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Beyond Developmentality: Constructing Inclusive Freedom and Sustainability

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Debal Deb

Beyond Developmentality: Constructing Inclusive Freedom and Sustainability
London and Sterling: Earthscan, 2009,
ISBN: 978-1-84407-711-3, 583 pp.

The current global financial meltdown that began to take effect in late 2008, the worsening environmental crisis, the global food crisis, and the threat of global terrorism have raised serious questions about the stability and security of a world based on capitalism, without pointing to a clear alternative. Policy makers seem to believe that once national economies begin to grow, prosperity and happiness will return. It is also believed

that environmental sustainability can be achieved through negotiated agreements to reduce activities that adversely affect the environment – without any fundamental change in the values of the capitalist order. There is still a widespread belief that the market will somehow spread prosperity. In this book, Deb argues that these crises reflect a general march to global disaster, occasioned by a failure to see beyond industrial growth, measured by GNP growth. For him, the morality and conception of development that drive the capitalist market economy contradict the requirements of happiness, social and intergenerational justice, and sustainable development and are leading to global disaster. The current order needs to be abandoned in favour of an economy without industrial growth, based on zero rates of profit and interest. ‘A zero rate of profit does not abolish all business enterprises, rather, enterprises will strive to maintain the average rate of profit which is zero, and avoid negative rates of profit and interest and there will be no further incentive to invest in technology to accelerate the depletion of natural resources’ (p. 293).

The book consists of nine chapters. The first unveils the dominant view of development, which supposes that the ‘improvement of the economic status of society, widening of individuals’ life opportunities, and betterment of the quality of life’ (p. 15) are to be achieved only by the growth of industry, agriculture, and technology that increases the production of goods and service. It makes the production of goods and services the focus of human activity and the goal of society. Traced back to nineteenth-century theories of biological evolution and social progress, this linear notion of development draws support from various streams of social and intellectual movements at different historical periods such as Christian cosmology, social Darwinism, Marxism, and the progressive anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment who viewed progress as human domination of nature by means of science and technology, consolidating into an epistemic

community ('developmentality') that has diffused and continues to uphold and urge rapid economic growth in accordance with the Northern model of techno-industrial development as the means to economic prosperity and poverty alleviation, in spite of its undermining of social justice and despoliation of the environment. In the second chapter the author dismantles classical and neoclassical theories that promote market ideas as myths and misconceptions, and he dismisses efforts to refine them on the grounds that they often involve 'monetarily costing the uncostable' ... 'we are simply incapable to determine the precise value of environmental goods and services' (p. 94).

Chapter 3 explores how development as industrial growth, with adverse consequences for the natural environment, has been propagated through colonial and post-colonial idioms of development, leading to the privatising of public goods in the South. In that context, environmental and social crimes are committed as the market morality of exploiting one's own group members upstages group solidarity. This is an under-explored perspective on structural adjustment in many countries in the South, especially in Africa, where such 'adjustments' have presaged state fragility and collapse.

Chapter 4 shows how the promise of development, especially as practised in agriculture in the South, failed to reduce poverty and ended up making the world more inhospitable to mankind. The fifth chapter shows how disillusionment with the prevalent practice of development, and the failures of science and technology to transform society for general well-being, have led to the search for alternatives, as expressed in the growing recognition of the value of natural objects beyond the economic-use value; it calls for innovative uses of resources to provide sustenance, security, and leisure.

Chapter 6 explores the discourse on sustainability, positing that ecological economics has established enough theoretical ground for an economy based on zero rates of profit and interest. Chapter 7 discusses

the advances in methodologies at the level of research and practice in dealing with ecological problems; these include the globalisation of civil-society movements for peace, freedom, and democracy, and their impact on global initiatives to provide policy for environmental protection and sustainability. Chapter 8 examines the superstructures to be confronted in the struggle to achieve a radical transformation of lifestyle and thinking, in order to establish an economy that is based on zero rates of profit and interest. These include big science, the vested interests of commerce and industries, state bureaucracies, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the urban ecological movement. The ninth chapter presents a conclusion.

The book is permeated by a strong belief in the capacity of humans to create a more benign, sustainable, and peaceful world, in which prosperity is redefined beyond the availability of commodities and is characterised by distributive and intergenerational justice, achieved through civic democracy. Drawing on a wide range of disciplines – natural sciences, ecology, economics, politics, history, philosophy, demography, Marxism, and so on – the author shows that environmental problems involve a great deal of human suffering, depletion of natural resources, and destruction of the livelihoods of future generations, and that they arise largely from the squandering of natural resources by powerful forces in the capitalist system. He shows that there is an increasing rejection of the current order and modes of thought, as expressed in new knowledge, scientific advances, and the activities of civil society and individuals, to warrant hope for change.

The book is a major contribution to efforts at transformation towards a more prosperous world free of the pains of industrial growth. The style is racy, persuasive, accessible, and yet the content is empirically grounded and the approach is painstaking. It is a major contribution to the necessary effort to save mankind from the current global capitalist crisis. As an instrument of empowerment,

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it is commended to everyone concerned about the critical issues facing the contemporary world.

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