

UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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“It is not the ‘actual’ interconnections of ‘things’ but the *conceptual* interconnections of *problems* which define the scope of the various sciences”

Max Weber

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INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by development? It is a question that many social scientists, politicians, economists and academics have tried to answer in the last several years in different ways. Therefore, this has led the term being divided into economic, social, political and cultural development. Hence, the term development means different things to different people. According to Michael Todaro the development process must “... *be conceived of as a multidimensional process* involving major changes in social structures, popular attitudes, and national institutions, as well as acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of poverty” (1997, p.16).

In order to understand the different levels of development, among and within societies, it is first necessary to answer the question of *which theoretical approach (es) best explain the current state of development in the world today?* In order to respond to that question, this essay will discuss the main characteristics and differences of the three main approaches or schools of thought, that help us to understand the state of development in the social sciences. From the individual level,

to the collective and international sphere. They are *the rationalist, the culturalist and the structuralist* perspectives, respectively.

To do this, in the first section of this paper, I start with a brief discussion on the historical variables related to the study of the concept of development in the last decades. Then, I explain the main characteristics, assumptions and limitations of each one of the approaches. For that purpose, I develop and explain a table in which those properties are stated and differentiate from each other, focusing in the critics of the weaknesses of the approaches. Furthermore, in section two, I focus on the explanations and arguments on which approach is better to understand the current state of development. Consequently, I analyse the interconnectedness among the perspectives.

In the last section of the essay, I include the conclusion, which lead to interpret Rabbi Menachen Mendell's quotation "*for the believer, there are no questions; for the non-believer, there are no answers*"¹. This will assist us to understand the importance of these three approaches or schools of thought, and their endeavours for the 21st. Century in search of a more stable and developed world.

An Introductory Note: Why These Three Approaches?

At this point it is necessary to answer the question that careful readers may have already addressed: Why these three approaches and no others? What about the institutionalist or modernists approaches? The post-structuralist or realists and idealists theories?²

As Lichbach (1997) has pointed out, I may argue that the rationalist, culturalist and structuralist approaches have been very (if not the most) active in contemporary comparative politics, and thus they have shaped the historical context of development of social theory. Furthermore, these three approaches together, set the dialogue and answer to Weber's fundamental questions, how people ought to live, as well as the dialectic among the modernisation processes of emancipation and exploitation. They explore the different structure-action combinations of interests, ideas, identities and institutions that give inquiry to the development process.

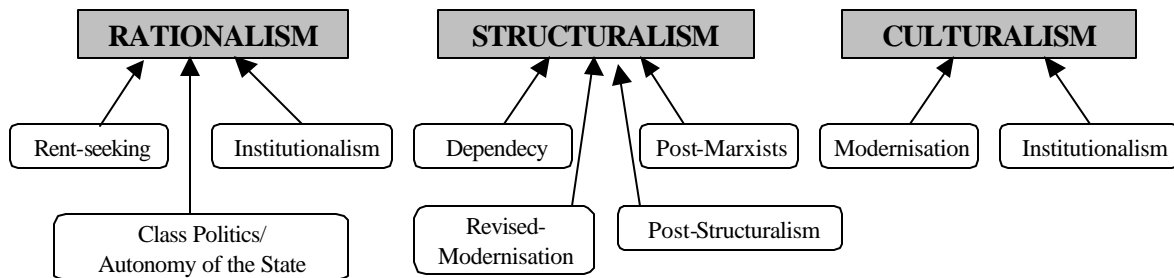
More over, these three approaches form the basis and grounds of the 'most important' schools of thought that describe and explain the role of politics in the process of development (Törnquist, 1999, p.41). Their assumptions and empirical bases can be easily identified in others. For example, the *rationalist* approach is the base of the rent-seeking, the institutionalist and class politics approaches. The dependency, revised-modernisation, post-Marxist and post-structuralism schools are

¹ Quoted in Lichbach and Zuckerman, 1997, p.239.

² Moreover, some readers may argue why not approach the theories of development, such as the (Neo)Keynesianism school, the (neo)classical perspectives or even the sustainable human development paradigm. In that sense, my argument is that this kind of approaches are more related with "strategies" for development, which clearly goes beyond the scope of this article. I am more interested in explain the theoretical approaches that allow to "*understand*" development. Consequently, I am interest in understanding the "*illness*", rather than the "*prescriptions*" should be developed in another article.

based in the *structuralist* approach. And finally, *culturalism* engages the modernisation and institutionalist approaches as well (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Approaches to Development and Its Linkages



As we can note from the above diagram, the rationalist – culturalist - structuralist schools of thought are the dominant approaches that best explain the current state of the development process. In that sense, the objective of this paper is to assess and verify this hypothesis, which undoubtedly would lead us to understand in its theoretical and philosophical sense what are the causes that lie behind development.

Finally, I may say in accordance with Stocker, that the fundamental purpose of theory is somehow to explain, comprehend and interpret reality, and that without theory of some sort it is impossible to understand ‘reality’ (Stoker, 1995, p.16). Thus, these three approaches, give us a broad picture of the development processes taking place in different parts of the world, and allow us to deeply analyse the root of development issues and topics in a theoretical perspective.³

SECTION 1: Three Analytical Approaches

Before analysing the three analytical approaches of development, a few words on the evolution of the development concept may be said. First, as mentioned in the introduction, the concept of development, has not got a consensus among scholars about its real meaning. Because its multidisciplinary characteristic, it may mean different things to different people. Thus, the evolution of the concept from the 1950’s onwards has been very broad. I may argue that the development of the development concept as we know it nowadays (Todaro’s definition for example), started with the influence of the Keynesian school of economic development, as well as with the

³ Another interesting approach to understand development was developed by the influential economist, Albert O. Hirschman (1981). His proposal was to identify two types of development theories: (i) mono-economics; focused in the particular conditions of underdeveloped countries, and (ii) mutual-benefit; studying the interactions between the developed countries with the underdeveloped ones. Thus he identifies that the former asserts orthodox economics and Marxism, while rejects development economics and neo-Marxist theories. The second, mutual-benefit, asserts orthodox economics and development economics, and rejects Marxism and Neo-Marxism. But I consider this approach very limited, mainly in the economic conditions of development, of course, and the proposal of this paper is to provide a more multidisciplinary approach to the current state of development, in order to understand its multiple variables and provide a more eclectic and holistic explanation.

notions of imperialism (neo-colonialism). Furthermore, during the 1960's and 1970's new dimensions were added to the concept; mainly in the international relations sphere with the "dependency" school. During the 1970's, the United Nations introduced the concept of "human environment" (UN Conference in Stockholm, 1972), as well as the observations of the Rome's Club and its influential "Limits to Growth" thesis. Later on, in the 1980's, the Brundtland Commission introduced again a new concept of development, closely related to the Rome's Club appreciations, the "sustainable development". And finally, during the last decade of the XX Century, two new concepts have been added, the "sustainable human development" paradigm, by the United Nations Development Programme; and the "culture of development" concept, by UNESCO's World Commission on Culture and Development (1997).

Now, having stated the evolution of the development concept in the last fifty years, we may now proceed to analyse more deeply the theoretical/analytical approaches that explain the current state of development. First, it may be clear that while the evolution of development concept and "strategies" can be divided in certain periods of time, the development of their analytical approaches has remain constant and thus providing explanations to development, independently of the time span.⁴ Consequently, in this section, I will analyse the main characteristics of each one of them in order to proceed, later on, to explain the comparison of their strengths and limitations, and thus proceed to examine, why when studying development, the three approaches must be taken into account.

(i) Rationalism

Jon Elster has summarised the theory of rational choice in one sentence "when faced with several courses of action, people usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome" (1993, p.22). Consequently, rational choice is guided by the outcome of action. Implicit in this concept, is the idea of interests, which are determined either materially or politically. Thus, rational choice studies how these interests produce the dialectic of reasons and irrationality in the development processes.

The starting point of the rationalists are the reason that human beings have in order to satisfy their interests and activities, generalising and concentrating on actions and choices, thus starting at an individual level of decision and ending at the social or collective level of actions.

Moreover, rational choice theorists try to explain (i) the reactions towards political and economic constraints by establishing a wide array of institutional arrangements, for both, raising revenues and stimulating economic growth; (ii) the variations in the capacity of organisations and political parties to achieve political and economic ends (Levi, 1997). Finally, it has also been argued that in the development context, rationality is:

⁴ In this sense, Paul Streeten talks about the evolution of development thinking, from economic growth to basic needs and human rights (1981, pp. 323-398).

“One of the behavioral foundations of the theory of *traditional economics*, holding that an economically rational person will always attempt to maximize satisfaction or *profits* or minimize *costs*. The notion of rationality as one of the *modernization ideals* means the replacement of age-old traditional practices by modern methods of objective thinking and logical reasoning in production, distribution, and consumption” (Todaro, 1997, p. 715).

(ii) Culturalism

With respect to the culturalist approach, I may argue that culture are the ways of thinking, communication and action which are determined by a set of values and attitudes socially learned, influencing the living conditions of human beings. Thus ‘culture’ is a concept determined by five basic, but indissoluble elements: (i) the *ways of thinking, communication and action*; among which we could identify attitudes towards education, work, identification with others, human relations, and future orientations; (ii) *values*; which are the norms or ideas of behaviour, like respect, commitment, ethics, tolerance, habits, discipline; (iii) *attitudes*; which are the forms by how people react toward different circumstances, like optimism, happiness, sadness; (iv) *social mechanisms*; like family, church, community, school and work places; and (v) *living conditions*; which are the levels of development that the persons have reached.

Furthermore, the culturalist approach is concerned with the norms and rules that distinct the poor and the well-to-do abide, concentrated in the discourse and practice of class conflict (Lichbach, 1997). Indeed, a starting point of the culturalist inquiry, about the state of development is based in the rules and the interpretation of collective action, particularising and focusing on norms.

Finally, it is worth noting that within this school of thought, the concept of culture is related to the organisation of things and actions. As well as the motivations, interests and concerns human beings face in a daily basis, that shape their progress. Furthermore, when related to development in its broad meaning, culture can be defined as a framework that allows organise the world and thus locate the self in the community, “making sense of the actions and interpreting motives of others, for grounding an analysis of interests, for linking collective identities to political action, and for motivating people and groups towards some actions and away from others” (Ross, 1997, p.42).

(iii) Structuralism

At last but not least, the structuralist approach is concerned with the relations and conditions which determine the state of development. For this school of thought, the state is characterised by situations and relations of groups within a society and upon the interrelations of those societies among the world – historically developing international structures (Lichbach, 1997).

More over, structuralism has been presented as “an attempt to develop theories and policies appropriate to less developed capitalist structures in the periphery dominated by the world system” (Dietz & Street, 1987, p.10). Thus we may argue that this school of thought is concentrated on the problems of underdevelopment, the interactions among centres and peripheries, and the structural characteristics of developing countries than promote or obstruct economic, social and political development.

Consequently, structuralism explores relations among actors in an institutional context, studies the historical dynamics of real social types; typologize and centre on conditions. Furthermore, structures are related with institutions as well as with interactions and functions in a societal context, and thus best apply to explain and explore the international relations of development.

A Comparative Matrix

At this point, having described and analysed the main characteristics of each approach, we proceed to examine the weakness and strengths of each schools of thought. Moreover, table 1 summarises and clarifies, at an eyes view, the previous discussion. It shows the starting point of inquiry, the levels of study, the main points of analysis and the main criticisms and weaknesses of each theoretical approach, that best help us to understand the state of development nowadays.

In this table, it is worthy to note that the starting point of inquiry is determined either by reasons, rules or relations, thus comprising the basic aspects of human activities. Indeed, meanwhile the rationalists study how actors satisfy their interests by reasoning the best outcomes, the structuralists explores the relations between actors in an institutional context, and the culturalists study the rules and values that promote identities and development.

Table 1. Characteristics of the theoretical approaches

Characteristics	THEORETICAL APPROACHES		
	Rationalism	Culturalism	Structuralism
Starting point of inquiry	➤ Reasons	❖ Rules	✓ Relations
Levels of study	➤ Studies how actors employ reasons to satisfy their interests.	❖ Studies rules that constitute individual and group identities.	✓ Explores relations among actors in an institutional context.
Levels of analysis	➤ Generalise	❖ Particularise	✓ Typologise
Main point of analysis	➤ Concentrate on actions	❖ Focus on norms	✓ Centred on conditions
Main criticisms	➤ Culminates in materialism. ➤ Lose values and contexts.	❖ Thought in idealism. ❖ Miss choice and constraint.	✓ Tenets in determinism. ✓ Miss actions and orientations.

Also, it is important to note in the above matrix, that the weaknesses or main points of criticisms of these approaches are based in the strengths of the others. Meanwhile the rationalists lose values and rules, culturalists lack choices and constraints; and while structuralists miss actions and orientations, rationalists culminates in materialism.

In addition we may note that when understanding development, these three approaches must be taken into account altogether. The three of them together generalise, particularise and typologise, thus allowing to understand and explain development within different perspectives and orientations, which when taken together concentrate on actions, focus on norms and centred on conditions.

SECTION 2: The Interconnectedness Among the Perspectives

Having recalled in the previous section the main characteristics and limitations of the three theoretical approaches of development, in the following section I summarise the interconnectedness among them. As noted before, the lacunae of one school of thought in explaining the development process can be approached by one or both the other perspectives. With that regard, it is important to understand that the connections among them are instrumental in order to understand, in the theoretical perspective, the state of development.

For example, as mentioned earlier, the rationalist approach is based in actions and choices, but diminish effect when introduces values and norms, as culturalism does. Moreover, the structuralist approach is centred on conditions and relations among institutions, meanwhile the rationalists are concentrated on actions and individuals, as well as culturalists are focused on norms and rules, among and within societies.

Furthermore, as pointed in the introduction, the core values of development can be circumscribed in one of the community schools discussed. When talking about the value of sustenance, or the ability to meet basic needs, we are primarily talking in a rationalist perspective, where human actions and desires should be met. The second core value – self-esteem – is related to the culturalist approach, where the study of the rules that constitute individual and group identities is pursue. Finally the freedom from servitude (to be able to choose) core value, can be described best by structuralists and the exploration of relations among actors in an institutional context. In that sense, the main point to recall at this stage is to understand that the development process is at the core of these approaches (see figure 2). Development, as Todaro has pointed out, is a multidimensional process which is at the heart of human activities and is influenced both by inputs and outputs.

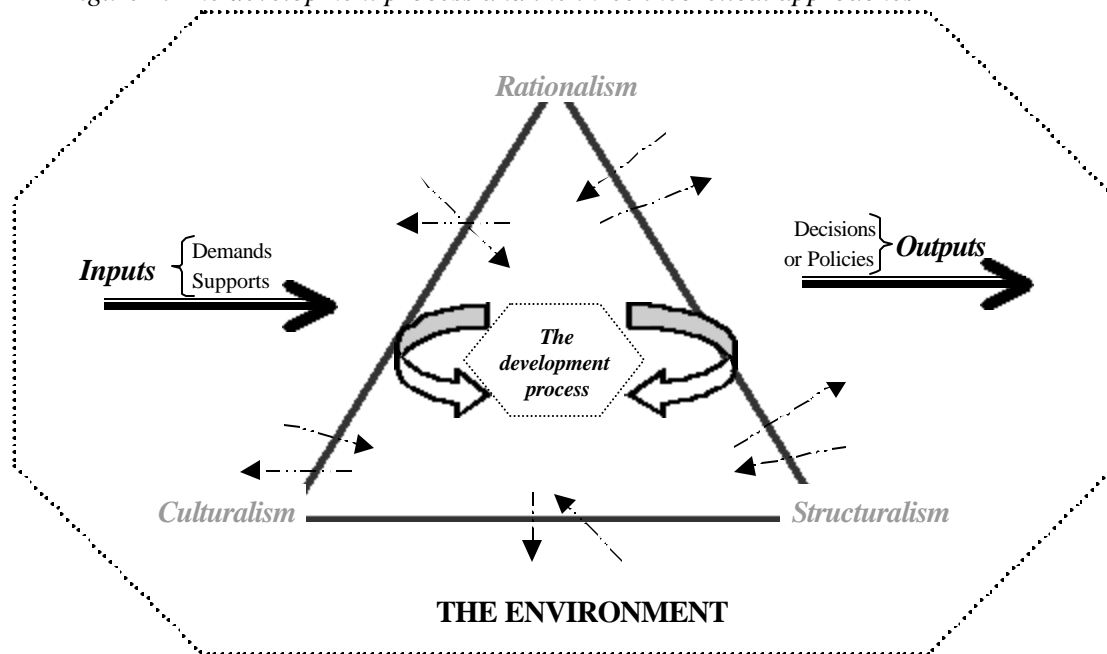
Development is both, a physical reality and a state of mind⁵, in which a society has to foster for obtaining a better life for its members. All the more so, development in

⁵ The latter has been widely developed by Lawrence Harrison, especially in “Underdevelopment is a State of Mind”, 1985.

all societies have at least three objectives⁶: (i) to increase the availability and widen the distribution of basic life-sustaining goods, (ii) to raise levels of living, and (iii) to expand the range of economic and social choices (Todaro, 1997, p,18). These objectives, lastly determine the degree and achievement of development that a society has perform over a period. In that sense, the three approaches explained in this paper, ultimately try to understand the process of development, in the individual, societal and international level. Consequently, they provide different explanations on why some groups are better off than others, as well as what are the conditions that determines the differences.

The development process implies an exchange of actions, norms and relations within a specific environment, which could be differentiated at the individual, societal, national or international levels. It is at the core of human activities and thus, from the three main schools of though. Moreover, it is feed by demands and supports from actors (individuals, institutions and states) and produces decisions and policies (outputs). This system and the productivity and efficiency involve within it, mainly, is what characterise the state of development. In that sense, the following figure summarises the role and importance of the three approaches for the development process; they bear the costs of providing the explanation of how it works. More over, in this process of development, which looks like a seamless web, operates centrifugal and centripetal forces⁷. These forces give movements and actions, and are both external and internal, thus promoting and obstructing the development process in a myriad of relations and interactions, that are explained according to the approaches developed in this paper.

Figure 2. *The development process and the three theoretical approaches*



⁶ Indeed, Samuel P. Huntington suggests that there really are five goals; two economic (growth and equity), two political (democracy and stability) and one both economic and political (national autonomy), mainly for developing societies (Huntington, 1987).

⁷ The centrifugal forces tend to move relations and situations away from the core, meanwhile the centripetal forces, operate on the contrary, they tend towards the centre of the development process.

CONCLUSION

As Lichbach (1997) has pointed out, there is always a danger that proponents of a research community or school of thought will become true believers and view their opponents as their bitter enemies. A good example of the relation among these three perspectives is the “father of sociology”, Max Weber. Who through his writings can be considered a rationalist, a culturalist and a structuralist. His master problem was to understand how people ought to live, the definition and implementation of common good and what is the best or right life and regime. It is, he was concentrated on the dialectic between the modernity and how the modernisation process emancipates and exploits.

As has been pointed out (figure 2), the development process is a complex and multidimensional one, that involves all human activities. It implies economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental perspectives and thus is concerned to produce outputs that seeks a better living standard. Development is a complicated task, and as such, it is impossible to understand its truly dimensional perspective taking into account only one of the approaches explained in this paper. Thus development must be explained and understood in a variety of levels, as these three approaches do.

Even there are strong critics to each of these approaches, it has been proved that they support the basis for understanding development and human activities. Rationalists tend to generalise, and some arguments against this school of thought rely on the prediction that if every actor acts in a rational way, there would be no interactions and thus discord and confrontation would flourish. Thus, we may say that rationalism is important for understanding development, in the sense that it provides the basic ingredients for explaining actions and aspirations, that leads human beings to seek progress. On the other hand, the culturalist school has been criticised mainly because of the different cultural structures within and among nations. For some scholars, cultural explanations are vague and imprecise, mainly because culturalist tend to particularise, but in that way we may study development in specific context and situations, taking into account the particular needs of a specific groups (what is better for some groups, not necessarily is good for the others and vice-versa). And finally, the structuralist approach have been hardly criticised for providing models and argument that blame development obstacles on others' structures and for the weaknesses in explaining the internal factor of development within societies. In sum, these three approaches are important, since they represent the different levels in which human beings interact and seek development: (i) rationalism, works in the individual level; (ii) culturalism, refers to collectives and groups, and (iii) structuralism, explains exchanges and interactions among structures (individuals or groups).

Moreover, these three theoretical approaches have an underlying unit because they offer critical commentaries on the problem of development; as well as help us to appreciate the meaning of its challenges. The dialectic of reason and irrationality in individuals and collectives are better understood and reconciled if we take into account these three interrelated approaches. Indeed, as a concluding statement, the

implications of the adoption of any of the theoretical approaches developed in this paper, will be useless if it is not compared and analysed with respect to the other perspectives. For instance, the weakness of one approach is the virtue of the others and vice-versa, and an attempt to avoid their interconnectedness will lead us to some kind of “dialogue of the deaf” where for the believer there would be no questions, and for the non-believer there would be no answers, instead of providing searching questions and valuable answers.

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