

STICKS AND STONES: HOW THE LANGUAGE OF DEVELOPMENT THEORY CAN HURT US

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ABSTRACT: Brazil is now an important global economic power. The complexity and productivity of its industrialized economy is widely recognized. Along with China and India, Brazil puts Third World economic power at the center of international politics. This change raises the issue of whether it is appropriate to identify Brazil or for that matter other BRIC countries as developing or developed? This essay suggests that to answer this question we need to give attention to the growing economic power of southern countries like Brazil and to a north-south comparative development perspective on democracy and the evolution of human rights. Previous binary, hierarchical conceptualizations of development essentialized both the South and the North and should be reconsidered.

KEYWORDS: Brazil, democracy, human rights.

Brazil's steady economic rise over the past several decades, its successful transition from military to democratic government, its growing importance as an international economic power of significance, and its recent advances in respect to the social welfare and distribution of national wealth raise the issue, is this a developed or developing country? The fact that we can ask this question of Brazil reminds us that these terms are imprecise, perhaps even skewed, measures of the changes currently taking place across the face of Latin America and Asia. The World Bank and other international economic actors now use the term "emerging economies" in reference to countries that are highly industrialized and exercising newly acquired global economic power. There is, however, still a developmental ring in its meaning, use, and intent.

Who is developed? What is development? This is changing both because there are Third World countries like Brazil pushing their way out of developing country status and because there are developed countries in new economic and social welfare trouble. When

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the United States was unquestionably the largest, most productive economy and a world power, it seemed reasonable to many development scholars to analyze the workings of a very successful economy as well as its, social-political norms and institutions in order to understand the nature of development. The heyday of this assumption was the 1960s. Theories like structural-functionalism, modernization theory, and classical economic development theory were widely consulted to advise new governments on correct policy. But despite many changes the academic confidence in using the United States and other highly industrialized countries as the gold standard for the measurement of development has persisted through the neo-liberal era into the twenty-first century.

I. WHO IS DEVELOPED? WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

The historical relativism of the effort to rank countries by economic, social, and political development indicators is much more apparent today than it was deep in the Cold War when much of this terminology was first interjected into global politics. Nevertheless, we still use it and today the basic demarcation between developed and developing countries remains intact. Why don't we just toss this terminology out the theoretical window?

There are two reasons not to do so. First, the macro-historical discussion of contemporary analysts like Charles Tilly, Perry Anderson, Theda Skocpol, or Atul Kohli suggest that there is some value in being attentive to the comparative study of political and economic development. How the political economy of international and domestic actors shapes the rise of the state, the global economy, imperialism, and justice seems worth continued exploration. Colin Leys has argued that we need development theory “not as a branch of policy-oriented social science within the parameters of an unquestioned capitalist world order, but as a field of enquiry about the contemporary dynamics of that order itself...and not just in the excolonial countries.” (Leys, 1996:43) Secondly, we are in a historical moment when Brazil and many parts of Asia and Latin America are themselves ready to take on the mantle of developed country. Many “emerging economies” have now joined the G-8 to form a new group, the G-20, which has inherited the job of coordinating the world's economy; their economies continue to grow at very rapid rates; wealth is being redistributed in a more equitable fashion; and for

many of these countries democratization is continuing or is a desired political good demanded by larger middle and urban-working classes. This is the kind of economic, social, and political change we conventionally associate with development in the North, and thus to be intellectually honest, it should clearly acknowledge it when it occurs in the South.

The fact that we do not often acknowledge the similarities in historical, development trajectories across the current developed-developing divide can lead us to overlook how much the Third World haunts the First and vice versa. Larry Rohter, a journalist who writes for both *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*, begins his recent book about contemporary Brazil with a personal experience of wealth and poverty on the streets of Rio de Janeiro in 1972.

The chic Zona Sul of Rio...felt less like a Third World country, repressive and underdeveloped, and much more like Fifth Avenue or Rodeo Drive.....But I also could not avoid observing knots of beggars sitting on the sidewalk.....their ragged poverty offered a stark contrast to the gracefully designed sidewalk on which they sat (Rohter, 2010: 2).

What descriptions like this imply is that there is a difference about Rio which is exotically distinct from the relations of poverty and wealth in the United States. While within a context of much greater overall national wealth, there was exactly this kind of disjuncture in wealth in the United States of the same era in precisely the cities Rohter mentions. If you spent a few days in New York in 1972, and certainly if you lived there, you would have seen: street beggars in front of vagant, collapsed buildings on the West Side; dangerous, scary, dilapidated public housing projects in the Lower Eastside; street people collapsed, physically spread across the sidewalk, and ignored in the financial district; dejected and neglected neighborhoods like Harlem and Chelsea; and drugs openly sold in alphabet land. If you came out of a party or event in Soho at night, you were greeted by dark avenues, and many taxis simply would not stop. Muggings were so frequent everyone you knew, knew someone who had been assaulted, if they themselves had not been.

When we make comparison across the North-South line, we open up a conversation that is conceptually rich. Brazil is a country many analysts like Rohter still term a developing country, but this overlooks the new reality that the characteristics of

what constitutes a developed country are now more broadly, if still less evenly, shared. For most of the twentieth century, development was seen as a package deal for a select group of countries which were: 1) highly industrialized with substantial national wealth; 2) relatively equitable in respect to income with sizeable middle classes who enjoyed access to many social goods; 3) democratically governed with an open franchise and broadly representative political parties; 4) securely protected in respect to political liberties and human rights in a way which was historically unprecedented. In the last decade, we are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that, as is the case for Brazil, there have been many development gains among developing countries. And conversely among highly industrialized countries, there have been losses as 9/11 has resulted in erosion in political and civil rights and as the recent financial crisis exposed cracks in the northern economic structure. What development means is less and less a carefully bounded package and more and more a loose bag of groceries. In both the North and the South there are distinct accomplishments in some areas and distinct problems in others.

If we consider these indicators of development status within a comparative or global frame, we may begin to identify the complexity of what it means to be developed and how to reference the various aspects of a country's social, political, and economic change. That we did not consider this earlier was both a kind of western arrogance and a product of the Cold War capitalist-socialist rivalry. If we relax our assumptions about how the characteristics we identify as developed cohere, we can acknowledge that the term developed country can be used both narrowly in respect to political and social development and perhaps more broadly in respect to economic development. For example, democratic processes and the protection of human rights have not always been available to the populations of western countries. Democratization is a vexed process and human rights is a moveable feast, changing its definition in significant ways every few decades. We might be able to speak meaningfully, with clear indicators, of development as a material reality, but in terms of the relationship of the state to the rights of the society, we are in a freezing rain with few intellectual foot holds.

II. STRENGTH OF ECONOMY

Brazil along with other Third World BRIC countries is growing at a very fast pace. As the global economic decline increases the financial and structural economic problem in Europe and the United States, Brazil like India has recently been growing at 7%-8% annually. (Economist, September 30, 2010) This kind of growth rate is not a recent phenomenon; Brazil grew at a double digit rate in the 1970s, similar to China's pace today. Beginning with an import substitution economy which was much critique by American economists, it opened its economy to free trade after establishing a complex, variegated economy with the "most advanced industrial base" in Latin America. (Luna and Klein, 2006:1) As it did so, it adopted an extremely successful south-south trade focus responding to dynamic and growing markets in China and India. Rationally assessing the first global energy crises with attention to internal energy resources, Brazil became a global leader in renewable energy resources. It surpasses any other country in its national capabilities for the production and distribution of ethanol. (Brainard and Martinez-Diaz, 2009:8) The Brazilian economy is now highly diversified with strength in many industrial and agricultural products. Brazil is also rich in natural resources. As the fifth largest country in the world both in terms of territorial expansion and size of population, it has a large internal market, and there is strong international demand for its exports. It is a stable economy with low inflation, low unemployment, and its financial sector is strong. Brazilian corporations are seeking out new capital and new markets.

While Brazil's current strength as an industrial economy has been built on a foundation that has taken decades to create, the realization that its economic development accomplishments make it a significant international force in the global economy is only recently acknowledged. Even a few years ago, the international perception of the "Brazilian Cost," a possible return to extensive inflation, debt, and instability, was cited as an indicator of Brazil's continued weakness as an economy and thus its continued developing country status. (Mac Lachlin, 2003:214) But as a member of the Group of 20, it has been elevated to a middle range status shared by eight other developing countries – Argentina and Mexico in Latin America; China, India, Indonesia, and Korea in Asia; and South Africa. Except for South Africa, each of these countries like those who preceded them as members of the G-8, exercises considerable economic clout in the global

economy. Their markets, GNP growth, technology development, multinational corporation investment, currency stability, and the overall health and promise of their economies now establish them as necessary players in global economic decision making.

But, you might say, Brazil has sacrificed an attention to human rights in both a political and social welfare respect. Given that, doesn't it make sense to maintain the designation 'developing' for Brazil and for other similar countries? This is an important intellectual consideration because the idea of a developed country has an implied social and political end-state – developed country-- for countries which continue to be called developing. But is the definition of developed country in relationship to social and political other factors really a clear set of accomplishments? Or is it a constantly moving, redefined conceptual destination, which cannot be reached, except by First World countries.

III. POVERTY AND SOCIAL WELFARE

In all Third World BRIC countries poverty continues to parallel strong economic growth rates. In the case of China and India this has more to do with the actual scale of the population than overall social inequity. China has relatively equal income distribution with about 8% living below the international poverty line, but because of the size of its population, the actual number of people in poverty is considerable. Brazil has been widely identified as the country with one of the most inequitable income distributions in the world, but this is changing. All of these countries regardless of overall levels of economic inequity confirm the general claim that the improvement in overall social welfare does not precede economic growth.

Data from Brazil's Centre for Social Policies at the Fundacao Getulio Vargas supports the conclusion that the number of people living in poverty has dropped dramatically in the last two decades. The percentage of people in Brazil living on less than \$2.50 a day was 31.8% of the population in 1993-95, 26.7% in 2002, and 15.3% in 2009. Other indicators similarly support the idea that social welfare is improving in Brazil. The average years of schooling similarly increased from 5.4 in 1993-95, 6.6 in 2002 to 7.6 in 2009. Households with washing machines are up from 24.3% in 1993-95 to 32.9 in 2002 and 44.4% in 2009; households with sewage connections from 36.5% in

1993-95 to 43.8% and 2002 to 51% in 2009. (Economist, September 30, 2010) Many low income families are now able to fly, own cars, cell phones, refrigerators, and other products once beyond their class. (Guedos and Oliveira, 2006:1) Some economists argue that there is at least a two pronged economic reason for this. First, Brazil's newly found economic stability and attention to the costs of inflation are extremely important. But the fact that between 1992 and 2006 the percentage of the population earning less than \$1 a day fell by 60% is also due to a new generation of more successful redistributive policies. (Neri, 2009:222).

An increase in life expectancy and a decrease in fertility has followed these social and economic changes.

Education is widely recognized to be the current challenge to Brazil's ability to improve life for those living in poverty. As in other areas of social services and quality of life, the numbers indicate considerable change. Between 1994 and 2005 university enrollment doubled. In 1970 2.4 years of education was the norm; in 2005 it was 6.8 years. At the same time the quality of education and teacher training remains an extremely important development challenge, but it is not a problem which necessarily will limit Brazil in the future, depending upon the public policy adopted. As Guimaraes de Castro explains, "Brazil has had to do everything at the same time. We have been getting everyone into primary school at the same time as expanding high school and university education." (Guimaraes de Castro, 2007: 1) Critics maintain that there is reason to believe that Brazil's institutions and laws "never manage to moderate the vast differences between the rich and the poor." (Pineiro, 2009:179)

One of the most striking aspects of poverty in Brazil is the way in which lower income status overlaps with race. In education according to 2003 PNAD household survey 32% of the population was functionally illiterate and black or mulatto, 18% were white. Similarly in respect to income of the top 10% wealthiest members of the population, 13% were not white; of the poorest 10%, 68% were not white. And finally, the infant mortality rate was two thirds higher for black mothers than for white. (Luna and Klein, 2006: 223, 225, 226) The inequities of race in Brazil are structural, rooted in a previous history of many years of slavery, followed by an explicit government policy of white-only immigration. The post-military government efforts to address income

inequities rooted in the rural land rights of Kilombo communities has been implemented in a consistently ineffective manner. (Linhares, 2004) In the urban areas the state has not fared much better in respect to race. In Rio de Janeiro for example “class-based policies have not succeeded in improving the condition of Brazilian blacks relative to the white population.” (Santos Oliveira, 1996:77) The interplay of class and race in character of poverty in Brazil is the kind of historically rooted structure to which comparative historians urge to be attentive, but it does not signify its status as a developing country.

IV. DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Brazil is a democracy with a recent history of repressive, military rule. While economic development does not necessarily lead to democracy, there appears to be a positive relationship between greater national wealth and democratization. Exactly how this process evolves is much contested. Early development theorists found wealth and economic development were very important, generating a value system supportive of democracy. In this context education and literacy were positively correlated to democracy. (Lipset, 1959:80) State-building theorists would counter that it is institutional capacity which must be created for democratic demands for representation and rights can be realized. That phase can be extremely costly in life and human rights, as the years of military rule were for Brazil with upwards of 50,000 arrested and with the “systematic use of torture” as a way to control political dissent and protest. (Pinheiro, 2009: 178) What too few theorists acknowledge is that social movements, revolutionary parties, and civil wars are often necessary to dismantle the interests and classes which support institutionally capable but undemocratic states. (Tilly,1975)

Brazil’s recent military dictatorship has been replaced by many electoral cycles with four civilian governments and four popularly elected heads of state. The last two decades have ushered in considerable political stability, if the fight to control party and Congressional corruption has not yet been won. Political activity was never entirely outlawed during the military regime, and there were moments prior to the first democratically elected government when social movements had some success. The urban poor in Rio successfully controlled many aspects of favela political life. (Gay, 1994) At the same time civil and human rights were widely suppressed: for example

“black-power activism became subversive.” (Reiter and Mitchell, 2010: 4) Both the social democratic and workers party have advocated for groups suppressed in the past. Sometimes this is successful as in the case of new social services for the poor, but sometimes not as in the case of sexual rights. Social movements continue to spur new political innovations as in the case of the Porto Alegre participatory budget. (Bruce, 2004) On a local level music and culture are mobilized to undercut violence in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and set a base for political empowerment. (Neate and Platt, 2006) While queer populations have much greater freedom, their efforts to expand political rights continues to confront the same kind of conservative groups which support military rule. (Vianna and Carrara, 2010)

Brazil is not simply a formally democratic country with a constitution and elections; it is actively involved in the same kind of social struggle for rights and the definition of public policy which characterize democracy in many states. Its democratic *bête noir* is race. The ability of the state to address it is certainly sharply constrained by the ways in which class inequities overlap with racial exclusion and oppression. And in this way, its democracy is still in the throes of harnessing institutional commitment, social support, economic opportunity and resources for the kind of social change which might make its future look very different than its past. Because it is clearly on a democratic trajectory, it would be difficult to see this process of social transformation as either developing. How do we know when the process of democratization has created the kind of social and political order we might developed? If Brazil does not meet the standards of 2010, does it meet those of 1950?

IV. HISTORICAL AMNESIA AND FUTURE SHOCK:

One post-modern critique of development theory is that it essentialized the Third World. (Schurman, 2008) Perhaps not surprisingly, it did the same thing to the developed world, and in the process froze terminology that might have been more selectively applied. If we assume a big picture, more-than-one-century perspective on political development, it becomes easier to see that the United States was not a democracy in the early stages of its industrialization and economic development. For half of the century slavery was a basic feature of the American social order. Land was expropriated by the

federal government from native populations throughout the western United States with no legal recourse. Federal troops were used to fight and harass these populations. The voting franchise did not include women, African-Americans, or any non-white racial groups until mid-century when African-Americans were included upon the conclusion of slavery. However, laws were soon passed in the South which denied those rights and allowed for extensive and systematic human rights violations. Marriage across race lines was illegal in all parts of the United States. Women were constrained in all areas of public and some private life in respect to basic rights. There was both significant federal and state corruption and votes were purchased in cities like Chicago and Boston.

When we consider Brazil and its recent economic rise, it is well to remind ourselves that democratic institutions and rights that we now associate with political development will probably not be fully elaborated. There were no external analysts or commentators on issues of political and human rights in the case of the development history of the United States or the nations of Europe. For Brazil and other Third World countries it has been a very different story. The protection and the development of human rights in the South is extensively discussed in the North and often in very patronizing even racist terms, as though we ourselves do not have a history of very similar excesses of violence and corruption. One very striking, recent example of this is American foreign policy on sexual minorities which has been presented as though these issues were entirely resolved in the United States itself.

It is understandable given the history of 20th century Fascist governments, both right and left, that the material foundations of human rights might be difficult to acknowledge. But while a relatively wealthy state can choose to ignore civil liberties and human rights, it is not historically the case that human rights have ever been well established in largely agrarian economies and societies. Advocating for human rights from North to South is a slippery slope of admitting to your own cultural inadequacies while mobilizing against them elsewhere with some humility and selectivity. This slippery slope is likely to get even more difficult for northern walking-your-talking as gaps in social welfare and political rights become more obvious. Unlike an earlier experience of historically unique, first-come, development status, the new members of

the Group of 20 are already surpassing the north in some areas of development and are making their commentary on our gaps as public as possible.

For example, recent comparative OECD data on education found that China now ranks first globally in both math and science. In contrast the United States now ranks 32 in math and 23 in science. Critiqued for having only tested students in Shanghai, not many doubt that China will be able to repeat this accomplishment in other parts of the country as the strength of its educational infrastructure is expanded along with expected economic growth. Whereas there appears to be no immediate plan for the improvement of math and science education in the United States. (Dillon, 2010)

At the same time the recent reorganization of the International Monetary Fund took place as a consequence of G-20 BRIC states agreeing to increase their quotas, which gives the Fund more resources. This made Brazil, China, and India, among the Fund's top ten largest share holders, and increases their power and influence within the Fund. (Chan, 2010) All three countries have publically critiqued the United States for its poor financial policy and its lack of free trade rules.

For those countries currently designated "developed," the North-South logic of the terminology may not be breaking any bones, as in the school yard sticks-and-stones taunt, but it certainly hurts us in a north-south development theory respect to continue the ruse that the binary of what development is and who is developed has not broken down beyond any easy repair. We need to stop thinking about development as something that is owned by one set of countries and not owned by another, and start thinking about it as a concept too complex to be reduced to country rankings or simplified, hubristic policy judgments.

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