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"Churcar" Alternatives to Development

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"Churcar" Alternatives to Development[1]

As ideas about development are so deeply rooted, attempts to seek alternatives are almost like swimming against the prevailing cultural current. To effectively pursue these alternatives, radical changes are necessary from the source. Instead of quoting Marx or Lenin, I consider more appropriate to draw inspiration from an old word of the Tacanas in Bolivia: "Churcar".

The concept of development continues to elicit mixed reactions. For some it is an indispensable goal, ensuring social and economic benefits; for others it expresses inequality and leads to social and environmental problems. It has been promised many times, and although it has so often failed, it continues to have broad social support. Today, ideologically disparate governments, such as the Chilean or Bolivian ones, agree to defend it: in the first case as "economic development" and the second as "integral development". Thus, to move towards alternative notions of development, means to go against the current of some of the ideas deeply rooted in our cultures. This is "churcar," the alternatives to development.

The meaning of development

In Spanish, although the word "development" has several meanings, those focused on the economy are prevalent: development is understood as the progressive evolution of an economy towards better living[i]. It is an idea that has been associated with progress, particularly in the field of economics, where some concepts were generated that later become other fields such as politics or wellbeing.

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The basic elements of these ideas were crystallized in the mid twentieth century, where the "motor" of development was considered to be economic growth. This would allow progress from situations of underdevelopment, such as those typical of rural societies, to others more advanced, such as those of industrialized societies. Similarly, positive effects would spill over the population, such as access to better jobs and poverty reduction.

Quickly, this idea of development stopped being a mere economic issue and became something much broader including, for example, models of political organization, adherence to particular ideas on welfare and even new international relations. This is how "Development" emerged from some industrialized countries as a model for all other nations to follow. By the late 1940s, the world appeared torn between "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries, where the latter had to take the former as an example to follow. This was not only an economic example, but one accompanied by a certain ideas of liberal democracy and of material consumption as the main vehicle for social welfare and the defence of cultural and political modernization. Within this ideological context, a specific institutional framework was generated (one with international banks to finance development, ministries of development, courses for the formation of an 'expertocracy', etc.) linked to trade and "international aid". This notion of development was essentially a linear one, of uninterrupted progress, where humans exploit nature. A culture linked to material consumption was enforced and national policies had to adapt to Western models of liberal democracies; modern science and technology provided the means to achieve those ends. Southern societies, regardless of their previous history or culture, had to embark on that same road. All had to follow the same steps on the path of economic growth, as defined by WW Rostow[ii].

These ideas had a profound effect in Latin America, where the Western idea of development started spreading quickly, hiding or subordinating other notions. This rapid assimilation is not surprising since development was easily connected to the desire for progress, which had been established across the continent since the nineteenth century. For an example of these historical roots, it is sufficient to recall the motto of the Brazilian flag: "Order and Progress", a phrase borrowed from Auguste Comte[iii]. No doubt that the dissemination of these ideas was not exempt from conflict, often creating strong disputes. In a broad sense, Liberal, conservative and socialist discussions - in this period were over the means to achieve development, whether the key players should be private companies or the state and the role that the market should play. However, all of them wanted to industrialize and that aspiration was replicated throughout our continent.

The most important Latin American contributions to this debate, like the early structuralism or the different versions of dependency theory, made clear several things. Perhaps the most important was that the processes of development in the countries of the north were inseparable from the underdevelopment processes inn our continent. Yet, even if at the time these ideas were very radical the discussions remained within the larger framework of a possible development, especially understood as progress towards industrialization. These discussions were, therefore, adjustments and rectifications within the same field, and not challenges to its conceptual foundations.

Rectifications and permanencies

At least from the 1960s on, a new set of critiques appeared that were increasingly radical and looking for changes in these basic ideas. Among the most well-known of these were analyses of the social effects of economic growth, the calls for a focus within growth on human needs, and the demand for a new international economic order. One of the strongest attacks against conventional ideas of development emerged in the early seventies, with the publication of a report on the ecological limits to growth[iv]. The report demonstrated that the idea of perpetual growth was impossible, either by the accumulation of environmental impacts or because the stock of various natural resources was limited. The report received strong opposition both from the conservative perspectives of those years, as from the left. Both sides were defending a belief in economic growth; the discussions were focused on how to manage it, and who would be the agents of such management.

Conventional development seemed to go backward in the face of these devastating criticisms, such as the environmental ones. But soon development reappeared, reformed and rectified, in this case as "sustainable development". The same sequence occurred over and over again throughout the following decades: new weaknesses of the idea of development appeared, criticisms and new proposals were launched -many of them against the belief in perpetual material progress- but soon the old development would come back. It would not be exactly the same as before, as it would have accepted some changes, but it would keep its essence. As a result of these dynamics, some new proposals emerged like the proposals for "human development", "local development", "integral development", "endogenous development", and so on. Development became a plural idea, but beyond this diversity, the core of its conceptual basis has been consolidated.

At this point it is necessary to distinguish two trends within development thinking: on the one hand we have the search for "alternative development" and on the other the "alternatives to development". In the first case the new arrangements are in institutions and procedures that "rectify" development; its conceptual base is not in question, but rather its implementations, mediations, etc. Its most obvious examples are "human development", "integral development", and all other types that are proposed to compensate or overcome the most diverse problems. In the second case, the orientation is seeking alternatives to the basic ideas of development. In other words, the purpose is to transcend the belief in economic growth, welfare assimilation with consumption, or the linearity of the same historical process for all cultures all over the planet. It seeks to supplant the very idea of development as a particular cultural product of Western modernity. In this area there are efforts ranging from environmental positions that recognize the rights of nature to new discussions about the Buen Vivir in the Andean countries.

Progressive developments: change and permanencies

The arrival of progressive governments in South America offers new examples of this tension between possible changes and adherence to development. Progressive agendas conquered presidencies proposing substantial reforms, particularly as alternatives to neoliberalism or market reductionism.

We must recognize that most of these governments, beyond their different styles, have introduced some reforms that broke with previous neoliberal styles. But it is also becoming more evident that many elements remain inherited from notions of conventional development, and among the most problematic is the prevalence of the idea of exporting raw materials. Indeed, all progressive governments in South America have turned to extractive activities as the base of their economy. In some cases the focus is on mining, in others on hydrocarbons, and finally there are those focused on agriculture foods. The 'primarization' of regional exports has increased, taking advantage of the high prices of raw materials, while reducing industrialization (including in Brazil). In some cases, the permanence of conventional development is celebrated praising the macroeconomic orthodoxy (it is said, for example, that the ministries of economy are "serious" to ensure fiscal stability, control inflation and comply with international debt). In other cases, it manifests as "resource nationalism" where the state tries to behave like a capitalist firm that maximizes its profits by using extractive activities as the basis of their economy (as with hydrocarbons in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela). But this extractivism is different from the one encouraged under market reductionism, as it

is now backed by the state. In some cases, it is developed by public companies or by private/public alliances. In others, there is an increased tax burden and sometimes efforts are made to tighten the regulation of these activities.

Beyond these nuanced elements, extractive activities are conceived as a key element to ensure economic growth, and thus the classical development ideas are reinforced. The progressive state seeks to capture greater proportions of the surplus generated from exports, but also aims to ensure the permanence of these activities, the inflow of foreign investment, and the export of these resources. Thus, exports and investment are seen as the ingredients needed to maintain economic growth, which continues as the "engine" of development. In the case of progressive governments the state intervenes under different modalities and intensities, either encouraging or securing such extractive enterprises, while simultaneously redistributing part of the money collected in welfare programs (the best known are the conditional cash transfer programs benefitting the poorest sectors of the population).

However, this same extractivism generates significant environmental and social impacts. As it is increasingly carried out under more intensive procedures or with a greater territorial coverage, displacing indigenous and peasant communities in remote areas, it is not surprising that it has unleashed new forms of resistance and social protest. A recent review shows that, in mid-2012, social conflicts existed against extractivism across South American countries, from Argentina and Chile in the south to Venezuela, Guyana and Suriname in the north. Moreover, in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, citizen protests against extractivism and in defense of territories or water were launched. Thus, social unrest has ceased to be an exception, and become the norm. In the same way, the differences between Right and Left governments in terms of development has faded away, as both bet on economic growth, and for this call upon export raw materials.

The ruling progressive governments have definitely explored some options within "alternative development" (in Bolivia, Ecuador and especially in Venezuela), but failed to get actually explore "alternatives to development". Many of the government's progressive projects have been waning, actors and production dynamics have been reorganized, and, once again, conventional development has reappeared. Of course it is not the same as before, as it is certainly different from the approaches of neoliberal governments. It is an "alternative development" with a new seal, improved; more statist but still extractivist; with nationalist discourses but also dependent on global markets that buy raw materials; more focused on social welfare and also more popular yet represses and oppresses citizenship resistance

when it jeopardizes the nation's role as a supplier of raw materials. In general, this re-channelling of development has been a slow process in various governments and has had an even slower recognition of the persistence of these previous trends among social movements. However, in Peru, this happened in about three months: the government of Ollanta Humala started as a progressive one, but given the social resistance to mining mega-projects, it finally opted to defend investments and accentuate the extractivist strategy. The progressive label of the government itself obscures the distinction between "alternative development" and "alternatives to development". Left governments are presenting themselves as the extreme alternative, beyond which there is virtually nothing. In countries like Bolivia, constant radical rhetoric lined with quotations from Marx or Lenin creates the illusion of a radical change in development and allows the claim that any call for true alternatives to development ought to be labelled as a return to a neoliberal past.

Actually the mode of production (dependence on raw materials exports) has not changed, and strictly speaking we are facing a new variety of "alternative development". Alvaro García Linera, in his analysis of the "Geopolitics of the Amazon", admits that the country has changed the ownership of the means of production, of public wealth and the distribution of economic surplus, but emphatically acknowledges: 'of course essentially the mode of production has not changed'[v]. A number of justifications for this situation, ranging from historical conditions to the manoeuvring capabilities of a small country like Bolivia, are provided. Beyond the agreements or disagreements with this diagnosis, it is impressive that it has led to a situation where there are no alternatives to extractivism, which is the same as saying that there is no alternative to development. After a long list of criticisms of the role of indigenous organizations and other sectors of society (especially NGOs), García Linera makes it clear that his ideal of "development" is a society of industry and knowledge, and to reach it there is no choice but to take advantage of extractivism. In his view there is no alternative and any criticism of this is an attempt of "conservative restoration".

It might quote the classics of socialism, but these ideas of a cognitive and industrial society are common among liberal shops, and it is even a World Bank funded model. Here, the deep cultural roots that both the left and the right share on the conventional view of development appear. A dispassionate analysis would show that this extractivist program, falling back onto dependence on raw material exports, is what most resembles a "restoration" of the old Bolivian condition, while efforts to shift towards industrialization remember the promises of the 1952 revolution.

In this way, García Linera's "Geopolitics of the Amazon" has no alternative to development and only "alternative development" supported by extractivism is possible. The state should capture some of those resources to fuel economic compensation programs. The problem is not that these programs are wrong in themselves, but that they are insufficient. There is a basic mistake to assume that a country can overcome its subordination by shedding their natural heritage as long as they can keep a slice of money to assist the poorest.

"Churcar" the alternatives to development

As ideas about development are so deeply rooted, attempts to seek alternatives are almost like swimming against the prevailing cultural current. To effectively pursue these alternatives, radical changes are necessary from the source. Instead of quoting Marx or Lenin, I consider it more appropriate to draw inspiration from an old word of the Tacanas in Bolivia: "Churcar".It is an appropriate example since it originates in eastern Bolivia, where debates about the meaning of development are taking place again.

This expression appears in the diary of the Italian Luigi Balzan, when in March 1892 he needed to go up Rio Mamore. He described the effort in detail: 'going up the river by batelón is very tiring for the crew, not to mention that it is always necessary to row with paddles. Sometimes there are places where, because there is a fallen tree, it is necessary to take to the shore as you cannot cross rowing. In these cases, it is necessary to grab the trees or grass with a grappling hook ... with which the rowers hook the branches, pull and then hook another, and so on."

This is precisely the task of building alternatives to development: the attempt to go against the current. While the majority follow the current of development, the alternatives require great effort, must exploit options here and there, such as examples of innovations from local groups to "hook" on them, make them known, and from there continue their path upstream.

Such hard rowing against the stream is "churcar: "it is necessary then churcar or rowing against the current" Balzan said in his diary[vi]. Churcar is a word of the Tacanan ethnic group expressing this hard rowing, which describes perfectly the task of building alternatives to development. It is rowing against the currents of development that range from the adhesion to popular consumerism in poor neighbourhoods to the reproduction of the economy of development in university faculties.

It is necessary to face the resistance to these changes, but also the determined attacks to avoid them. Balzan says in his diary that 'to go up the rivers it is necessary to approach the shore with the danger of irritating wasps nesting in the willows or in the water; you will receive painful bites". When touching those wasps' nests "the poor Indians are avenged by vicious bites".

With those words, it is inevitable to keep in mind the long conflict for the TIPNIS, where the alternatives to development have triggered the response of the "developmental wasps" who are in the shores. That story about the Indians churcando the river seems to have been a premonition of the marches in 2011 and 2012 in defence of the forests of Isoboro Sécure, who were certainly "avenged with vicious bites" from the powerful elites in an unequal dispute.

It is the reason why churcar is a term that better expresses the indispensable contribution of social movements, especially indigenous, to the cultural change necessary for progress towards alternatives to development.

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