

Reinventing development from below: An invitation to a comparative exploration of social movements in the South

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Introductory Remarks

The popular classes of the global South are up in arms. From Soweto to Buenos Aires to the Narmada Valley social movements are asserting subaltern social needs for social justice and human dignity. Such movements are constructing alternatives to the dominant meaning and direction given to development by the process of global neoliberal restructuring. These experiences pose challenges to activists and scholars to both understand, and contribute to, the further development of popular protest in the South. This project seeks to make some steps in that direction.

In the 1990s a common tendency in scholarship influenced by poststructuralist theory argued that social movements in the South rejected development and were harbingers of a post-development era. The theoretical underpinnings, methodological strategies and substantive arguments – including the arguments concerning social movements – of post-development thought have been substantively criticized. Indeed, critiques of post-development have, as Gillian Hart argues, “run their course” and, we would add, served the purpose of highlighting the shortcomings of such perspectives¹.

Our project seeks to move beyond criticism to suggest a different understanding of social movements in the South, which locates popular protest in relation to the shift in the balance of class power brought about by neoliberal restructuring. It also seeks to trace changes in the characteristic features of popular responses to neoliberal restructuring across the regions of the global South. The basic argument and perspective that the project wishes to develop is that there is occurring a gradual and uneven shift from defensive projects seeking to defend the moral economy of developmentalism towards offensive projects that seek to construct alternatives both to neoliberalism and developmentalism – a *reinvention* of development.

Elaborating the Argument:

From Defensive to Offensive Popular Responses to Neoliberalism

The mid-1970s witnessed the onset of neoliberal restructuring in the South. Fundamental to this process was the erosion of a state/society relationship that can be referred to as ‘the moral economy’ of developmentalism. This was constructed by a social compact between elites and popular classes in which a ‘social wage guarantee’ underpinned by price subsidies and public services secured the relative allegiance and acquiescence of the latter to the state-building projects of the former. This

¹ Gillian Hart (2001): “Development Critiques in the 1990s: Culs de Sac and Promising Paths”, *Progress in Human Geography* 25 (4), p. 654.

compromise kept the class power of capital in check. However, neoliberal restructuring has effectively reversed this scenario through a process of “accumulation by dispossession” – a contemporary form of primitive accumulation where social, ecological, cultural, and intellectual “commons” are commodified and brought within the orbit of capitalist accumulation².

William Robinson argues that the “intensive enlargement” of capitalism that has characterized world capitalism in the late twentieth century has “disembedded” capital from the constraints upon accumulation that were characteristic of organized capitalism. The constraints that were removed through neoliberal restructuring were intrinsically connected to an epoch of capitalism where the nation-state was the central institutional form of capitalist reproduction. The territorial and institutional limits of the nation-state enabled popular classes to demand the instalment of certain constraints on the power of capital and some form of social control over capitalist production and accumulation through state intervention and redistribution. Neoliberal restructuring brought this configuration to an end as it has sought to create a level playing field for capital worldwide. By opening up virtually every sphere of social life to the logic of capitalist accumulation, the global market has become “the sole organizing power in the economic and social sphere”³. There has been a transition, then, from national economies articulated through exchange, where labour exercised power through state intervention to an increasingly globalized production process characterized by “the fragmentation and decentralization of complex production chains and the worldwide dispersal and functional integration of the different segments in these chains”. The chief beneficiaries of this process have been the emergent transnational capitalist class. Those who are most disadvantaged by the process are the working and popular classes – the emergent global proletariat – whose traditional bases of power have been undermined and eroded.

Initially, the sundering of the material basis of developmentalism and the moral economy of the developmental state provoked resistance that sought to reclaim and restore it to its former status: “Protestors demanded that the state meet its responsibilities to the people, who, during the decades of patron-client politics, had upheld their end of the bargain”⁴. Yet, the process of reconfiguration of the balance of class power engendered by neoliberalism has reduced the political capacity of popular classes and the economic and political capacity of the nation-state to impose restrictions on capital and redistribute the social surplus. These processes impose certain limits on the viability of an oppositional subaltern project centred on the reclaiming of developmentalism. Combined with the failures in both developmentalism and neoliberalism to provide the conditions for the satisfaction of subaltern needs, this has created the seedbeds from which movement projects from below that seek to reinvent development have sprouted. Whilst conducting their struggles in determinate locales, these movements are not promulgating a politics of particularist localism celebrated in post-development theory. Rather by struggling to fundamentally alter – i.e. reinvent – the dominant direction and meaning of development to revolve around the satisfaction of subaltern needs for social justice and human dignity – and developing practises in which this reinvention actually materializes – these movements are crafting new universals that may serve as cornerstones in the building of solidarities between particular movements in particular places struggling against a common and profoundly global opponent.

² David Harvey (2003): *The New Imperialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press; David Harvey (2005): *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

³ William Robinson (2004): *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class and State in a Transnational World*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, p. 89, 18.

⁴ John Walton and David Seddon (1994): *Free Markets and Food Riots: The Politics of Global Adjustment*, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 50.

What Are We Looking for in this Project?

This project would seek to bring together the contributions of scholars engaged in the study of social movements in the South, whose general outlook resonates with that suggested above. Its aim would be to bring these contributions into comparative dialogue. Practically, this would involve the following:

- An edited volume of in-depth case studies (10.000-12.000 words) of social movements in and across the global South and across the urban-rural divide.
- A chapter of comparative discussion – preferably collectively crafted on the basis of at least one actual face-to-face seminar with all contributing authors.
- The volume would be edited by Motta and Nilsen, and would contain an introductory chapter presenting the theoretical framework, which unites the various contributions.

For a sample of our own initial efforts to build towards this kind of exploration of social movements in the South, see our paper “Reinventing Development in the South: Patterns of Popular Protest in India and Argentina” – accessible at http://www.nodo50.org/cubasigloXXI/taller/motta_311205.pdf