



# Beyond Developmentality: Constructing Inclusive Freedom and Sustainability

By Debal Deb.

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Any book that makes the statement “like the ever changing coat proteins of *Trypanosoma*, the blood parasite causing sleeping sickness, the capitalist ideology keeps changing its garb every so often, yet remains equally lethal to the living resources of the Earth” (390) immediately grabs my attention. Such unequivocal, clear, and pointed statements have become harder and harder to find as attacks on capitalism have given way to statements against “globalization” or admonitions that capitalism is different in different places or that we are somehow in a “postcapitalist” world.

Debal Deb’s text is a thoughtful and detailed deconstruction of the practice of Western development and its ideological underpinnings in capitalism. Through nine chapters, he carefully unwinds prominent myths that are associated with capitalism and shows how its practice and transplantation via “development” fatally undermines the planet’s key life support systems. The argument is not based on technical accounts of ecological change; rather, the emphasis is on the effects of capitalism on ecology writ large. The book takes aim squarely at the profit motive and perpetual growth mechanisms within capitalism.

The opening chapters trace the construction of the concept of unfettered growth and supporting concepts. A fairly routine, but nonetheless illustrative, review of the intellectual history of development is followed by a discussion of “myths and misconceptions” and “crimes of development.” The misconceptions are selected to emphasize the incompatible nature of capitalism and ecological sustainability—what James O’Connor (1998) described as the “second contradiction” of capitalism. Deb is careful to unwind some of the key assumptions of capitalist development: economic rationality that emphasizes the individual, an emphasis on the rate of profit and discounting, and the equation of commodities with individual happiness. One of Deb’s key concerns arises on page 103, where he notes that the reification of the individual in capitalism and the primacy given the market allow individuals to pursue their own interests above those of the community. This theme is reiterated throughout the work and is a significant part of his alternative vision discussed later. Deb unwinds colonial and postcolonial history to emphasize three classes of “crimes” of development: environmental, social, and political. These, he argues, encompass major transgressions that seriously call into question the notion that development equals progress. The apex of the deconstruction of conventional narratives on Western development as progress occurs in Chapter 4, where a list of “fantasies and fallacies” points to both the ideological and practical failure of the development project.

The middle chapters of the text turn away from deconstructing development and toward the search for alternatives. Rather than offer banal platitudes and empty rhetoric about “sustainability,” Deb again engages in a critical approach. After a discussion of the history of alternative ecological thought, he distinguishes between “weak” and “strong” versions of sustainability, the former associated with slow-growth approaches, such as Bruntland, and the latter associated with zero-growth approaches. I appreciate this sort of approach, which is engaged several times in the text. Rather than argue that his alternatives are new, Deb pays close attention to the intellectual history of alternatives (Chapter 5) before making his case (Chapter 6).

The closing three chapters of the text are an earnest exploration for an alternative development. This is not to be confused with “postdevelopment.” Deb does not reject the idea of a metanarrative, a grand theme around which society organized; rather he rejects

the capitalist metanarrative. He also does not argue for a simple Marxist solution. So for what kind of alternative does Deb argue? His approach could be summed up as being against industrialization, individuality, and Western “rationality” and being for communal, zero-growth, and long-term approaches. As with most works that set out to change paradigms (or mentality in this case), the concrete proposals are the most interesting part of the read. Real, systemic change comes so infrequently because it takes a great deal of hard work and truly bold new ideas.

The alternative vision is summarized in the final chapter. Zero growth and sustainability replace positive growth and consumerism, and individuality is replaced by communal governance. It is on this last point that I was a bit taken aback by some of the recommendations.

226 Deb’s proposals rely on a governance mechanism that reifies local, traditional knowledge and environmental management as superior to current practice. I found this prescription to be tinged with romanticism. Although there is nothing particularly objectionable about calling for community empowerment in “key decision-making procedures of democratic institutions,” the claim that “when this participatory spirit blossoms to encompass regional or national governance, democracy becomes vibrant, and protects inclusive freedom of society” (503) is romantic at best. After maintaining that “largely, traditional indigenous communities seem to have the characteristics of civil democracy” (366) and citing Illich’s claim that “to find an alternative language, one must return to the past,” I can’t help but think that the part of Deb’s alternative on governance borders on eco-communalism, rather than on eco-socialism, a reactionary, rather than a revolutionary, approach to political ecology. A progressive approach would have outlined exactly how eco-socialist communities would form and govern themselves, in addition to how they would avoid populism and the tyrannies of the traditional. Many volumes of research have documented the invention of tradition, the often-oppressive environment that occurs under “traditional” or “communal” governance frameworks and the exclusion of women and others. Equating communal governance with democracy and “inclusive freedom” (505) requires a significant leap of faith. Reconstructing local/communal modes of governance must also be tempered by the fact that such institutions have been decimated by modernity, both capitalism and socialism, so that it would be difficult simply to co-opt existing frameworks, especially on a global scale. Communal/traditional governance structures do have many positive qualities; however, I would be hesitant to offer them so uncritically as an alternative.

Against my reservations about the particulars of Deb’s alternative, I thoroughly enjoyed the book and his attention to detail. I applaud his attempt to reconstruct rather than abandon development and his willingness to attempt a counternarrative. Deb elegantly deconstructs capitalism, development, and developmentality without falling victim to nihilistic postdevelopmentism. I will surely use it in my graduate seminars on development.

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## Reference

O’Connor, J. 1998. *Natural causes: Essays in ecological Marxism*. New York: Guilford Press.