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Alternative to Eurocentric Development Theory: African-Centered Theory of Development

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Abstract

The central thesis of this paper is that Africa needs to formulate a development theory that should guide her quest for development. It is the submission of the paper that the development theories and prescriptions that have been sold to Africa cannot take her to development as they are rooted in a social, historical, and political setting that are completely different from those that obtain in Africa. Arising from the faulty premise of Western social science, an alternative development theory is suggested, one that values the human person, where spirituality is central, and the environment enjoys a prime place. All development is ideologically driven, African development should be ethically driven.

Keywords: *alternative development theory, ethical development, spirituality, western social science*

Introduction

It is now more than four decades since Claude Ake, the Nigerian scholar, cautioned against wholesome embrace of the social sciences without subjecting the terms and concepts employed by social scientists to critical scrutiny. He warned that we should not be deceived by the veneer of “science” woven around the social sciences and thus be lulled into swallowing hook, line and sinker, not only the terms and concepts employed by social scientists but also the underlying assumptions behind them. Critical scholars like Ake (1979) are justifiably suspicious of the social sciences which they regard as no more than imperialism in the guise of scientific knowledge.

Ake provides the point of departure for this discussion, he draws attention to the need for social scientists to be wary of embracing concepts and terms, using them loosely, and attempting to apply them to social milieus other than the ones in which they were conceived. Ake (1979) says:

Social science, any science, does not exist in a vacuum. It arises in a particular historical context, a particular mode of production. Science in any society is apt to be geared to the interests and impregnated with the values of the ruling class, which ultimately controls the conditions under which science is produced and consumed, by financing research, setting national priorities and controlling the educational system, etc. (Ake, 1979, p. 134).

Science is about subjecting ideas and assumptions to critical evaluation, exposing fallacies and inconsistencies, as well as affirming the truth. Unfortunately, many a myth, lie or falsehood had been clothed, packaged and presented as the truth in the social sciences to be accepted as such by less discerning minds, who assumed that since the source was scholarly, it does not require further scrutiny. However, their pretensions to being a “science” notwithstanding, there is no debating that the social sciences are not as precise in their conclusions which are more open to question than those of the natural sciences. It is for this reason and others that we must dissect, analyze and interrogate all terms, concepts and conclusions put forward by social scientists, to do otherwise is

to jeopardize our understanding of what is wrong with our society and what we need to do to set things right.

In x-raying our societies, social scientists pick and uses terms and concepts that they consider relevant and adequate to explain the state of things. The questions to keep in mind are: How far do the terms, concepts, and theories provide satisfactory explanations of what they purportedly seek to explain? How far are their assumptions and ideas useful for purposes of explanation?

Quite often, in the social sciences, the scholar may become blind to his or her own biases, unconsciously pushing an agenda or ideology that may not stand in the face of closer examination, this was what Ake was drawing attention to. Unfortunately, scant attention was given to Ake's warning; scholars, students and policy makers continue to remain uncritical of social science terms and concepts, in the naïve belief that they are neutral and "scientific", not the loaded and value-laden terms that they are. We shall see, shortly, that this is a costly mistake and one that African scholars, in particular must challenge.

It began with a word

It is not infrequent to find concepts emerging and being used in the social sciences which leave lasting, near indelible imprint once they have gained traction in academic lexicon. This was exactly what happened with "underdevelopment" which was given a completely new meaning when it was used by President Truman at his presidential inaugural address. The new president conferred on the United States a role which he wanted it to play vis-à-vis a large expanse of the world made up of nations that have or were about emerging from decades of colonial rule.

According to Esteva (2010), President Truman committed the United States to:

... a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas... More than half the people of the world are living in a condition approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing. (Esteva, 2010, p. 1).

It is worth noting here that while Truman vowed to cast off "old imperialism" he was not as forthcoming with respect to "new imperialism". The rationalization of the new economic order which America is in the process of imposing, is cleverly hidden under the rubric "democratic fair dealing". Liberalism, as defined by America, is presented as a factor in the general progress of humanity. The development of the rest of the world, in particular the "underdeveloped" areas is now a burden to be borne by America. To do this, America required unfettered access for its companies to mineral and other resources to be found in the developing countries on terms and conditions dictated by the interests of the United States.

What is most insidious from Truman's address, however, was how from that day on he cast a pall on a large chunk of humanity. Esteva pointed to how:

On that day 2 billion people became underdeveloped... from that time on, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of

others' reality – a mirror that belittles them and send them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in the terms of a homogenizing narrow minority. (Esteve, 2010, p. 2).

Such were the power of words, they were employed and used to label this large number and to by so doing consign them to the margin of existence. Their socio-historical experiences were no longer of relevance, and major milestones like the slave trade, colonial occupation and imperial plunder that were the lot of African states were ignored, swept under the carpet and treated as if they were of little or no consequences. How and in what ways did the slave trade distorted the African mode of production? What effect did the transfer of able-bodied men and women from Africa to West have on the rise and expansion of capitalist production and industrialization of the West European countries? What role did colonialism play in the emasculation of the traditional production systems that were to be found all over African states, which were producing crafts and merchandise that were at par, if not superior, to those being produced at Europe at that point in time?

While answers to these questions are being awaited, it needs pointing out that one of the lasting effects of the coming into usage of ‘underdevelopment’ was that it had a crystalizing effect on the beliefs, behaviors and emotional responses of the people it was applied to – their perception of themselves vis-à-vis others who were not them is significantly tainted. They are less vibrant, energetic and able to stand up for themselves if they surrender and give in to the power of the label foisted on them. African countries are therefore sorely in need of becoming aware of their agency to choose and create their reality, what Freire (2014) calls “conscientização.”

Bourgeois conceptualizing of development

When the oppressor has appropriated a word as innocuous as development, it is the duty of the oppressed to not only challenge that appropriation but also to refuse to be defined by the label chosen by the oppressor, they should begin the necessary mental and psychological transformation of liberating themselves from the objects that they were cast as being, to subjects possessing the ability to choose and shape their destiny.

The varied ways in which development has been conceptualized and defined points the way to African scholars, they must call to question the concept of development as given and used in Western circles, academies and institutions. What this calls for, is a break from the vicious circle and constricting choke hold of a position that does nothing to explain let alone advance the interests of the African people. A number of definitions are presented to show the futility and hopelessness in taking for guide bourgeois-centric notions of development.

Sciarelli and Rinaldi (2017) while conceding that defining development poses an issue, they nevertheless encapsulate it to “represent an overall variation of economic, social and cultural influences that coincide with the income growth per capita” p. 4. A closer reading of this conceptualization leaves one with the impression that in the opinion of Sciarelli and Rinaldi the slave trade that ravaged Africa and the colonial imposition that followed could pass for development since they both had economic, social and cultural effects on the indigenous African societies and may have even resulted in a rise in per capita income.

Such linear and static conceptualization which conveniently chooses to ignore key historical events in the interaction of societies leading to dissimilar development outcomes, dates from the early

days of modernization theory as espoused by Rostow (1961), Hagen (1962) and Lewis (1955) among others, where modernization was confused with development and neither modernization nor development were situated within the context of enslavement - mental and physical – as well as other social dynamics at play.

An interesting position on development was taken by Brookfield (1975) who saw it as change, whether positive or negative. Brookfield's central thesis is that development cannot be understood, properly so, by separation into parts; rather, as indicated by the title of his book, it constitutes one "interdependent" system. Brookfield was one of early critics of modernization theories of development drawn by a concern over social injustice and world inequality. To accept Brookfield's characterization, the division between developed and developing nations must give way, all nations are developed, as all are in a constant flux of change – negative or positive.

This contestation about what constitutes "developed" and "developing" remains a central point of discussion in the development discourse. Joining the fray, Keita (2004) submits:

[...] there is an evident problematic here concerning the terms 'developed' and 'underdeveloped'. 'Developed' suggests a completed or finished process, while 'underdeveloped' tends to imply stasis or lack of progress. But the technological and economic structures of European society fifty years ago have undergone palpable changes and continue to do so. Consider the fact that computers, cellular phones, solar energy, and so on were not commonplace in European society some fifty years ago. Thus the idea that European societies are 'developed' is obviously questionable. European societies are in the process of development just as other societies deemed 'undeveloped' or 'developing'. For this reason, the automatic contrast between 'developed' and 'developing' societies should be subject to debate. (Keita, 2004, p. 133).

Keita and many in his mold would not accept the division and compartmentalization seeing through the thin veil that was put up to try mask fundamental contradictions of an argument constructed of straws. The obsession to see the world as one split into "developed" and "underdeveloped" has also been explained in terms of the ethnocentrism that suffuses the social sciences. Non Western societies tended to be cast as "backward," "primitive," "a curiosity," or some sort of exotica, making it a compelling duty for the West to assume suzerainty over them to help "civilize," "modernize" and "develop" them. All the arguments for the justification and rationalizations for imperial and colonial invasions are to be found couched under one of more of those characterizations – what is called the Whiteman's burden.

Development or, to be more precise, its subjective denial - is the latest of the Eurocentric notion used to explain away why Western nations and their ideas should be rammed down the throats of non-Western societies. Development has always been shaped by the cultural forces and the political agendas of the West (Sardar, 1999) ably supported by the so-called disinterested institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, IMF, that are only keen to see that market forces are at play and competition holds sway. The growth of liberalism and ascendancy of capitalism in the light of the decline of the socialist alternative helped to present and entrench the belief that development as seen through Western prism was the norm.

The military-industrial connection was another strand for the success of Western development discourse, ideology was backed by military muscle, thus smoothening any rough edges and whipping dissenters back into line. In this way development became very closely implicated in

questions of power, especially the power to set up the basic framework or paradigm through which societies and history are to be understood. This was coupled with the brute power to impose many things on others. From the foregoing, a conclusion that is not too difficult to make is that there are so many contradictions around the concept “development,” it is neither neutral nor scientific, and African countries and other non-Western societies must free themselves from its clutches by coming up with their own conception of what it is and what it should mean.

Frustrated by what she regards as the hopelessness in the use of a concept such as “development,” Nicole Lieger (1995) took the radical position of repudiating and rejecting its use. She forcefully urged that it should be “dropped since it is depoliticizing, deculturalizing, westernizing and homogenizing” (Lieger, 1995, p. 1). So strongly convinced was she that development as a concept is meaningless, except for the purposes she identified above, she insisted on putting the word “development” in inverted commas throughout her essay.

While Andrews and Bawa (2014) did not go the distance with Lieger, they nevertheless agree that the concept of development has become vague and imprecise and needs to be reformulated. They argued that:

development’s survival depends to a large extent on how the paradigms (including theories, approaches and methodologies) is able to adapt and reinvent itself to the changing times being more open to alternatives that are context-specific and more in tune with the socio-cultural dynamics of the people development targets. (Andrews & Bawa, 2014, p. 933).

Writing in The development dictionary, Sachs (2010) points out that development has become “an amoeba-like concept, shapeless but ineradicable [which] spreads everywhere because it connotes the best of intentions [creating] a common ground in which right and left, elites and grass-roots fight their battles” (Sachs, 2010, p. 4). Despite the best intentions that might lie behind development discourse, we need to continually remain unwavering in warning against being lax, Africa and the Third World must be guided by the failures to attain “development” after more than six decades of trying out Western imposed prescriptions that were touted as the ways to development.

Since the 1950s the main tenet of development thinking has been premised, either explicitly or implicitly, on the role of modernization as a vehicle for facilitating economic growth through urbanization, industrialization, and capital investment. The phrase itself and the persistent strategies for achieving it, have implied the desirability of adopting a unilinear and universal development trajectory replicating and perpetuating the structures and systems dominant in Western industrial countries to the developing world.

According to the basic belief of the modernization school, modernization occurs when traditional values, beliefs, and ways of doing things give way to innovative views and methods. ‘A society is traditional’, writes Everett E. Hagen, ‘if ways of behavior in it continue with little change from generation to generation’, if it ‘tends to be custom-bound, hierarchical, ascriptive, and unproductive’ (Hagen, 1962, p. 56). Hagen characterizes economic growth as a “series of advances in technology and a rise in per capita output, rapid enough so that marked change occurred within each generation and indeed during each decade” (Hagen, 1962, p. 10). Modernization and economic growth are what constitutes development, they should be the goal of

all non-Western societies in the normative and ideal sense, that is submission of bourgeois social scientist no matter the direction they were coming from.

An alternative conceptualization of development

It is a compelling imperative to have an alternative development framework for Africa since what is now being bandied as the prescription has failed to address the diagnosis. The problem lies both in the prescription and in the failure to correctly diagnose what the issues are in African countries. An understanding of development in any part of the world can most successfully be achieved through analyses that incorporate historical, political, economic, as well as social dimensions. This is particularly the case when attempting to understand development in the African setting, where the experiences of colonialism, independence and nation-building, the degree of influence exerted by international financial institutions, and the extent and nature of poverty and inequality have had a major impact on shaping the development trajectory of the African state.

What was not done, or only done half-heartedly, was to interrogate capitalist development theories and strategies and their suitability to a setting that is entirely different from that of Western countries. Because development as conceived, birthed and propagated by Western bourgeois social science is incapable of addressing the developmental needs and challenges of Africa, it behooves African social scientists to come up with an alternative that is grounded in the reality and historical experience of the continent. In doing so, they need to jettison assumptions that undergird development in Western societies, learning from Polanyi's assertion that "all attempts to impose the totality of capitalist logic (a human invention) on society are idealistic and utopian." In any case, Africa does not need no desire a system that would not work for it, a system that mistakes development for economic growth and infrastructure – airports, roads and dams.

Africa, in fashioning an alternative development path, must avoid the conception of development that sees nothing wrong in alienating the human person, one that reduces people to appendages tied to machines in an endless production of goods and services that do not necessarily make life any better, meaningful and fulfilling. Western notion of development, Rapley (2007) points:

[...] was charged with being unconcerned about prosperity; rather, it was said to be geared toward establishing external control over citizens' lives. Development was allegedly preoccupied with drawing citizens into the formal networks of circulation, where they could be taxed, thereby consolidating the state's control over their lives. (Rapley, 2007, p. 4).

Capitalist logic defines human beings not as social beings, but rather as individuals motivated exclusively by self-interest. Everything around them is regarded as a commodity which could be exchanged for money, including the time, labor and leisure of the human person. Capitalist rationality is premised on self-interest, not social obligations, moral commitments, or altruism. The ultimate possession, life, is a commodity in the logic of capitalism; it could be expended if the price is right. Africa's redemption would only manifest when it rejects the capitalist logic, put the human person as the foci of development and affirm commitment to decent, moral and spiritual coexistence between all that inhabit the globe, this is the alternative, African development pathway.

African development theory

Making a case for African development theory, which they called “indegenist,” Asabere-Ameyaw, et. al., (2014) said it is premised on active and collectivist participation of all community members who feel a sense of obligation as well as responsibility to all. They listed the key elements of the theory to include:

(i) Reclaiming a more spiritual sense of self, (ii) learning more about what it means to be human, (iii) becoming active community members with a shared sense of responsibility, and (iv) having a sense of reciprocity and to learning to share 'what we have and to appreciate nature and protect our lands'. (Asabere-Ameyaw, et. al., p. 31).

The capitalist development framework has been too concerned with production and profit such that the environment gets scant attention. The environmental damage produced by capitalist economic system, especially in places where multinational corporations could get away with it is all too plain to see. Oil spills, rapacious logging, the loss of rain forests, water and air pollution are taking a toll on the eco-system. Although Africa’s contribution to carbon emission and the resultant greenhouse gases effect is minimal, it is not immune from effects of what is happening elsewhere. Widespread disruption and loss of life is predicted in the coming decades as a consequences of irresponsible greed for profit, which had brought drought, hurricanes, and flooding, and with them environmental refugees.

African development theory is holistic and inclusive, it does not lean in the direction of the few against the interests of the majority, production is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is primarily about the nurturing and restoration of the dignity of the human person in harmonious co-existence with nature around him. The consumer society that reigns in the West has fueled inequality, inequity, waste and pollution, among other vices. Some concerned Western economists have asked that the society takes a pause to ask whether economic growth as is being pursued by Western nations, is worth it (Galbraith, 1967; Mishan, 1967).

George et. al., (2014) pushed for placing African development theory where the environment, made up of land and earth, take prime place. Disregarding the central appreciation of the importance of land, they argue, leads to non-understanding of the inter-connection between land and the peoples’ political, social, economic, and spiritual everyday social interaction. Where the capitalist may see land as only useful for production, to be maximally exploited, it the submission of African development theory that to reduce land to just one of the factors of production, along with labor and capital, is a reductionism that divests land of spiritual and existential import as seen by the African. This difference in perspective between Western capitalist development theory which is bereft of ethics and African development theory which has ethics at its core, should help us understand what development is all about for the African.

Objections may be raised, as indeed have been, that environmental concerns are a luxury that Africa can ill afford. Africa should go for economic growth at full speed, disregarding the environmental consequence, as whatever degradations, spills, depletions, and contaminations arising from such would be offset as economic growth occurs, it is argued. In fact, there are whisperings to the effect that environmental activism is but one of the ploys to halt or slow-down African and other Third World countries’ development.

From the perspective of African development theory, however, a carefully thought-out policy on land and other environmental issues would enhance, not inhibit, real development. A policy that safeguards the environment is one that makes for healthier, fitter citizens, with fewer health issues. This development may not be captured in the balance sheets or in measures of gross domestic product, GDP, some of the indices used to measure development, but it is the *real* development. The submission is, for development to occur, the environment requires protection and improvement.

Spirituality and religion are things that African development theory say have relevance to development, rejecting the notion that economic growth, progress and development are the antithesis of religion with its archaic rituals and mumbo-jumbo. The secularization thesis is dismissed by African theorists as untenable. In a fitting rebuttal, Goulet describes the secularist thesis position as an attempt by ‘one-eyed giants’ who ‘analyze, prescribe and act as if man could live by bread alone, as if human destiny could be stripped to its material dimensions alone’ (Goulet, 1980, p. 481). Life and the values that go to make it meaningful, fulfilling and rewarding go far beyond and way above material things; religion and spirituality offer that intrinsic satisfaction that fills a void no material could come close to filling. In any case, it has been amply demonstrated that culture, spirituality, and economic development can co-exist and reinforce each other with no antagonism at all (Ryan, 1995). Religion may also contribute “directly to a person’s flourishing or contentedness, and comprise an intrinsically valued dimension of human well-being”, (Clark, 2002, p. 124).

Another core aspect of African development theory is the emphasis on the sanctity of the person, his livelihood, as well as his physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing and health. Depersonalization, alienation, and unconscionable exploitation of man and nature have no place in the theory normatively and ideally. The optimal satisfaction of the person without injury to the present or future generations is at the heart of African development theory, a viable alternative to Eurocentric, capitalist spawned theory that has failed Africa and would not work for Africa.

Conclusion

The history of European development is one enmeshed in the pillage, rape and plunder of the human and natural resources of Africa and other Third World nations. The slave trade and the colonial occupation that followed in its wake arrested and distorted the development trajectory of Africa and conferred advantages on Europe. After African nations gained formal independence, their economies remained shackled to those of Western nations and International Financial Institutions, IFIs, were manipulating their performance such that decades after, no discernible development appears to have been recorded. None appears on the horizon, either.

The futility of pursuing Western styled development became manifest on examination of the conceptual basis of development as propounded in bourgeois social science. Development is material, unfeeling, and cares neither for the human person nor the environment; spirituality it also takes for a joke. This conception of development is a threat not only to Western society, it imperils the whole of humanity. African development theory, on the other hand, is holistic and all-encompassing. The human being is conceived as being at the center of development, yet he takes from the environment that which is sufficient for his survival, taking care of the land and environment with all due responsibility. Spiritual connection was also elevated in African development theory as it offers man not only serenity and contentment, makes him accountable and moderates his greed.

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