

# Mainstream



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## An Archeology of Development | Debal Deb

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The current notion of development was born of the nineteenth century philosophical ideas of evolutionary progress, combined with the Ernst Haeckel's ontological development metaphor. Soon after its origins, the notion of development percolated into theories of social evolution current before the Darwinian evolutionary theory was published. The social theorists of the nineteenth century reproduced current prejudices about social evolution with an aura of scientific authority, by allusion to Darwinism. The misapplication of Darwinian theory of evolution to social evolution gave birth to Social Darwinism, whose proponents postulated the history of human civilisation as a series of connected economic stages described as hunting-gathering, pastoral, agricultural and commercial or industrial. In this depiction of history, contemporary Europe represented the highest form of social configuration, while the non-Western pre-capitalist societies represented the inferior rungs of the ladder of human civilisation. (Of course, this construction of the human social evolution is the prevalent textbook version of progress. In mass media as well as ethnic polity, hunter-gatherers, for example, are still described as "primitive" people.)

This linear course of social evolution provided the purpose and directionality of history of all societies, who ought to strive to progress. An ideological outcome of this philosophy of social progress was that, in the Victorian ethnographic view, Native Americans, Africans and the aboriginal peoples of Asia, Australia and New Zealand represented the primitive stages of human evolutionary history, and Asian societies and cultures were viewed as cases of "arrested progress. In the afterglow of Enlightenment, the general European attitude toward Asian societies and their traditions was one of contempt.

The Victorian social evolutionary theory was epitomized in Herbert Spencer's work *Progress: Its Law and Cause*, published in 1857. Spencerian progress consisted of growth from germinal homogenous forms to increasingly greater structural complexity. "This law

of organic progress”, Spencer claimed, “is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through a process of continuous differentiation, holds throughout.”

### **Anthropocentrism and Euro-centrism**

Following Spencer, sociological theories drew analogies from biological evolution to depict a progressive change of social organization from “infancy” or primitiveness to more advanced stages, culminating in modern European civilization. Spencerian social theory vulgarized Darwinian metaphors of natural selection, struggle for existence and survival of the fittest to serve racist doctrines, colonial expansion, extermination of aboriginal “savages”, and imperialist war. Lieutenant Raymond Peyronnet argued in his *Dix Leçons de Morale* (1900) that “The biological sciences teach that the feeble must disappear before the strong; and extending these consequences from men to nations, one must admit that no sentiment of humanity or right would be powerful enough to prevent a strong State from taking possession of a weaker State.”

The European discovery of the New World had opened for Europe a unique window into its own past, and forged the identity of the non-Europe, the Other, whose present embodied Europe’s own past, while Europe’s present heralded the Other’s future. Europe’s ethnographers and anthropologists depicted the “primitive” customs of the non-Western societies to reconstruct the infancy of humanity. (The Neo-evolutionism of the 1950s recapitulated this unilinear progression of social complexity from bands to tribes to chiefdoms to primitive states to modern states.) In this linear depiction of social evolution, non-industrial societies outside Europe were seen as ‘contemporary ancestors’, the historical stage the West had already lived out. This nineteenth century perception of pre-industrial, non-agrarian societies as barbarian, continue to inform contemporary social policies regarding tribal development programs.

The assumption of the inferiority of native cultures inherent in the belief in evolutionary progress of society was conveniently ensconced in Social Darwinism, which proposed that primitive cultures and peoples who cannot adapt to the ways of the superior races must die out to fuel progress of civilization. As a typical example, Arthur Girault argued in 1895 that eradication of native peoples of the barbarian lands and their cultures was the necessary price for the evolutionary advancement of humanity: the disappearance of the inferior races after contact with the ‘fittest’ civilized races was inevitable, in accord with the principle of natural selection.

Girault's book *Principles de colonisation et de legislation coloniale* (1895) became a standard text for French colonial legislation.

The spread of European civilization implied that all savages ought to embrace modernity. Civilization, or eradication of the primitive, was perceived in the dominant European discourse at the height of European colonial expansion as an important agenda of, and justification for, colonization of the "less cultured" societies. As succinctly described by Marx and Engels in their *Communist Manifesto*, the rise of capitalism in Europe heralded the compulsion of all uncivilized nations, "on the pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production."

Lynn White has suggested that industrial and technological development in Europe was possible because western Christianity had taught that man is ordained by God to subjugate and exploit nature for his proper ends (*Genesis* 1: 26). This view of the primacy and supremacy of humans over the rest of nature acquired its glorious expression in the Enlightenment ideology. Agricultural landscapes were confirmation of human technological superiority over primal forces. The dichotomy of culture and nature in this ideology found epistemological equivalence in the hierarchical relationship of wilderness with civilisation, man with woman, and Europe with the Other. This interpretation of the world in terms of entities in a dichotomous and hierarchical relationship trained the Western mind to conceive the non-Western, the non-human and the non-masculine as objects of subjugation — an ideology which continued to inspire and inform Europe's capitalist modernity.

Darwin's revolutionary theory of evolutionary descent of humans from common biological ancestry gave a jolt to this anthropocentrism. Nevertheless, Darwinism did not bring an end to anthropocentrism. Anthropology showed that, in spite of his descent, man is indeed unique among all organisms. The discipline of ethnology, a daughter of imperialism, indicated the uniqueness and supremacy of the European race and the evolutionary atavism and intellectual inferiority of non-Europeans, the savages. Thus, anthropocentrism commingled with Euro-centrism, whose conviction was based on a series of 'ethnographic' accounts (mostly travellogues) that almost invariably portrayed the "savages" as immoral, cruel and cannibalistic. In Europe's imagination, Orientals were connoisseurs of sex (as in the *Arabian Nights*, Kijajuraho, Konark, *Kamasutra* and its Japanese and Chinese equivalents, and Fitzgerald's rendition of Omar Khai'yam); African and American tribes were cannibals; fierce matriarchal women inhabited Amazonian forests. It was the "White man's burden" to subjugate — and civilize — the aboriginal societies of Asia, Africa, Australia and the New World.

## **Imperialism and development**

Invasion, conquest and devastation of indigenous cultures and economies of the Old as well as the New World were justified from the progressivist perspective. To morally and legally justify conquest and rule of the native's lands, the British in particular had to (1) portray the indigenous peoples as an uncivilizable part of the wilderness and (2) demonize the indigenous peoples as indolent, untrustworthy, murdering heathens, who had no intelligence to "develop" their land. In other words, if the indigenous people were not using the land, they had no title to it. Imperialist thinkers believed that the British (or French or German) empire had a moral mission to bring the light of civilization to the dark corners of the earth. The 'light' was not the only benefit the savage natives would receive from the empire; the subject people would also have the privilege of a guarantee of peace and participation in a system of law and order. What if the subjects die from want of food and too much of law and order? Tagore mocks the West's answer: "We shall go elsewhere to colonize other societies, for it's our mission to spread development." (see accompanying ++box++).

Progress, as Spencer had asserted, was a necessity. Even revolutionary, anti-imperialist intellectuals acceded to a continual social progress as the destiny of mankind towards which "the whole creation moves." Alfred Wallace, a leading scientist and socialist thinker of the Victorian era, condemned Europe's "plunder of the earth" and the imperial misgovernments in colonies, yet had no doubt that "in the end, all should work out for good" of humankind. Marx deplored that British rule in India had caused the misery of an "infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindustan had to suffer before", yet considered the British Empire as "the unconscious tool of history" to "fulfil mankind's destiny" — by extirpating India's old vegetative society, ridden with despotism and superstition.

Seen from this progressivist perspective, all non-European societies were atavistic, and the world outside Europe languishing in the dark, awaiting enlightenment by Europe. Under the colonial rule, the recalcitrant subjects only proved their atavistic proclivities whenever they tried to escape regulation and ordering by the state. In the early years of British rule in India, the inhabitants of the Jungle Mahal who resisted colonial rule were "the most unimprovable savage people." India's tribes who persistently remained hunter-gatherers or nomadic pastoralists were demarcated, under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1916, as "criminal tribes". The savage whose traditional occupation of life challenged the state's authority, and tried to escape from the empire and modernity, could only be civilized by coercion. Coercion by the paternalistic state, like force-feeding a detesting sick child, was intended for the healthy development of the savage. The fact that binding the savage down to settled agriculture generated revenue and labor force for the empire masqueraded to prove the society's development.

## **A legacy of critique**

Nineteenth century radicals as well as the Romantics understood that the Enlightenment's promise of delivering humanity from oppression and poverty had been foiled by capitalist development. Marx asserted, "All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force."

The Luddites opposed technology because it heralded the defeat of the interest of the masses and the loss of human freedom. The Luddite message influenced a section of Victorian literature, epitomized in Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein*. The Romantics often repudiated the monstrous technological growth and called for a return to the relative environmental harmony, simplicity of country life and the feudal social order. A prevailing sentiment against modern developmental was that it commodified and monetised every tenet of hitherto cherished human qualities, values and professions — a sentiment equally shared by Shakespeare, Goethe and Marx.

Indeed, industrial development entailed general betterment of health and financial conditions of people. Nevertheless, social derangements like the erosion of familial peace, loosening of social bonds and security and the deepened poverty of workers were unacceptable to the thousands of uprooted peasants. The discontent of the masses with the new social order was expressed in multifarious symbols of protest. Just as the peasant protests in nineteenth century Europe and in post-independence India against the state's enclosure of forests for commercial working and the abolition of customary user rights took the form of arson, so the urban workers, led by Luddites, stormed factories and smashed the machinery to express their wrath and despair at the loss of their familiar rural world of relative stability, security and peace. Anarchists called the workers to break all social disciplines and socialists and communists sought to organize them in unions to prepare for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

### **Critique from the South**

A good number of thinkers in India articulated in their writings a forceful critique of the Euro-centric model of development and governance in a period when British rule evoked awe, reverence and admiration among the country's elite. Over the past decade I have identified a wealth of such critical prose amid the writings of Tilak, Vivekananda, Tagore, Ramendrasundar Trivedi and Binoy Kumar Sircar in a language that is no less profound than those gleaned in any modern 'postmodernist' writings. Unfortunately, such pieces of critical indigenous literature have hardly ever been cited in any scholarly work related to development and postmodernist discourse. The absence of any allusion to, and translation of, this body of literature may reflect that acceptance of a non-European critique, expressed in an allophonic language, appears to be problematic even

amongst Southern academic critics of the Western/ Northern hegemony. This fact however reflects the current ideological dominance of the standard development dialogue — an heir to the Euro-centric discourse of the past century. Tagore's article, imbued in his refined sarcasm, is reproduced here to indicate the relevance and poignancy of a Southern, non- Europhonic critique of the development doctrine.

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### **Thus Spake *Myrmica* [1]** by Rabindranath Tagore

Lo and behold — the ants! Those wee thin red creatures are the ants, called *Formica* in Latin. I am a *Myrmica*, descendent of the great family of Myrmicinae; I feel much amused to watch those ants.

Look at them — ha ha ha, just watch their gait: they crawl as though they are one with the dust. My head, on the other hand, scrapes the sky when I stand up. If the sun were a piece of candy, I suppose I could pinch off its pieces with my claws and store them in my nest. Gosh, what a large piece of straw I have dragged such a long way, and look at those ants — three of them pulling and pushing on a single dead grasshopper. We're so different! Sincerely speaking, I am much amused.

Look at my leg, and theirs! My legs are so enormously lengthy that I cannot really fathom the end of them! What higher stead could one expect than on these legs? But those ants are so blissfully content with their own tiny legs. Amazing! Ants they are, after all!

They are so tiny, and moreover, I watch them from a considerable height — so I cannot fully comprehend their ways. However, a glance upon them from the corner of my eye, standing on my enormous legs, and only a little guesswork sufficed me to have understood everything about them. For the ants are too small to require any prolonged observation. I will write a treatise on them in Myrmicine language, and will give seminars, too.

I have much experience indeed, derived from assumptions, about the ant society. For instance, we the *Myrmica* have the faculty of filial affection, and therefore, ants cannot have the same faculty, for they are ants, nothing but ants. They say ants can build their nests underground. Clearly, they must have learnt the construction engineering from *Myrmica* —because they are ants, creatures named *Formica* in Latin.

I feel great pity for the ants though, when I see them. And I do feel a great urge to do

them some good. I even would if I could, for some time abandon the civilized Myrmicine society and live, along with flocks of *Myrmica* brethren, among the ants in their colony, and bring about some reformation in their society — heck, to that extent am I prepared to sacrifice! We intent to thrive on their bits of sugar, and to live somehow in their mud holes, spreading our appendages — merely for the sake of their development.

But they don't want development — they only want to eat their own humble sugar and live in their own mud holes — ants, mere ants as they are. But *Myrmica* as we are, we shall most certainly give them development, and shall eat their sugar and shall live in their mud holes — we, and our nephews and nieces and all in-laws!

To the question as to why we should eat their sugar and occupy their mud holes, we may give the principal reason that they are ants, and we are *Myrmica*. Secondly, we have a selfless interest in bringing about development for the ants, and therefore, we shall eat their sugar and occupy their mud holes. Thirdly, we'll have to leave our homeland. Hence, to make good for this loss, it is imperative that we consume a bit more sugar. Fourth, we'll have to live among alien creatures in an alien land, and we may contract diseases, — so we may not live long — oh poor us, dear us! Hence we must eat sugar; and whatever space is there to occupy in the ants' holes must be shared amongst us, our kins and affines!

If the ants are disgruntled, we shall flatly call them ungrateful. If they want to eat sugar and to demand accommodation in the mud holes, we shall tell them in their face, in Myrmicine language, "You are ants, small creatures, you are Formica!" That'll be sufficiently forceful logic, won't it?

But then what will the ants eat? We don't know. They may suffer from scarcity of food and lodging, but they ought to be patient and consider the possibility that contact with our long legs will eventually lengthen their legs to stand them in a better stead. There will be no dearth of discipline, and peace. They develop more and more, we eat more and more sugar — only such an arrangement can maintain peace, law and order. Or else, there are chances of hell breaking loose. We are so careful, because we bear an immense onus of responsibility, you see.

What if the whole race of ant becomes extinct due to want of sugar and an excess of law and order? Then of course we shall have to go elsewhere to spread development. For we, Myrmicines, are highly developed, by virtue of our elongated legs.

*Translation:* Debal Deb

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[1] *Deyé pipreh* in original refers to the large Indian *black* ant, *Myrmica* spp. To avoid the racial connotation of black in this context, unintended in the original, I have chosen to use its zoological nomenclature. *Formica* is the generic name of the smaller ants that Tagore refers.