CHAPTER 14

World Social Forum: Re-imaging Development and the Global South beyond the Neo-colonial Gaze

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Historians of the concept of development and its attendant economic practice of the capitalist mode of production such as Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton have provided seminal discussions of this notion in efforts to demonstrate not only its European roots but also the ways in which social forces in Europe contested the practices and effects generated by capitalism. While the concept of development and its portrayed outcomes such as progress, modernity, etc., is not new, it nonetheless has different genealogy as it pertains to social formations in the global South. Consequently, the ways in which it has translated in these regions and its effects cannot be assumed to take the European trajectory.

The normative root of the concept of development as it is applied in relation to the contemporary global South has its origin in European imperial projects. Thus, the evolution of the notion of development as a domain of knowledge in the post-1945 period takes over where colonial notions of the White man’s burden that called for the ‘civilizing’ missions for the savage ‘other’ in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean and Latin America left off. Development discourse though is not just a domain of knowledge but generates economic and political practices that while mediated by local historical and social realities have enabled the reproduction of an unequal world system since the high noon of modernization theory in the 1950s and the contemporary era of neoliberalism. This chapter has two parts with part one discussing how the conceptualization of development in hegemonic frameworks of development has enabled the reproduction of colonial systems of domination. The second section contends that the

1 Cowen and Shenton 1996.
nascent nature of the World Social Forum process notwithstanding, it provides a major political opportunity structure for the re-imagining of economic and political processes in the differentiated global South and of the South itself beyond the hegemonic European-North American neo-colonial gaze.

Development Theory and Practice: Neo-colonial Systems of Domination

Theories of development range from critical perspectives such as dependency, neo-Marxist, and feminist, to liberal informed traditions such as modernization, rational choice and neoliberalism. Our central concern here are hegemonic development theories such as neoliberalism and its earlier predecessor modernization theory given their critical influence in academic and policy circles, a factor that has resulted in their powerful influence in key turning points in economic and political processes in the global South. While not offering a full discussion of these theories\(^2\) we discuss the central ways in which hegemonic theories of development historically and in the contemporary era of neoliberalism have facilitated the reproduction of colonial systems of domination and in the process the marginalization of the majority of social formations in the global South. For our purposes here we argue that these theories have perpetuated the colonial system of domination in three ways: naturalization of the global economic-political hierarchy; the ahistorical, pathological and racist representation of the global South; and the domesticated representation of capitalism.

Naturalization of the Global Economic-Political Power Hierarchy

During the colonial conjuncture, activities of imperial powers in the contemporary global South were represented as being morally just and mainly concerned with the establishment of “pre-take off” foundations for economic and political modernization processes of these societies as outlined in Walt Rostow’s schema of stages of development.\(^3\) In society after society,


\(^3\) Rostow 1960.