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Exorcising the Specter of Development: Human Rights in the 21st Century

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Abstract

With the commodification of rights as private privileges under neoliberal capitalism, movements in the Global South have begun to reinterpret the human rights canon. Cosmopolitan notions of human rights have spread from the Global South only to face parochial resistance from postmodern intellectuals and neoliberal power structures in the Global North. In advancing a vision of “cosmopolitanism from below” as an antidote to neoliberalism, these alliances have articulated their demands in terms of economic and social rights. In the process, they have ruptured the connection – crucial to US hegemony from the late 1940s through the early 1970s – between human rights and development. Supporting these new interpretations of human rights discourse, we argue for an explicit decoupling of human rights from previously existing development projects predicated on “catching up” through programmed industrialization. We contend that proposals for a new global system in the 21st century could be centered not on micronationalist localisms, but rather on a genuinely inclusive universalism. The concept of human rights *in our times* is rooted in world-historical struggles that must include the universal right to food, health, and prosperity, and social ownership of resources on the one hand and freedom from exploitation, inequality, geographical location, gender and sexual domination, racial control, structural violence, and environmental degradation on the other hand. In this sense, the concept of societies without borders is inextricably linked with a notion of human rights that in its breadth, depth, inclusivity, and universality goes far beyond the limited class-based notion of rights rooted in the advent of bourgeois civil society and inherited by the development project.

Keywords

development, human rights, US hegemony, UN, globalization

The UN, Development, and Human Rights

A specter is hunting the Global North – the specter of cosmopolitanism. With the commodification of rights as private privileges under neoliberalism,

and with the retreat of the state from the Keynesian social contract, state socialism, and Third World developmentalism, grassroots movements in the Global South have instinctively appealed to the concept of human rights. Cosmopolitan notions of human rights have spread from the Global South only to face parochial resistance from power structures in the Global North. We recognize and theorize Southern cosmopolitanism in the form of demands for general rights as a mode of resistance against neoliberal particularism. Exploring the role of popular mobilizations, NGOs, and UN agencies in delineating new interpretations of the human rights canon, we argue for a more conscious, deliberate, and explicit delinking of human rights not only from previously existing development projects (whether bourgeois, non-aligned, or “socialist”) predicated on “catching up” through programmed industrialization, but also from the foundational concept of development itself. At the same time, we caution against throwing out the “baby” (namely, the bundle of rights – and hence social institutions to maintain them) with the “bathwater” (namely, a developmentalism that carries the baggage of nationalism and imperialism). In the words of Araghi and McMichael:

As centuries of struggles of the western and nonwestern subordinated groups (slaves, women, blacks, workers, peasants, indigents, gays, lesbians, refugees, the Native and colonial peoples, etc.) have transformed and expanded the original bourgeois conception of “human” and “human rights” it has been precisely the *contraction* of the historically expanded meaning of human rights (and the delegitimation of the demands rooted in this conception) *via a particularization/relativization* of the meaning of “human” and “rights” that is at the ideological core of neoliberalism.¹

In other words, in retreating from the social, the discourse of neoliberalism celebrates particularity and the search for new particularized identities in the accompanying hollowness of the rhetoric of progress.² We caution against post-Foucauldian critiques of development³ which tend to see development as a mere ideological imposition from above – divorced from the demands of the subalterns for rights and cosmopolitan privileges.⁴ In contrast, we paint a picture of development in its imperfect and incomplete relationship with human rights.

¹) Araghi and McMichael, 2004.

²) Araghi and McMichael, forthcoming.

³) cf. Escobar, 1995.

⁴) For an excellent analysis see Seidman, 1994.

We pursue three overlapping objectives. First, in examining the UN's impact on the academic field of development studies, we historicize contemporary disputes on alternative development, collective rights, and the possible restructuring of the system of global governance. Second, in tracing the trajectory of Third Worldism in the UN – from the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s, through the Declaration for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974, to more recent pronouncements on the “right to development” – we challenge the widespread tendency not only to conflate the purviews of the UN and the World Bank, but also to underestimate the evolution of these organizations from the period after the Second World War to the present day. Third, in emphasizing the role of the UN as an incubator for *critiques* of mainstream developmentalism, we illuminate the force field of (some) UN agencies, NGOs, and movements pushing for the expansion of human rights in the direction of economic, social, cultural, and environmental entitlements.⁵ In pursuing these objectives, we sketch a world-historical approach to the sociology of human rights – a growing field in academia.

What is the relationship between development and human rights? For more than sixty years, the paired concepts of development (understood as planned social change to improve living standards in the poor countries of the world) and human rights (understood as a set of individual protections and collective goods guaranteed to all of the world's peoples) have legitimized the policies of the World Bank, the UN, and national governments, guided the relief and advocacy roles of NGOs, informed the grievances of social movements and community groups, and inspired social scientists to produce theoretical treatises and empirical studies. Originally mobilized to create a “fit” between the requirements of US hegemony and the demands of exploited and excluded populations across the world (including workers, women, subordinated racial groups, and colonized peoples), the concepts of development⁶ and human rights found expression not only in the inter-governmental organizations established by the US government, but also in such aspirational documents as the UN Charter (1945), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and subsequent declarations.

While the term “development” denoted a set of policies designed to bring progress to specific *national* contexts, the term “human rights” encapsulated the widespread desire for an *international* framework to ensure a range of

⁵ Frezza 2008a; Frezza 2008b.

⁶ Araghi 1999.

individual freedoms and social entitlements.⁷ Though imperceptible in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, while national self-determination remained a priority for colonized peoples, the joint articulation of development and human rights concealed the conflictual relationship between the nationalist and internationalist components of US hegemony.⁸ When the former colonies of Europe had achieved their formal independence, initiated development programs, and begun to grapple with the logic of the Cold War, the contradiction inherent in what we call “nationalism within internationalism”⁹ intensified. This contradiction reached a fever pitch with the emergence of Third Worldism in the UN system. Subject to both bourgeois and socialist interpretations, the term “Third Worldism”¹⁰ came to denote Pan-Arabism, Pan-Africanism, African socialism, and similar tendencies in Asia – a range of perspectives that emphasized the structural impediments to nation-building and development in the non-Western world.¹¹ Four signposts – the Bandung Conference of Asian and African states in 1955, the first meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, the issuance of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1966, and the NIEO in 1974 – marked the maturation of Third Worldism both within and beyond the confines of the UN.

⁷ McMichael 2008; see also Araghi’s (1995) concept of “nationalism within internationalism.”

⁸ The tension between nationalism/development and internationalism/human rights finds its roots in the debates around the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and the division of the international working-class movement into socialist and communist factions in 1919 and 1920. Accordingly, we call attention to an unexplored aspect of the rapprochement between Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin – a topic that long ago received much coverage in the domain of diplomatic history (especially with the influential publications of E.H. Carr and Arno Mayer). In essence, Wilson and Lenin agreed on the need not only to end the “old diplomacy” of the great powers, but also to affirm the right of colonized peoples to national self-determination. Consequently, the two leaders – one an advocate of “bourgeois internationalism,” the other an advocate of “proletarian internationalism” – were forced to broach the question: What would happen to the former colonies of Europe after they achieved their national liberation? Although Wilson and Lenin could only arrive at a vague answer to this question, they both speculated about possible remedies for “underdevelopment” amidst the turmoil of the First World War. This set the tone for bourgeois developmentalism in the US sphere and socialist developmentalism in the Soviet sphere (see Araghi 1995; 2000; 2003).

⁹ Araghi 1995.

¹⁰ For a world-historical perspective supportive of this analysis see Patel and McMichael 2004.

¹¹ Berger 2004.

In exploring the idea systems, policy proposals, and institutional arrangements associated with development and human rights respectively, this article elucidates the evolution of the US–UN relationship in two periods: from the late 1940s to the early 1970s and from the early 1970s to the present. Just as the demands of labor, through the New Deal at home, along with the Marshall Plan and the Point Four Program abroad, “meant that the US could present itself, and be widely perceived, as the bearer of the interests, not just of capital, but of labor as well,”¹² the disintegration of Keynesianism, social democracy, and Third World developmentalism would harbor significant ramifications for US power. If it was through its support for national self-determination – first codified as a transnational norm with President Wilson’s advocacy of the League of Nations and later institutionalized by the UN – that the US bolstered its hegemonic status, it is not surprising that the widespread sclerosis of post-colonial states would be linked to the decline of US hegemony.¹³

This reveals a two-sided paradox. On one side, such neoliberal policies as fiscal austerity, privatization, deregulation, financial liberalization, and free trade – though spearheaded by the US government and implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the WB, and ultimately the World Trade Organization (WTO) – have effectively *weakened* US hegemony. On the other side, a spate of social problems – including poverty, job insecurity, exclusion, migration, and environmental degradation – have forced UN agencies into the orbit of NGOs seeking to compensate for the “retreat of the state” from social programs. In short, a range of phenomena commonly associated with globalization – including the implementation of neoliberalism (to resolve the crises of welfare and development states, while facilitating the functioning of transnational corporations) and post-Fordism (to undermine the compact between capital and labor typical of the developmentalist era, while expanding sources of unorganized labor) – have nudged UN agencies into the role of providing information, networking opportunities, and material support to NGOs.

In contributing to the debates on US hegemony, global governance, and transnational norms, we explore the world-historical process by which the two *intellectual* underpinnings of US hegemony – the concept of development (with its *nationalist* orientation and connection to *positivist* social science) and the concept of human rights (with its *internationalist* orientation and

¹²⁾ Arrighi 1990.

¹³⁾ Ibid.

connection to *normative* political and legal theory) – came into conflict with one another. By “intellectual underpinnings,” we mean the bases of what Michael Mann calls “ideological power” – an important complement to the economic, political, and military power of the hegemon.¹⁴ From the dawn of US hegemony in the late 1940s through its first crisis in the early 1970s, the two Enlightenment-tinged concepts were presumed to be inextricable from one another. The linkage made considerable sense to policy-makers, activists, and scholars. While the concept of development – routinely defined as “catching-up” through programmed industrialization – informed the US-sponsored reconstruction of the global economy (with the recently created WB serving as the curator of development), the concept of human rights – primarily understood in terms of civil and political rights and articulated with the concept of national self-determination – informed the US-sponsored reconstruction of the interstate system (with the newly minted UN serving as the custodian of human rights). Though embodied in the WB and the UN respectively, the paired concepts of development and human rights were repeatedly claimed, contested, and reformulated by national governments and popular forces in the Third World.

In the world-historical conjuncture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which witnessed widespread social movement activity amidst the first shocks to US hegemony, two examples of “alternative development” in the name of human rights appeared – however haltingly – in Tanzania (where Julius Nyerere’s regime advocated “equal rights and equal opportunities” along with “a gradually increasing basic level of material welfare before any individual lives in luxury”¹⁵ under the banner of *Ujamma*) and Chile (where Salvador Allende’s regime – inspired by the dependency theorists – pursued a form of socialist developmentalism).¹⁶ Although the Chilean experiment in socialist developmentalism came to an abrupt end with the US-supported coup d’état of 1973 and the subsequent dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, who ushered in the first major experiment in neoliberalism under the advice of US-trained economists known as “los Chicago boys,” the spirit of self-criticism and revision survived in the academic field of development studies. Accordingly, we shift our attention to the UN’s role in cultivating self-criticism in development studies.

¹⁴ Mann 2003.

¹⁵ Nyerere 1968: 340.

¹⁶ Rist 2002: 123–139.

The UN, Development Studies, and the Origins of Third Worldism

Since its founding amidst the postwar reconstruction of the interstate system and the global economy in the late 1940s and early 1950s – a US-led process that featured the inauguration of such inter-governmental organizations as the UN, the IMF, the WB, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), along with the codification of national self-determination, development, human rights as transnational norms – the field of development studies has entertained wide-ranging debates about the role of state planning and market mechanisms, processes of industrialization, and trajectories of decolonization in the Third World. In bringing scholars, policymakers, and activists from across the globe into contact with one another, the UN served as a forum for these debates. In effect, the UN's role as an intellectual caldron complemented its roles in security, peacekeeping, state-building, poverty alleviation, and humanitarian relief. Often bearers of advanced degrees and acquainted with the culture of academia, UN officials and staff members had a pronounced impact on programs in development studies in university systems across the world.

Notwithstanding the rigid formulations of modernization theory – a paradigm premised on the idea that all societies should follow the same developmental path from “tradition” to “modernity” or from “backwardness” to “advancement” by mimicking the industrial revolutions of Great Britain and the United States – the interdisciplinary field of development studies has always shown a penchant for self-criticism.¹⁷ How can we account for the internal dissent that has punctuated the history of development studies? Doubtless, it was partly attributable to the spirit of heterodoxy and experimentation that suffused postwar circles of Keynesians, institutionalists, and social democrats in the US, Western Europe, and Latin America – an eclectic array of professional economists and policymakers devoted to the task of learning the lessons of the Great Depression and building on experiments in public works, deficit spending, and war finance during the worldwide crisis (1914–1945). As Albert O. Hirschman – a heterodox economist who worked first for the US Federal Reserve Board on the reconstruction of Western Europe and later for the National Planning Board of Colombia – has shown, the Keynesian Revolution was “exported” from the US to the rest of the non-communist world through the Marshall Plan and President Truman's Point Four Program.¹⁸

¹⁷ Kanth 1994.

¹⁸ Hirschman 1995: 139–153.

Declaring the end of the “old imperialism” and acknowledging the need to institutionalize the “rights of man,” President Truman’s Inaugural Address in 1949 promised support for the UN, the Marshall Plan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and a “program of development based on the concept of fair dealing.”¹⁹ Truman continued:

[We] must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas... I believe that we should... foster capital investment in areas needing development... This should be a cooperative enterprise in which all nations work together through the United Nations and its specialized agencies... All countries, including our own, will greatly benefit from a constructive program for the better use of the world’s human and natural resources. Experience shows that our commerce with other countries expands as they progress industrially and economically.²⁰

Conceptualized as a means of bringing the insights of the US New Deal and its European offshoot, the Marshall Plan to bear on the non-communist nations of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, the Point Four Program envisaged a convergence between the strategic interests of the US and the needs of the “underdeveloped” regions of the globe. On the level of ideas, the program promoted cross-pollination among internationalists in the discipline of political science and Keynesians in the discipline of economics. On the level of institutions, the program presupposed a close relationship between the WB (and other lending agencies) and the UN.

Though imbued with the spirit of internationalism and connected to US-based currents in economics (including institutionalism), Keynesianism had a complicated and ambiguous relationship with modernization theory – an issue that is routinely ignored in the literature on development. Whereas Keynesianism emerged in the discipline of economics as a critique of liberalism (i.e., the classical economics of Smith and Ricardo), modernization theory emerged in the social sciences as a tool for analyzing the impoverished regions of the world. This points to another factor that augmented the level of dissent: the participation of political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers – as well as economists – in the establishment of development studies as an academic domain. Owing to its interdisciplinary character, the field was forced to treat development as a multifaceted problem with political, social, cultural, and geographic

¹⁹ Truman Library Homepage.

²⁰ Ibid.

components. A final factor was the intrinsic malleability of development as a concept. Owing to its connection to Enlightenment visions of scientificity, historical progress, and human emancipation, the concept of development harbored a seductive appeal for social scientists and policymakers not only in the US and Western Europe, but also in the Third World. Though designed to generate explicit policy prescriptions, the concept of development could be adapted to different national contexts.

These three factors – the relative openness of the Keynesian-developmental consensus, the antidotes to economic reductionism offered by neighboring disciplines, and the continually shifting definition of development – formed the historical context of a major UN initiative: the founding of the Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964 to coordinate the operations of the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, and the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA). In essence, UNCTAD was designed to compensate for the built-in tendency on the part of the WB, the IMF, and GATT to privilege the interests of wealthy countries over those of poor ones. In this light, the “Joint Declaration of the Developing Countries (1963), which announced the creation of UNCTAD and the Geneva Conference’s “Final Act” (1964), which set UNCTAD’s machinery in motion, can be seen as significant precursors of the NIEO.

While serving as the Executive Secretary of ECLA from 1950 to 1963 and the Secretary-General of UNCTAD from 1964 to 1969, Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch made an exemplary contribution not only to UN efforts to compensate for the deficiencies of the WB, but also to ongoing debates in the field of development studies. Renowned for using the term “center” to designate the industrialized world and the term “periphery” to denote the world of primary commodity producers, Prebisch and his colleagues at ECLA and UNCTAD exerted a decisive influence on the import-substitution industrialization (ISI) model of development that held sway in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s.²¹ In espousing ISI, Prebisch contended that the underdevelopment of Latin America – stemming first from Spanish colonialism, then from British hegemony, and finally from US hegemony – had been continually reproduced by unequal terms of trade. Though fraught with theoretical and practical problems, the ISI model provoked a series of disputes on the strengths and limitations of mainstream developmentalism.

²¹) Araghi 1991.

Meanwhile, the projects of ECLA and UNCTAD – impeded as they were by limited funding, uneasy relations with the WB, and tensions associated with the Cold War – provided limited relief for Latin America and the Third World. Nevertheless, under the leadership of Prebisch, these organizations influenced the *critiques* of development offered by such dependency theorists as Andre Gunder Frank and Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the late 1960s. Phrased differently, the “structuralism” of Prebisch, ECLA, and UNCTAD – though deeply embedded in the Keynesian-developmental consensus – contained the seeds of the powerful critique of development offered by the dependency theorists. Over time, this critique was applied not only to the development policies of the WB, but also to the unrealized proposals of the UN itself – including the widely celebrated NIEO.

In this context, dependency theory provided the discourse of what we call left-leaning national-developmentalism. In emphasizing the unequal and exploitative relationship between the center and the periphery, calling attention to the painful legacy of colonialism and the imperfections of the decolonization process, and intervening in debates on the history of capitalism, dependency theory and its principal heir, world-systems analysis, prefigured subsequent critiques of development. In the early 1970s, an array of factors – including the triple crisis of Keynesian welfare states in the First World, state socialist regimes in the Second World, and development states in the Third World, the restructuring of the Bretton Woods system and the concomitant alteration of the purviews of the IMF and WB, deepening tensions between the US government and the UN, and direct challenges to US hegemony (including the Vietnam War) – prompted world-systems analysts to rethink the concept of development itself. Although the world-systems perspective criticized the nation-state framework – arguing that development must be considered a property of the *system* as a whole – it did not extricate itself from the logic of development and underdevelopment altogether.²² Nevertheless, world-systems analysis had a decisive impact not only in methodological debates in the subfield of historical sociology, but also on theoretical debates in development studies and its offshoots, critical development studies and critical globalization studies.²³

²²) Araghi 2003: 59–60; Araghi 2009.

²³) After a decade of intense deliberation on the “impassé” of development theory and practice, the interdisciplinary field of critical development studies crystallized in the mid-

Since the promulgation of the NIEO and related documents in the early 1970s, specialists in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and geography have routinely challenged the concept of development. Influenced by such theoretical currents as world-systems analysts, postcolonial studies, post-structuralism, feminist political economy, and ecofeminism, these specialists have highlighted six flaws in mainstream developmentalism: positivism – defined as the belief that social science should adopt the methods of natural science and aspire to value neutrality; methodological nationalism – defined as the assumption that the nation-state constitutes the fundamental unit of analysis; Eurocentrism – defined as the belief that Europe achieved dominance in the global system by virtue of its cultural superiority; economism – defined as the belief that economic growth holds the key to human progress; gender neutrality – defined as the belief that gender roles need not be taken into consideration; and indifference to the environmental destruction that accompanies large-scale development projects. In light of its status as a touchstone for academic critics of development, the NIEO merits further examination.

The UN, the NIEO, and the Legacy of Third Worldism

Though conceived as a pillar of US hegemony, based in New York, and reliant on funding from the US government, the UN achieved a degree of autonomy in the three decades after the Second World War. In legitimizing the right to national self-determination, granting representation to newly independent nations, establishing a venue for the adjudication of disputes, and providing the basis of a global human rights regime, the UN Charter set the stage for the organization's mutation from a close collaborator with the US government to a relatively autonomous actor. Over time,

1990s (Vandergeest and Buttell 1988; Schuurman 1993). Far from forming a cohesive school, critical development scholars can be seen as participants in an immanent critique of the theory and practice of development (Peet and Hartwick 1999; Desai and Potter 2002). By “immanent critique,” we mean a concerted effort on the part of academic specialists to rethink the origins, evolution, and future of development. Critical development scholars recognize not only that development theory remains plagued by semantic ambiguities and contested interpretations, but also that the social problems that created the need for post-war macro-economic planning (in its Keynesian, state socialist, and Third Worldist forms) have worsened in the age of globalization (Leys 1996; Nederveen Pieterse 2004). As a consequence, the fields of critical *development* studies and critical *globalization* studies are essentially inextricable from one another (George 2005; Robinson 2005; Mittelman 2005).

the UN managed to distinguish itself from its ostensible partner, the WB – a phenomenon that is often overlooked in the literature on development. Struggling to bridge two divides – that between the “capitalist” West and the “socialist” East and that between the First and Third Worlds – the UN became an arena for the expression of Third Worldist demands. Whereas the UN’s structure facilitated the growth of Third Worldism, the WB’s close ties to the IMF and the US Treasury precluded Third Worldism from taking root there.

Drafted by UNCTAD and ratified by the UN General Assembly, the NIEO and its companion document, the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, questioned the efficacy of the development policies implemented from the late 1940s through the early 1970s. Drawing on the right to development – a normative principle that had been incubated in UN agencies since the debates on the ICESCR in the mid-1960s – the NIEO advocated greater autonomy for Third World governments in regulating the activities of transnational corporations, nationalizing foreign property, establishing associations of primary commodity producers, and protecting indigenous industries and agriculture from foreign competition.²⁴ Despite its roots in previous UN documents – not to mention its consistency with the broad consensus on development – the NIEO created a significant uproar among scholars, policymakers, and activists. Why did the NIEO have such a profound impact on scholars? Why did it precipitate such a controversy among policymakers? In light of the widespread tendency to define the NIEO as a watershed event in the history of development, these questions merit further examination.

Reflecting on the limitations of Third Worldism, which he aptly characterizes as a retreat from the dependency school’s explanation of the “development of under-development,” Gilbert Rist advances a provocative argument:

...the NIEO does no more than reinforce the existing order of things; it proposes virtually nothing over and above the promotion of ‘development’ envisaged in mainstream economics. Three closely linked concepts are at the root of the NIEO: economic growth, expansion of world trade, and increased ‘aid’ by the industrial countries. All the concrete proposals are intended to satisfy this threefold ‘requirement.’²⁵

²⁴) UN Documents Cooperation Circles Homepage.

²⁵) Rist 2002: 149.

While we accept the crux of Rist's argument, we offer a significant caveat. Rist's use of the term "mainstream economics" to characterize the underpinnings of the NIEO is potentially misleading because it ignores the historical passage of Keynesianism–developmentalism from heterodoxy to orthodoxy in the period after the Second World War. Although academic economists and government policymakers continued to define growth as the central objective of macroeconomic policy, conventional wisdom about how to achieve growth – not to mention such objectives as full employment, greater equality, poverty reduction, and a social safety net – changed considerably in the postwar period.²⁶ Accordingly, in providing a corrective to Rist's analysis of the NIEO, we emphasize not only the historical specificity of the Keynesian–developmentalist consensus (1945–early 1970s), but also the divergent paths taken by the UN and the WB – the two institutions most closely associated with development. In providing all nations with equal representation in the General Assembly, the UN's structure cultivated Third Worldism by permitting vociferous criticism of the US, the Soviet Union, and the development policies espoused by the two superpowers. In contrast, in granting the US government with veto power on major decisions, the WB's structure precluded the emergence of Third Worldism altogether. Thus, the UN, in part, served as a think tank for critics of mainstream developmentalism and US hegemony, while the WB devised, implemented, and legitimized development policies that were favorable to the US government.

With the global crisis of the early 1970s – a period that placed particular strain on the Third World – the gap between the UN and the WB widened considerably. Though virtually powerless to administer development programs – a task left to the WB and the national governments to which it provided loans – the UN served as a laboratory for development paradigms, the primary arbiter of such transnational norms as human rights and the right to national self-determination, and the centerpiece of the global governance system. Notwithstanding dramatic changes in the interstate system and global economy, the UN continues to serve these functions in the current period – but under vastly different global conditions.

This places us in a position to explain the significance of the NIEO. Though couched in Third Worldist rhetoric and advanced in a climate of anti-imperialism, the NIEO did not represent a radical departure from

²⁶ Hall 1989; George 2000.

previous UN documents.²⁷ In alluding to past development programs, the NIEO failed to explain differential outcomes in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. In speculating about future development programs, the NIEO failed to deliver a coherent blueprint for a more equitable and sustainable global system. Yet the Third Worldist discourse of the NIEO and the context of anti-imperialism proved significant insofar as they reflected structural antagonisms in the global system.

In the three years leading to its definitive rejection of the NIEO, the US government had opted to terminate dollar-gold convertibility, reorganize the Bretton Woods system (beginning the shift from development proper to debt management, inflation control, and what would come to be known as Structural Adjustment), and support a coup d'état in Chile that replaced a significant experiment in socialist developmentalism with the first major experiment with neoliberalism (under the tutelage of elite economists trained by Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago). With the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs in Jamaica, Bolivia, Zaire, and dozens of other countries, the gap between the IMF/WB and the UN grew considerably. Thus, placed in world-historical perspective, the NIEO stands as a monument to the breakdown of the Keynesian-developmental consensus and the advent of the neoliberal consensus.

With the transition from Fordism (wage-planning on a national scale) to post-Fordism (industrial relocation to low-wage zones) – a process led by transnational corporations and facilitated by technological advances in communications and shipping, the restructuring of the IMF and the WB, and the partial dismantling of the Keynesian regulatory framework in the First World – scholars, policymakers, and activists gradually lost interest in the tripartite schema of First, Second, and Third Worlds. This process was finalized with the disintegration of the Second World – the Soviet Union and its state socialist allies – between 1989 and 1991. Significantly, the rapid incorporation of the Second World into the global economy under the direction of the IMF constituted the final blow for socialist developmentalism. As a consequence, the terms “Global North” and “Global South” eventually replaced the schema of “three worlds” as the preferred means of designating inequality in the world. Far from being a mere semantic issue, the new conceptualization of global inequality reflected the nullification of Third Worldism as a perspective, an idea system, and a set of policy proposals. In our conclusion, we explore the successor to Third

²⁷ Rist 2002.

Worldism – namely, the advocacy of second-generation rights to equality and third-generation rights to solidarity as a means of bringing to fruition a more egalitarian, inclusive, peaceful, just, and sustainable world.

Conclusion

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its state socialist allies in Eastern Europe, the fracturing of Yugoslavia, the official establishment of the European Union, the dismantling of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, and a wave of financial crises in Asia and Latin America, the global landscape had changed considerably.²⁸ Notwithstanding a series of cataclysmic events, a spirit of cosmopolitanism has spread from the Global South to the Global North. Though tarnished by its past association with European colonialism and its repeated appropriation by the US and other great powers, the concept of human rights has proven felicitous to a spectrum of popular forces across the world – including the Landless Rural Workers Movement in Brazil, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, and the World Social Forum. Meanwhile, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have expanded their purviews beyond the defense of civil and political rights to the advocacy of economic, social, and cultural rights. Finally, building on its campaign for a New World Information and Communication Order in the late 1970s, the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization has brought scholars and NGOs together to promote electronic democracy. This trend promises to stimulate a wealth of sociological research on human rights.

Citing the role of popular mobilizations, NGOs, and UN agencies in delineating new interpretations of the human rights canon, we have argued for the need to extricate human rights – understood primarily in terms of collective rights to a more egalitarian, inclusive, and sustainable social system – not only from previously existing development projects built on “catching up” through programmed industrialization, but also from the baggage-laden concept of development itself. Where does this leave us? In

²⁸) The political turning point was the 1979 revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua. Both were understood by the emerging neoconservatives as a result of Carter’s promotion of human rights and his indecisiveness in military response. Both revolutions (despite the later dominance of Khomeinism in Iran) were profoundly motivated by mass opposition to the widespread use of torture and violation of human rights. See Araghi 1999; Rejali 2007.

our view, proposals for a new global system in the 21st century should be centered not on nationalist developmentalism, but rather on a genuinely inclusive universalism. What are universal rights? With neoliberal capitalism abandoning, both in rhetoric and practice, the recognition of universal rights, we can begin by acknowledging the historic significance of the 1948 universal declaration of human rights. Whereas the promulgation of the Declaration marked the end of an Interregnum that brought two World Wars, a Great Depression and the Holocaust, the 60th anniversary of the Declaration marks the emergence of new possibilities for human emancipation. The realization of the bundle of rights associated with a better life and longevity does not entail an emphasis on growth as the apex of economic life, the imposition of a uniform development project, or recourse to a linear narrative of human history. On the contrary, rights bundling draws on the praxis of social movements against poverty, inequality, exploitation, exclusion, structural violence, and environmental degradation. In lieu of reinventing development for the 21st century, it remains for scholars and activists in the field of human rights to delineate explicit programs for actualizing the right to a better life and longevity on a global scale.

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