determines who has the authority to act.*

Critical ideas in development are judgments assembled on the basis of a right/wrong framework of evaluation, with reference to an underlying body of revered ethical beliefs that are in themselves beyond question, and that their framers consider to be emancipatory in some respect. Ethics are thus on the one hand, the irreducible and essential sovereign core: they are the axioms that underlie development discourse. As Des Gasper (2004:19) explains, they are 'substantive beliefs about what is good or bad and right or wrong in relations between people and between societies, and humans and other life'. But on the other hand, ethics are also not natural or timeless, but are historically and socially specific formulations, of which there are many versions possible. Indeed, in development studies there are several such competing ethical frameworks that offer a range of different criteria to decide on good from bad, and which guide knowledge formulation.

The dichotomy between critical and uncritical ideas does not hold in this space, because even ideas that lie outside of the traditional critical canon, such as modernisation theory, are still based on an implicit, if not explicit, ethical critique. This is not a particularly radical claim, because all knowledge

in development studies is formulated from an ethically informed critique based on one of many possible socially constructed problematisations of the status quo. As De Vries (xxxx:150) describes, 'at the core of the modernist project the idea and practice of critique has always been central. Modernization theory always relied on a critique of the present as a way of constructing a different – if pre-defined – future'. The ubiquity of critique thus derives from the inescapable presence of these ethical values across the landscape of development knowledge. While there are different ethical systems that produce different critiques, there are, echoing Weber's (1949a) idea of value-relation, no value-free or value-neutral ways of naming, defining, or theorising the problematic of development.

The second, and main, proposition is that there are three types of critique in development, or 'ur-critiques'. That is, development discourse, in which critique is ubiquitous, can be clustered into three discrete identifiable families. These are in brief: the *Northern critique*, the *Southern critique*, and the *Egalitarian critique*. Ur-critiques have emerged historically in sync with the object of their engagement to structure, regulate, and channel development knowledge. They provide the narrative core around which ideas and putatively value-free theories of development are assembled in ways that are consistent with, and that validate their underlying normative orientation. This does not mean that the numerous ideas that emerge from each root are necessarily consistent with one another: a single ur-critique can give rise to different and conflicting knowledge formulations. Neither does it mean that all development ideas trace their genealogy to any one single ur-critique: many ideas are hybrids that have shared parentage, so that ur-critiques can be thought of as intersecting circles, or overlapping canopies: distinct, yet intersecting frameworks.

Although development knowledge circulates among a small community of producers and consumers in universities, aid agencies, government ministries, and think tanks, the ur-critiques that underpin them are not in themselves complicated or sophisticated formulations that circulate only among the chattering classes. The underlying value orientations that they point to are not proprietary to development theorists and practitioners, but to society at large. Ur-critiques are socially rooted narratives (Bruner 1991) that indicate an orientation that resonates with large social constituencies in the North and South, and that are coherently connected to broader social imaginaries and subjectivities.

To summarise, the propositions put forward thus far are that critique is ubiquitous, that it forms the basis on which development knowledge is constituted, that this is a reflection of underlying ethical value dispositions, and that there are three root ur-critiques in circulation. The implications are that if all development ideas have values *qua* ethical axioms, which are externally manifest through critical narratives, then it becomes possible to use critique as a way to organise and identify development thought. This leads to the third proposition, that this three-fold categorisation is capable of providing an organising key to map knowledge in development studies.

Development knowledge has conventionally been organised in terms of a historical evolution of ideas, from the early development economists of the big push, modernization theory, dependency theory, structuralism, neoliberalism, human development, and post-development. It could also be described in terms of a succession of dominant policy regimes from import-substitution of the 1960s, basic needs and agriculture in the 1970s, structural adjustment and the Washington Consensus of the 1980s, the poverty agenda and the post-Washington Consensus of the 1990s, the MDGs and the SDGs since 2000, and the new South-South, or Beijing consensus since 2010s.<sup>1</sup> There are also disciplinary categories of development anthropology, development economics, and heterodox economics that provide distinct and at times, mutually incomprehensible maps and landscapes of development knowledge. The framework provided in this paper creates the possibility to use critique not just as a weapon to expose, deconstruct, or challenge existing knowledge, but as a way to recover, identify, situate, and map the distinct families of development ideas based on their ur-critiques, and hence, on their fundamental ethical roots.

The three ur-critiques are not necessarily exhaustive, but are presented here as heuristic ideal-types (Weber 1949b). The analytical approach adopted in this chapter can be described as a comparative genealogy of development thought. Following Foucault, I use genealogy as a method of questioning what seems natural or inevitable, and thus to trace out how distinct ethical and epistemological traditions emerge to shape a moral architecture that defines what counts as legitimate knowledge and intervention. Development thought in this way is not just a sequence of policy doctrines or paradigm shifts, but a field of morally-derived reasoning in which competing normative visions are the basis on which theory and practice are formulated. In the rest of this chapter, I discuss and expand on the three ur-critiques and their consequences. The material presented here is necessarily brief and preliminary: there is clearly more work that is needed to expand, substantiate, and scrutinise it.

## 2. The Northern Critique

The ur-critique that gives rise to the ideas, theories, and practices of big-D international development is the *Northern critique of underdevelopment in the South*. It bears a specifically Northern positionality because it reflects the way development is ethically rationalised by Northern development advocates when confronted with the question: *what should we, the wealthy North, do about the impoverished South?* The response, which reflects a paternalistic and humanist universalism, is that the condition of economic and social deprivation in the South is intolerable to the ethically alert Northern conscience, and that the North is morally obliged to intervene and alleviate this suffering rather than ignoring, or exploiting it. This is manifest in a wide range of development writings across the decades. In 1949, Harry Truman's much maligned inauguration speech explicitly rejects a colonial relationship, and declares: 'Only by helping the least fortunate of its members to help themselves can the human family achieve the decent, satisfying life that is the right of all people.' The founding document for Sweden's foreign aid programme in 1962 similarly

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<sup>1</sup> See also Sumner (2024) for a four-fold typology that merges many of these categories.

cites a 'moral obligation to help' (Sweden, Government Bill 1962:100). In the 1990s, Stuart Corbridge (1993: 466-467) articulated the rationale for development aid in terms of 'the responsibilities of Northerners to distant strangers' that exist on the basis of 'minimally universalist claims'. These universalist claims have been articulated at length in the literature on global redistributive justice, and in particular by the 'cosmopolitanists' Charles Beitz (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2007).

This ethical value orientation towards the South generates two sets of antagonists and targets for critical attack by the conscientious Northern development actor: Northern indifference, and Southern dysfunctionality. The former is a critique of Northern parochialism or fiscal conservatism, which rejects the idea of universalism, and/or sees no ethical compulsion for intervening in the South. The debate between Peter Singer and Garrett Hardin in the early 1970s captures the arguments deployed in this debate at a time when foreign aid was ascendant. Singer's article 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' argued that the North had a strong moral obligation to provide more substantial transfers to the South: 'If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it' (Singer 1972, 231). Hardin instead used the metaphor of a lifeboat to argue that the world's carrying capacity was finite, and its resources were in Northern hands - so that the North should use the scarce resources in its control to prioritise its own survival (Hardin 1974).

The latter antagonist and target of the Northern critique is the South itself; that is, the irrationalities and inadequacies within the South that are holding it captive in poverty. It reflects what is often an implicit, but analytically significant assumption: that the underdevelopment of the South is the result of causes internal to itself. These can take the form of misfortunes of geography and the 'gaps' and 'traps' identified by Arthur Lewis and Ragnar Nurske. But they are often moral complaints about the South's human failings, or what Kipling more forthrightly calls 'sloth and heathen folly', namely, corruption, poor governance, ethnic conflicts, or oppressive cultural norms.

Both these components of the Northern critique are present in Jeffrey Sachs call for a global compact in his 2005 book *The End of Poverty*:

*Many poor countries today pretend to reform while rich countries pretend to help them ... The poor countries must take ending poverty seriously, and will have to devote a greater share of their national resources to cutting poverty rather than to war, corruption, and political infighting. The rich countries will need to move beyond the platitudes of helping the poor, and follow through on their repeated promises to deliver more help. (Sachs 2005: 266).*

The historical origins of this ethical structure of universalist empathy and paternalistic altruism are found in the abolitionist movement that arose in radical Christian sects in 18th century

Euro-America (Davis 1975, Barnett 2011), and in the ideology of 19th century colonial trusteeship (Mellor 1951). Trusteeship, as it was envisaged in the British context, and that was formally articulated in the charter of the League of Nations, redefined the role of colonial occupation in terms of an obligation or 'sacred trust' of the colonial power to ensure the protection and well-being of the subject colonial peoples. Amanda McVety (2018) provides a valuable historical account of how the idea of a universal internationalised development project emerged after 1919, and had matured by the mid-1940s. By this time, the Northern critique had transcended and reformulated trusteeship in the post-war age of development and decolonisation from the specifics of particular coloniser/colony pairings to the generalised and generic categories of developed and developing, North and South, first and third worlds. In post-war Northern countries, this division fell neatly along the traditional left-right fault-line, with left-wing social democratic parties extending their advocacy for domestic wealth redistribution into the international frame of foreign aid (Lumsdaine 1993, chp 5).

The moral component of the Northern critique is evident in a diverse range of actors since the 1940s. But it is also not the only such rationale available from the North, as the fiscal demands of foreign aid have required it to be reinforced with a robust domestic justification. Although foreign aid is often deconstructed as the pursuit of cynical, self-interested gain, the more widespread rationalisation since the 1940s has been to present it as the pursuit of a common interest. That is, the South's development pathologies are reframed as a shared global problem, so that funding rural poverty alleviation in Nepal, or combating desertification in the Sahel is internalised as a matter of far-sighted self-preservation of the Northern donor in an increasingly inter-connected world (Corbridge 1993).

An example of the latter is found in the case that Paul Rosenstein-Rodan puts forward for international development in the 1940s, as a necessity to prevent future wars: 'If we want to ensure a stable and prosperous peace, we have to provide for some international action to improve the living conditions of those peoples who missed the industrialization "bus" in the nineteenth century' (Rosenstein-Rodan 1944: 158). Universalism in this case is not just a moral conviction about a shared humanity, as much as a far-sighted recognition of a world where differences have shrunk and the dangers of climate change or disease tie the interests of the North and South together. A generation later, this blend of moral obligation and enlightened self-interest was connected in more mature form in the Pearson report of 1969, which defined the North's payback in terms of the moral consolidation that Northerners would accrue as a result of their altruistic actions.

*The widening gap between the developed and developing countries has become a central issue of our time. [...] We live at a time when the ability to transform the world is only limited by faintness of heart or narrowness of vision. Could the moral and social foundations of their own societies remain firm and steady if they washed their hands of the plight of others?*

The Northern Critique has generated a particular type of development knowledge that flows from, and that validates its ethical foundations. A universalist humanist ethic provides the basis on which the differences between North and South can be seen in terms of a similarly universal theory of social evolution. This means that the same factors and dynamics that explain the ascent of the North into economic prosperity and political liberalism can be redeployed to explain the lack thereof in the South. Development is thus framed theoretically as a linear direction of travel with the North currently at the front position, and other countries in train, emulating and aspiring to catch up.

In this formulation, the geographical distance and cultural distinctness that separate the North and South are increasingly irrelevant, so that there is only one important distinction left: that the South is temporally located in the North's past. Whereas Marx famously declared that the developed North, shows 'to the less developed, the image of its own future', the Northern critique sees the South as the converse - as the image of its own pre-modern past of rural poverty, patriarchy, poor health, religious dogmatism, and authoritarian rule. The South is thus understood as a stunted version of the North, trapped in a state of childhood innocence. The task of a universally applicable social science of development is thus to reveal the future pathway to adulthood by identifying the obstacles within the South that have burdened its progress.

The Northern critique thus bears a positive view of the enlightenment, science, technology, rationality, and the possibilities of progress. The ideas, theories, and practices that emerge from this critique envisage the field that is known as 'international development': development at a distance, and from the apex of a global project that is implemented in the South, but that is funded, organised, staffed, studied, and critiqued in the North. In the world of policy, it advocates for the cultural and economic integration of the South towards the North, for internal reforms within the South to address its dysfunctions, and for foreign aid in finance, technology, and capacities from North to South. It is thus sympathetic to Northern aid actors, to the OECD cartel of Northern aid, and to the expanding development agenda of the 1990s from liberal economic reforms into human rights and democracy.

### **3. The Southern Critique**

In contrast to the first ur-critique, which belongs to a paternalistic and moralised North, the second ur-critique in development is that of an ambitious South that is mindful of historical justice and national autonomy. The Southern critique is the commonly held narrative of the state elites, intellectuals, and aspirational middle classes of Southern countries. It informs the collective economic declarations of the South in the Bandung Conference of 1955, the Group of 77 in 1964, and in the New International Economic Order (NIEO) of 1974. A contemporary academic expression of the Southern critique can be found in the 2010 declaration: *Ten Theses of New Developmentalism*, a collective statement signed by a number of structural economists, including Osvaldo Sunkel and Alice

Amsden. The Southern critique's main narrative is that *the North is the obstacle to the successful development of the South, both historically, and in the present*. Indeed, the NIEO contains words almost directly to this effect:

*...the remaining vestiges of alien and colonial domination, foreign occupation, racial discrimination, apartheid and neo colonialism in all its forms continue to be among the greatest obstacles to the full emancipation and progress of the developing countries.*

The two components of the value framework that informs the Southern critique are thus that firstly that it is explicitly developmentalist, and embraces the idea of economic growth and convergence towards the economic achievements of the North. This universality of goals and methods distinguishes it from the third Egalitarian ur-critique. Secondly, in contrast to the Northern critique which problematises factors internal to the South, the Southern critique inverts this to explain development failure as a problem located in the North, and in the external environment. This includes the North's colonial past and current neo-colonialism, the Northern dominated global economy, Northern global governance institutions, Northern development knowledge, Northern development aid practices, Northern comprador proxies in the South, and Northern multi-national corporations.

These two components reflect a profound paradox at the heart of the Southern critique that is reflective of the broader anti-colonial nationalist project that it is drawn from: that it seeks to both emulate and repudiate the North. What this means is that the relationship of the Southern critique to universalism is more complicated than that of the other two ur-critiques, and is frequently misrepresented. Southern critics have often resisted the universality of the North's social norms and political institutions such as human rights, gender equality, and liberal democracy. But they have not rejected a universalised aspiration to the North's economic development, industrialisation, or high living standards, which they embrace. Indeed the problem that the Southern critique articulates is that the North has made these universal aspirations unachievable for the South. The South thus complains that Europe's original 19th century pathway to industrialisation has since been closed off, with that ladder kicked away (Chang 2002). As a result, the ideas that emerge from the Southern critique have sought to recreate an ersatz version of those historical conditions, such as trade protectionist policies in service of infant industry protection.

The genealogy of the present day Southern critique lies in the anti-colonial nationalism, and the left-wing anti-imperialist thought of the early 20th century. These ideologies emerged to refute the then prevalent notion that European colonialism was a benign or even charitable project that brought good governance and prosperity to the colonies. Instead, Irish nationalist historians explained Ireland's economic stagnation in the 19th century as the consequence of its neglect and misgovernance under British rule following the 1801 Act of Union (O'Brien 1921). Hobson (1901), and Lenin (1917) argued that European colonialism arose from a predatory economic impulse to

secure profitable investments for surplus capital. In India, nationalist economic historians argued that colonialism had drained India's wealth to Britain (Naoroji 1901), and had de-industrialised India (Dutt 1902).<sup>2</sup>

The Southern critique actually took shape as such in the 1940s-70s, as the South itself was constituted through the independence of more than seventy former colonial and trust territories. Its most important inspiration came from the utopian-modernising visions in the anti-colonial nationalisms of Asia and Africa, which envisaged national development as the path to substantial independence and decolonisation. In addition, the specific combination of economic ideas and policies that it became associated with can be dated to its formative period. Firstly, decolonisation occurred at a time of the Keynesian ascendancy in the North. This meant that there was widespread consensus on the need for the post-colonial state to take a commanding role in promoting development and in regulating the destabilising capriciousness of the market. Secondly, the Southern critique was assembled in the recent aftermath of the Soviet Union's industrialisation in the decade of the 1930s. It created the possibility, and the expectation, that other poor agricultural economies could also engineer catch-up industrialisation in a similarly compressed time-frame. Thirdly, the Prebisch-Singer hypothesis of 1950 argued that the terms of trade for primary commodities would follow a downward secular trend. There was thus an alarming and urgent compulsion for the South to industrialise quickly in order to avoid a future of worsening poverty.

It is in this context that the Southern critique formed the basis for a family tree of ideas starting with structuralism and dependency theory. The policy progeny of structuralism was import-substitution industrialisation, which became the dominant policy model adopted across the developing world in the 1950s-70s. After a period of eclipse and retreat during the decade of structural adjustment, development ideas based on the Southern critique re-emerged in the 1990s, drawing on the East Asian 'miracle' to argue for the importance of an interventionist state, and for industrial policy (Johnson 1982, Amsden 1989, Haggard 1990, Wade 1990). It also remained significant in the framing of a Southern position on structural adjustment in the 1980s, the WTO in the 1990s, the critique of development aid, the response to climate change, and the resurgence of industrial policy (Lin 2012, Andreoni and Chang 2021). The Southern critique has also fostered a welcoming attitude towards China's industrialisation, and China's growing presence in development finance across the South.

#### **4. The Egalitarian critique:**

In contrast to the Northern and Southern critiques, which see underdevelopment as the problem and development as the solution, there is a third ur-critique in which development itself is seen as the problem. The *Egalitarian critique* finds that the big-D project of purposive development is

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<sup>2</sup> Some contemporary advocates of the Southern critique have found comfort in Friedrich List's 1841 critique of Anglo-American free trade. However, they often obscure List's clearly stated caveat that industrialisation was not possible for the savage peoples of the tropics.

inequitable, hierarchical, universalising, exploitative, and ecologically harmful. It combines an epistemic scepticism toward the universalist, economic, and technocratic premises of development with a humanist concern for dignity, participation, and inequality. Denis Goulet (2006:4) provides the following example of this narrative in action, although it is also expressed across a spectrum of severity ranging from moderate reformism to radical rejection of development, and by actors within and without the development industry:

*Today's false development, which assigns supremacy to mere economic might, would lead to a new form of barbarism, on which is all the more dangerous because it hides behind the mask of progress and civilization.*

The antecedents and lineages of the Egalitarian critique lie in two sources that have historically been counterpoints to modern industrial capitalism: firstly, it comes from romanticist, anti-modernist ideas concerned with the loss of ecology, community, rurality, culture, meaning, and particularity. In the circumstances of the South, this has taken the form of ideas such as Gandhian self-sufficiency, and peasant neo-populism that have historically been suspicious and hostile to the capitalist transformation, industrial modernity, modern scientific technology, and urbanisation. As Gavin Kitching (1982:98) describes, they:

*have sought to confront industrialization and urbanization with an alternative 'vision' of development, concentrating on small-scale enterprise, on the retention of a peasant agriculture and of non-agricultural petty commodity production, and on a world of villages and small towns rather than large industrial cities.*

Secondly, it lies in anti-hierarchical, social emancipatory ideologies including Marxism, Fabian socialism, Christian liberation theology, and feminism, which orient its concerns towards deprivation, inequality, and exploitation. These left-wing ideologies have also provided the tools to see economic development not as a harmonious and collaborative partnership, but as a predatory process of exploitation. In addition, they have explained how this reality is disguised and euphemised through ideological dissimulation.

Although many of these early ideas were in themselves already critical of development, it was not until the late-1960s, at the end of the United Nations 'first decade of development', that they took the form of a structured ur-critical narrative as such. It is at that time that the development industry came into being in a specific and stereotypical form, as a recognisable set of ideas, practices, and institutions. This template, which was replicated in numerous countries in the South, consisted of the concentrated deployment of externally sourced capital, technology, and human expertise to execute ambitious projects of economic infrastructure, state-directed industrialisation, and urban-centric modernisation. The project was largely economic and economic, and progress was evaluated in terms of economic growth, measured by gross domestic product per capita (GDP/capita). Indeed,

the only actual goal that was placed before the first decade of development was for developing countries to achieve a five percent rate of economic growth (UNGA 1961)

It is in response to this ensemble of modernisation from above that the Egalitarian critique came into being in two overlapping clusters to target development as economic growth, and development as a hierarchical top-down project. The former argues that development as economic growth is narrow and inequitable across many dimensions. It masks the costs incurred by many groups such as the rural poor (Lipton 1977) and women (Boserup 1970, Rogers 1980, Dey 1981), with harmful social and ecological consequences not adequately captured by the metric of GDP/capita. As the World Bank president, Robert McNamara (1973) himself described: 'Despite a decade of unprecedented increase in the gross national product of the developing countries, the poorest segments of their population have received relatively little benefit.'

While the New International Economic Order (NIEO), passed by a UN General Assembly resolution in May 1974 amplified the core concerns of the Southern Critique, it is the lower profile Cocoyoc declaration, made just five months later in November 1974, that articulated the distinct concerns of the nascent Egalitarian critique:

*The experience of the last 30 years is that the exclusive pursuit of economic growth, guided by the market and undertaken by and for the powerful elites, has the same destructive effects inside developing countries. ...*

*Our first concern is to redefine the whole purpose of development. This should not be to develop things but to develop man. Human beings have basic needs: food, shelter, clothing, health, education. Any process of growth that does not lead to their fulfilment - or, even worse, disrupts them - is a travesty of the idea of Development ...*

*We reject the unilinear view which sees development essentially and inevitably as the effort to imitate the historical model of the countries that for various reasons happen to be rich today. For this reason, we reject the concept of "gaps" in development. The goal is not to "catch up" (UNEP and UNCTAD 1974).*

The first component, or the critique of economic growth, has since generated a vast body of development literature on poverty, poverty analytics, and anti-poverty policy. These ideas have grown through several decades from the Basic Needs approach of the 1970s (ILO 1977) to the rise of the poverty agenda in the 1990s, when poverty alleviation became prioritised as the first of the Millennium Development Goals (Gore 2000). It also extends out into a deeper moral and philosophical critique of economic rationality and economism from philosophers, ethicists, theologians, and ecologically-oriented social theorists such as Serge Latouche, Ivan Illich, and André Gorz. Their concern is about the reduction of the many dimensions of human well-being to economic wealth and economic metrics. Amartya Sen (1999) famously addressed this problem by

arguing that the end-goals of development should be the exercise and expansion of substantive human freedoms, and that economic growth must be understood as the means to achieve these. Gorz, Illich and Latouche instead provided a more severe response, calling for economic growth to be abandoned altogether in the form of *decroissance*, or degrowth: the idea that further economic growth is incompatible with planetary boundaries, and that this requires a compression and reversal of economic activity.

The other substantial critique of economic growth is the ecological critique, which is on the one hand directed at the effects of primitive accumulation and industrial modernity on indigenous and rural communities. But it is also directed at the conservationism and neo-Malthusianism of the colonial and post-colonial periods. It has instead generated knowledge under the rubric of the 'red-brown' critical political ecology that points to colonialism, capitalism, social inequalities, and unequal power relations as the source of ecological degradation (Blaikie 1985).

The second branch of the Egalitarian critique engages with the hierarchical nature of development. It has generated a significant body of knowledge about the paternalistic, neo-colonial, and depoliticising nature of projects. Within this category, we have the idea that development is a top-down (Barnett 1977), depoliticising (Ferguson 1990) scheme of high modernism (Scott 1998) that devalues indigenous and rural peoples' knowledge (Hobart 1993). A scaled up version of this argument has been used to explain the larger agenda of development as a much grander project of global domination (Escobar 1995). As Gustavo Esteva (xxxx:xx) explains, it was a plan explicitly created by the United States to cement its international pre-eminence after the second world war:

*They needed to make entirely explicit their new position in the world. And they wanted to consolidate that hegemony and make it permanent. For these purposes, they conceived a political campaign on a global scale.*

Despite being a vibrant anti-establishment tradition that is cynical and dismissive of the founding certitudes of the development industry, this body of critique has nevertheless given birth to some of the most important ideas in contemporary development management. This quality is not restricted to the explicitly 'constructive' critiques, but extends also to the more radical post-development writings. That is, despite the fact that they explicitly reject the idea of development and seek to dismantle it, post-development has nevertheless had influence in amplifying complaints that have reformed mainstream practices (Ziai 2020). The critique of top-down development has given rise to knowledge about participatory methods, community-based development, decentralised governance, and non-governmental organisations. The idea that development is depoliticised is also not unproductive, but has created new forms of political economy knowledge about development (this book, chp 5). The Egalitarian critique has given rise to a historic shift in development policy from economic growth towards poverty alleviation, from economic to non-economic social goals, from

urban to rural, from large bureaucratically organised schemes to decentralised, community-based projects, from gender-blind to gender-sensitive, from paternalistic to participatory.

## 5. Discussion

To summarise, there are three contending ethical value dispositions in the field of development studies. These are not manifest superficially, but can be inferred through the operation of a corresponding set of root critical narratives or ur-critiques, which form the basis on which development knowledge is formulated.

The first ur-critique sees the problem of underdevelopment as one of Northern indifference and Southern inadequacy. It bears a paternalistic and universalist humanism that interprets poverty in the South as a shared moral responsibility, generating a technocratic, interventionist, and managerial knowledge of development as benevolent progress. It is based on providing aid from the North that will unlock development and address the internal gaps in the South.

The second ur-critique, which bears an ethic of historical justice and national autonomy, diagnoses underdevelopment as a problem of Northern domination. The theories and practices of development that this has given rise to seek to neutralise those external factors, prescribing industrialisation and state-led transformation as the means of emancipation.

The third ur-critique draws on an anti-hierarchical and ecological ethic that sees development as unfair, exploitative, and harmful. It generates reflexive, participatory and post-growth knowledge on how development can be reformed, regulated or resisted in order to benefit the disadvantaged and to protect nature.

How do existing ways of thinking about development knowledge relate to this framework? There is firstly an obvious point to be made about disciplinary stereotypes: the Northern critique guides and produces much of development economics, although this is often implicit and might be of surprise to economists themselves, who consider rigorous scholarship to be value-free. This means that a range of ideas in economics, from Rosenstein-Rodan's 'big push', Ann Krueger's (1974) 'rent-seeking', and Banerjee and Duflo's (2011) 'poor economics' are products of the Northern critique. In contrast, the Southern critique has generated knowledge in heterodox economics, political economy, economic history, and comparative politics, featuring scholars such as Raoul Prebisch, Osvaldo Sunkel, Walter Rodney, Robert Wade, and Peter Evans. Finally, the Egalitarian critique remains the home territory of anthropology. As Gow (2002) describes, 'within development, anthropologists have chosen, for professional, personal, and perhaps emotional reasons, to be more concerned with the rural and the indigenous and more generally with the marginalized'. The reality is not as simple as these stereotypes, but they are nevertheless of relevance.

Where do existing schools of critical thought such as Marxism, feminism, or post-colonialism fit into this scheme? The implication is that while these have had significant influence on development thinking, their operation on knowledge production occurs through the prism of the three ur-critiques. Post-colonialism thus operates as a constituent of the Egalitarian critique, for example in the way that Foucault has influenced a number of key texts in the post-development school. Marxism has clearly informed development theory, but does so in distinct and even contradictory ways through the Southern critique and the Egalitarian critique. Feminist ideas are even more heterogenous and are present mostly in the Egalitarian critique. For example, the feminist idea of an economy of well-being, promoting care, justice, and sustainability, is an important critique of economic growth. They are also notably more resonant with the Northern critique, than with the Southern.

What are the implications of this framework of ur-critiques for the structure of development knowledge? Firstly, it displaces the idea of critical development studies, and its underlying categorisation of development knowledge into mainstream versus critical schools of thought. That configuration effectively identifies the Northern critique and its knowledge outputs as 'mainstream', while merging the Southern and Egalitarian critiques together into a common 'critical' category. My argument has been that this is mistaken: the label of critique provides a misleading harmony to ideas that are in disharmony with one another. These are not minor errors: it places those who enthusiastically champion developmentalism, such as Chang, Amsden, or Gore, in the same category as those who radically reject the idea of development such as Esteva, Scott, or Gorz.

The three-fold framework proposed here instead illuminates two important contradictions in development thinking. The first is the foundational clash in development ideas between the North and South. The second is the tension between developmentalism and anti-developmentalism. The classic example of the former would be the contest between modernisation theory and dependency theory, of structural adjustment and structuralism, and of Northern aid that finances social development, against the South-South aid that finances economic infrastructure. The latter contradiction is manifest in the long-standing debate between economic growth and redistribution, or between grand schemes of economic transformation, and smaller, community-based projects that focus on inclusion and equity.

In the period since the early 1990s the configuration of these two fault lines in development thinking have evolved and transformed under the post-Washington consensus, the rise of the poverty agenda, and the new MDG/SDG global agenda. This process was described by Charles Gore (2000:796) as it was still underway at the time:

*The clash between the Washington Consensus and the sustainable human development approach acts to reinforce and conserve the key elements of the current paradigm, and in particular its ahistorical approach and its combination of normative internationalism with methodological*

*nationalism, whilst the clash between the Washington Consensus and ideas within the two strands of the Southern Consensus serves to undermine these elements and creates tensions and pressures for a further paradigm shift.*

The Northern critique has evolved since the 1990s by absorbing elements of the Egalitarian critique. This led it out of the preoccupation with structural adjustment in the 1980s into a much broader agenda of poverty alleviation, democratisation, and social inclusion. In contrast to this, is a new Southern developmentalist critique that is inspired and financed mainly by China, and which includes resurgent national development strategies such as Latin American neo-extractivism (Gudnyas 2010). Thirdly, there is a resilient and radical scepticism that stands apart from those elements that have been co-opted by the North, and that clusters around a new set of autonomous critiques such as decoloniality and degrowth.

## **6. Conclusions**

This chapter started by asking what is critical about critical development studies, and how critique relates to knowledge production in development. The response from Bowles and Veltmeyer (2021:xxxx) is that critical development studies provides ‘emancipatory alternatives to a failed mainstream development project of capitalist modernity’. Indeed, critical scholars see themselves as anti-systemic dissidents who challenge mainstream development knowledge and produce alternative, empowering truths. In the inner life of critique, participants arrive at the frontlines of knowledge production, dressed and armed for battle as intellectual foot-soldiers in a just war against a clearly defined antagonist. Within the confines of these battle-lines, the conclusions are largely pre-determined, and the narrative is locked within a rigid set of parameters, so that you are either with us or against us.

I have argued that this is inadequate, and that there is more to critique than this model of knowledge production provides. I ask critical scholars to at least temporarily lay down their arms, to turn the lens of scrutiny around, and to question the certitudes and founding narratives of their own inner world. The approach that I have taken has essentially been to endogenise the idea of critique, and its founding axioms. This involves turning critique from an exogenous factor, or a taken-for-granted, given reality that lies outside the frame of analysis, into one that is within the frame of scrutiny and abstraction.

The difference in the two approaches can be illustrated by reference to three well known critiques of development discourse. Arturo Escobar (1991) has decoded development discourse as a mechanism of representation that pathologises and infantilises the South to render it the object of Northern intervention. James Ferguson (1990) describes how the technocratic rendering of development generates a body of depoliticised knowledge and practice. Robert Chambers (1983) argues that development is based on a hierarchical form of Northern expertise that devalues the knowledge of

local communities, and that consequently produces top-down and exclusionary forms of intervention.

Endogenising critique repositions Escobar, Fitzgerald, and Chambers, to erase the artificial distinction between the development knowledge they produce and the development discourse that they analyse. They are not outsiders judging development texts from a safe critical distance, but are themselves situated within this field. An explanation of how development discourse functions will thus need to account not just for the hegemonising narratives that scholars analyse, but also to the counter-narratives that these scholars themselves create, and the generative implications that their representations bear.

This process of subjecting the inner life of critique to scrutiny is by no means easy: critique reflects deeply held ethical commitments and is the meaningful purpose that guides many scholars in their fields of enquiry. Endogenising it would require them to problematise and question that which they deem beyond question. It would require them to transcend the necessary ethical edifice on which any knowledge or analysis can be built. The critique of critique rarely goes this far, and remains captive to its founding ur-critiques, and thus to its ethical gods, who remain untroubled.

For example, Arturo Escobar comments extensively on the inadequacy of the critique of development by practice-oriented development anthropologists. They have, he finds, 'done no more than recycle and dress in more localized fabrics, the discourses of modernization and development' (Escobar 1991:677). This is similar to the conclusion that Marcuse (1964) and Boltanski and Chiappello (2018) also arrive at. They find that contemporary capitalism has managed to absorb critique so that it is co-opted and commodified into a sterile form that strengthens and reproduces the system. Their proposed solutions are similar to Escobar insofar as they call for a deeper, uncompromised critique that remains true to its ethical axioms, that manages to evade capture, and that retains the capacity to expose and resist the system. In other words, the critique of critique is mostly that it is just not critical enough: it does not measure up to an underlying ethical ideal.

How is this different from the practice of endogenising critique, and to Foucault's genealogical form of enquiry? How does this change the way one understands the relationship of critique to knowledge production? The answer is that it problematises that which is taken for granted as natural, eternal, and revered, which in this case, is the axiomatic basis of critique. It is not interested in what development theories claim, but in what kind of moral universe they presuppose. It takes the ethical foundations of critique not as timeless trans-historical moral truths (Nietzsche 1887/1994), but as historically specific constructions that should equally be subject to investigation. This approach makes it possible to see critique from its exteriority and to arrive at a different set of insights: that critique is not a marginal faction, but is actually ubiquitous; that it is not an anti-systemic force that destabilises development truths, but that it is constitutive of the system of development knowledge. Foucault famously argued that power was not only repressive, but also productive. In his words:

*We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors'... In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.*

In this chapter, I have similarly argued that the effects of critique are also not repressive and destabilising of the knowledge-scape of development, but productive and generative. Critique provides both an ethical orientation that inspires and guides the field, and also charts out the ontological terrain on which ideas, theories, and practices germinate. In doing so, critique populates the garden of knowledge in development studies, and does so in terms of three common ethical roots that generate its contours and fault lines.

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