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## **The Atlantic South: politics and language of under development**

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### **Underdevelopment**

Beginning with the end of the title, it is interesting to exam this word, underdevelopment, for it has a strange heritage in Western culture.

First, it is negatively attached to development, which can happen in many ways. And it is also attached, again in negative ways, to evolution, that is, to social, economical or even cultural evolution, always in terms of societies, countries or populations.

In the history of biological sciences, the words development, and evolution were both used in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century embryology, before Darwin, to refer to the unfolding of a pre-existing structure, as the preformationists did, or forces acting on a undifferentiated egg, as did the epigeneticists. In both cases, we are talking about the unfolding of something that is already there, but comes to existence or reveals itself, just in the same way we talk of the development of a film. It is also interesting to note that also some modern geneticists have this faith in the pre-existence of information in the DNA, and talk of development as the expression of genes.

When it comes to human societies, development usually takes the same conceptual weight of its embryological counterpart, that is, as the unfolding of the human capacity of dealing of the environment, and that's why social development is generally used in an exclusive economic sense, from hunter-gathering, to domesticating animals, growing crops and so on. Development becomes thus, universal in the broad history of humanity. I will quote American writer Water Rodney, in one of the most important book in the history of books, How Europe underdeveloped Africa, saying exactly this:

This capacity for dealing with the environment is dependent on the extent to which they understand the laws of nature (science), on the extent to which they put that understanding into practice by devising tools (technology), and on the manner in which work is organised. Taking a long-term view, it can be said that there has been constant economic development within human society since the origins of man, because man has multiplied enormously his capacity to win a living from nature.

Underdevelopment is a much more problematic term, because there is no way to conceptualize it as a universal “lack of development”, or development below expectations, unless we are comparing levels of development. Of course we can say an organism didn’t developed as expected, as in the case of malformations, but this also because we know the typical developmental outcome of it species. In the case of societies this becomes even more obvious. We talk about underdevelopment observing that from an economic perspective some human groups have been producing less or becoming less wealthy than others though their relation to nature or to technology. The question, then, is not only that underdevelopment is a relative concept, but, being so, how can it came to be. I will quote Walter Rodney again, and I think he comes much more to the point now than he did about development. He points out that underdevelopment started becoming a preoccupation of Europeans through the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, talks about the obvious relative nature of underdevelopment, and then says that:

A second and even more indispensable component of modern underdevelopment is that it expresses a particular relationship of *exploitation*: namely, the exploitation of one country by another. All of the countries named as ‘underdeveloped’ in the world are exploited by others; and the underdevelopment with which the world is now pre-occupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation.

If it is the case, it is possible that also some notion of development may not be predetermined or universal as it has been accepted in a great part of Western thought. And this, I think, is the case both for organisms and societies, but I will leave this discussion to the end, because it goes a bit in parallel to the main theme of this exposition, which is the Atlantic south.

## **The Atlantic South**

If we concede that these phenomena - underdevelopment and development - are variable in time and space, we may also accept that they, also, have developed somehow.

I think a good place to look for this dynamics of development and underdevelopment is what I call the Atlantic south, that is, this place of communication or triangulation between Europe, Africa and America, first, and then also US, Africa and Latin America in more recent times.

The history of humanity in the last 500 years is the history of a huge transfiguration of peoples, cultures and societies in a global scale. We talk of globalization as a recent process but it is actually an ongoing process where Western Europe, and later the US, through successive waves of violence, greed and oppression transfigured the whole word according to its needs. It started with two very similar movements during Renaissance, that is, in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Salvationist expansions of Iberia, to the west, and of Russia, to the east.

We are informed by Western discourse that the history of modern world is the history of the technological and cultural creativity of Italians, Dutch and British, later French and Germans, breaking with the Feudal system and later maturing this reborn mercantilist endeavour into the industrial revolution. In this perspective, the Iberian and Russian expansions, and all the extra European context, only provided an area of purchasing, that is, stealing, for the primitive accumulation of capital.

This discourse, carefully elaborated by social scientists of these same countries, doesn’t explain why the first renewing impulses didn’t come from central and northern Europe but from the marginal areas, that is, from Iberia and Russia. These were, in fact, the first societies that really broke with feudal systems for two historical reasons: these were very centralized states that emerged from long wars of reconquer, Iberia against the Muslim word and Russia again the Mongolian and Turcoman domination.

**B**razilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro called these new socio-cultural formations mercantile-Salvationist, because of the important role of the Catholic and Orthodox Church, giving to both processes a messianic character. These new socio-cultural formations were supported by the new technologies, mostly oceanic navigation, firearms and forged iron, and it is interesting to note that the means that made possible both the messianic motivation and the technology of these societies came from an extra European context, that is, from the Muslims, from the Mongolians and other Eastern civilizations. While Russia made its impressive expansion through land, transfiguring hundreds of peoples in Asia, Iberians made their way through the oceans, with, in my opinion, more enduring consequences.

At the time of the arrival of Iberians in America, the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century the continent was populated by many kinds of sociocultural formations, or, if we think in evolutionary terms, of many levels of technological advancement and civilizational processes. It ranged from hunter-gatherers to agricultural societies, to peoples organized in various forms of state configurations, from single tribes to confederations of tribes and also large empires dominated by urban centres. Of course, there was no mercantilist societies like in Europe, no oceanic navigation, no fire arms, and no horses.

The Inca, Aztec and Maya civilizations, for example, had developed, totally independent of the Old World, an advanced agricultural technology, an impressive urban architecture, with paved roads, big buildings, a very effective astronomic science and calendar, a writing system, mathematics and so on. These empires didn't rely only on themselves to survive, but dominated dozens of other ethnic groups around them. But these civilizations didn't prevail in the whole America. Many other kinds of human societies, maybe less advanced to our patterns, but totally integrated to their environments in many ways, were flourishing in America and interacted with each other at the time the European arrived. Then the genocide started.

It is difficult to me, put in few words, and mostly English words, all the atrocities that were perpetrated against hundreds of millions of people during the 300 to 400 years of colonization of America, and, also, the atrocities that were perpetrated after the colonization. First, it not involved only the American populations. This mercantilist machine of the Iberians, was soon joined by their much effective competitors, British, French and Dutch, mobilized dozens of millions of Africans, which were sent to America to be dehumanized in forced labour. Because of the commerce triangulation in the Atlantic south: Europe, Africa and America, the slave trade became a lucrative endeavour in itself, so it was not a bad deal if millions of African slaves died from extenuous work and bad health conditions, so the business could go on. Even European society were transfigured in the process, with the grow of its population and the urban problems caused by the industrial revolution, children dying in the factories and the exportation of the exceeding population to the Americas.

America itself suffered the most massive process of depopulation ever witness in the history of humanity. It is estimated that the big civilizations, as the Aztecs, had about 20 or 30 million people. After 1 century, the Indian Mexican population were reduced to about 1,5 million. Some Aztec, Inca and Mayan cities were in fact bigger than the Europeans. Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, had about 300 thousand people in the beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century, more than 3 times the population of London at the same time. Tenochtitaln were completely destroyed by the Spanish conquerors. The Zocalo square, the sacred center and meeting point of the city, still exists in the modern Mexico City. Ironically, just after the destruction of Tenochtitaln, the Spanish built in the Zocalo a big cathedral over the ruins of the ancient Aztec temple, and the governor palace over the ruins of the palace of Montezuma.

It was a tragedy, but even this tragedy is highly mystified by Western scholars. This story of the end of the great civilizations of America is usually told as the Spanish conquerors were a particularly evil people. Well, this is not exactly the case. It is true that Spanish and Portuguese were the initiators of these big world tragedy. But what came next is even more terrible.

Today, if you look to faces of American populations, you can see many Indian-like faces in Mexico, in Guatemala, in Peru, in Bolivia, in many parts of Central America and some parts of Brazil and even in Argentina, that is, in the whole Latin America. But if you look at the populations of the former colonies of Britain, France and Nederland you can hardly see any Indian face. The US is a good example: where are the Indian features of US population?

The British, the Dutch and the French came to Americas after the Iberian with a much more advanced capitalist mentality. This means the total extermination of the indigenous population, clearing the area for mining, extractive activities or the plantations, the use of African slaves to do this job for free, and yet, earning money with the slave trade associated with exporting American products to all over the world. The African population of Iberian and more advanced European colonies also became different, that is, you can notice, today, more signs of preservation of African cultures in former Iberian colonies (took Cuba and Brazil for example) than in other areas. This is not because Ibereans were more gentle lords, but because the others were more effective in their capitalist endeavour of dehumanize the African labours in the productive process.

## **Transfigured peoples**

Darcy Ribeiro built a ethnic-national typology of transfigured peoples, which can be applied to Americas, but not only: the Testimony Peoples, the New Peoples, and the Transplantated peoples.

Testimony Peoples are the remnants of ancient civilizations with different levels of transfiguration by the Europeans. It can be seen outside America in Asia and Africa, for example. The preservation of indigenous languages in these two continents is some level of analysis for measuring how far European transfiguration went. In America, Testimony Peoples are exactly that countries where Aztec, Mayan and Inca civilizations existed, that is, the South American Andes, Guatemala in central America, and Mexico in North America.

New People are totally new social configurations due to the blend of different peoples and cultures. This is the most characteristic situation of the Americas for it happened in the whole continent. Its most distinguished characteristics is the initial blending of European and Indian peoples, with the accommodation and integration of Europeans in America using the ecological strategies of native populations, then the implementation of plantations and other huge productive endeavours using slave labourers from Africa. To give few examples, Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba and the south of the US are new peoples. Outside America, similar new peoples formations can be seen in the expansion of Arab civilization over populations of Africa, Asia and Europe, and, before that, in the Roman civilization.

Then, we have the transplantated peoples, which are the American societies conformed by massive immigrations from Europe. It happened, for example, in the US, and, as a secondary phenomenon, in Argentina and Uruguay. It means that Argentina and Uruguay were originally new people, a blend of Europeans and Indians, that later became transfigured again by millions of Europeans immigrants that came to this countries.

What happened to the majority of the American countries, during and after colonization, and during and after slavery, was the building of a much traumatized society, for it was split in two distinct mentalities.

All the ethnic reconfiguration imposed to the American peoples, both new and testimony peoples, created, first, an “external proletariat”, that is, people who don’t work for themselves or even for their country, but for foreign economies that profit with the situation. Second, it created a dominant class which is totally alienated of the rest of the population, although the members of this dominant class, more European-like, more educated, see themselves as the true representatives of their respective nations.

So, when independence came to the majority of the America countries, the leaders of this independence didn't, in fact, changed or wanted to change the situation, for they had, at their disposal, the same exploitation structure they were used to. On the other hand, when the official end of slavery in Americas came, things hardly changed for the former slaves. The farm was still there, with the same subhuman conditions of work.

When we talk about America, today, we think of a single country, America being only another name for US. That's interesting, for US is the less typical country of all the Americas, not only in the formation process, but what happened after. The US were, in fact, two countries in terms of ethnic-national typology: the transplanted north and the new people of the south. As soon as they managed to integrate the south, through a civil war, the US advanced through the rest of the Americas with a competence still greater than their Europeans counterpart.

The fruit companies, the mining companies, and after, the oil companies, and many others, have become the true owners of Latin America for near a hundred years, not only the capitalist owners but the political owners, building of removing military dictatorships all over the country. Cuba is a interesting case, not only because of its socialist revolution in 1959, but as a US true colony, decided in what Lenin called the great imperialist war, between Spain and the US.

The text below is an excerpt of Isabel Allende's preface to *The open veins of Latin America*, by Eduardo Galeano:

In the early seventies Chile was a small island in the tempestuous sea in which history had plunged Latin America, the continent that appears on the map in the form of an ailing heart. We were in the midst of the Socialist government of Salvador Allende, the first Marxist ever to become president in a democratic election, a man who had a dream of equality and liberty, and the passion to make that dream come true. That book with the yellow covers, however, proved that there were no safe islands in our region, we all shared five hundred years of exploitation and colonization, we were all linked by a common fate, we all belonged to the same race of the oppressed. If I had been able to read between the lines, I could have concluded that Salvador Allende's government was doomed from the beginning. It was the time of the Cold war, and the United States would not allow a leftist experiment to succeed in what Henry Kissinger called "its backyard." The Cuban revolution was enough; no other socialist project would be tolerated, even if it was the result of a democratic election. On September 11, 1973, a Military Coup ended a century of democratic tradition in Chile and started the long reign of General Augusto Pinochet. Similar coups followed in other countries, and soon half the continent's population was living in terror. This was a strategy designed in Washington and imposed upon the Latin American people by the economic and political forces of the right. In every instance the military acted as mercenaries to the privileged groups in power. Repression was organized on a large scale; torture, concentration camps, censorship, imprisonment without trial, and summary executions became common practices. Thousands of people "disappeared," masses of exiles and refugees left their countries running for their lives. New wounds were added to the old and recent scars that the continent had endured. In this political context *The Open Veins of Latin America* was published. This book made Eduardo Galeano famous overnight, although he was already a well known political journalist in Uruguay.

## Language

In everyday speech, the word “language” is used to refer to any conventional system of symbols used in communication. We thus speak of the language of dance or music, of computer language, the language of bees, and, of course, human language. Within the linguistic sciences community, the word language is restricted to the human domain, whether the focus is in the linguistic system itself - its formal and semantic aspects, or “microlinguistics”, as approached in that science’s core tradition from Saussure to Chomsky, or in the many relationships established by (or “inside”) human beings through the functions and operations of language, as in the fields of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, psycholinguistics and many others, also called. Studied from the perspective of our cognition, language has been considered a representational system somehow innate to - or embodied in - human biology. When it is approached through the linguistic items we manipulate, language is viewed a denotative system of symbolic communication, composed of elements that “denote entities regardless of the domain in which these entities may exist” (Maturana, 1978, p. 50). Says the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana:

[Denotation] requires agreement for the specification of the denotant and the denoted. If denotation, therefore, is not a primitive operation, it cannot be a primitive linguistic operation, either. Language must arise as a result of something else that does not require denotation for its establishment, but that gives rise to language with all its implications as a trivial necessary result. This fundamental process is ontogenic structural coupling, which results in the establishment of a consensual domain. (Maturana, 1978, p. 50).

Within that explanatory system, no component of a consensual interaction (i.e., language) can operate as a denotant: “at most, an observer could say that they connote the states of the participants as they trigger each other in interlocked sequences of changes of state” (Maturana, 1978, p. 50). And denotation arises “as a posteriori commentary made by the observer about the consequences of operation of the interacting systems”. It must be noted that Maturana is thus making, here, a fundamental separation between the *structure* of the interacting systems (the organisms involved in “languaging”) and the *behaviour* of these interactants, which can only appear in the description of the observer, not in the operations of the organism’s structure. Elements of the linguistic system itself (those studied through “microlinguistic” approaches) are components in the organisms’ behaviour, not part of their structure.

In this case, the “language of underdevelopment” is not to be found only in the usages or in the meanings attributed to this particular word in itself, but in the actual relations between organisms in a consensual domain that constitute social systems. In the case of underdevelopment, the relation between macrosystems: populations, societies, countries. The “underdevelopment theories”, the majority of them elaborated in the rich countries, speak either of a dualism between “modern” and “traditional” societies, or of a linear evolution of societies. These approaches are not only misleading: they actually contribute to the maintenance of the fundamental relations that make some countries underdeveloped. As discussed by Álvaro Vieira Pinto, in semantic terms, we should note the modern use of “developing countries”, instead of underdeveloped, point to an ongoing process of developing instead of making reference to the relations established that are, in fact, generative of underdevelopment. The “dependency theories”, many of them elaborated in underdeveloped countries are much more accurate (in language terms) at least in the sense that they point to the relational (instead of the evolutionary) dynamics of underdevelopment.

## A note on foreign language policies

In the last decades, when most foreign relations have not been based on colonialism, at least in official grounds, we got used to the more friendly talk of “cultural exchanging” when referring to cases of language transferring through active language policies. In the same way, we are justified to consider that the many instances of commercial and technological cooperation realized between countries and communities all over the world are legitimate motivations of language exchanging between the partners. A good example is Mercosul, the South American trade agreement between one Portuguese-speaking country, Brazil, and the Spanish-speaking Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. Since its official establishment, in 1991, there has been a significant increase in the study of the respective foreign languages in those countries, as a direct result of bilateral language policies with active support of the donating countries (Orth, Oyarzabal & Trivinos, 2004). It should be noted, however, that Guaraní, a language official both to Paraguay and Mercosul and spoken today by near 5 million of South-Americans (Lewis, 2009), did not benefit from that language interchange. Guaraní does not play the same role of Spanish in the foreign language policies of its donating country, even though, being an official language, Paraguayan people are encouraged to use it in their inter-personal and institutional relations.

The experience of Mercosul shows us that, although we are justified to consider it as a positive case in foreign language policies and practices, the problem of domination remains, for this and other situations of mutual cooperation are not prevalent in our culture of language diffusion, on the contrary, they are oriented by that culture. The marginal role played by Guaraní is indicative of this state of affairs. Guaraní is not only a modern and official language used by millions of people, but, during colonization, widely spoken by populations of the four Mercosul countries, and used as a lingua franca in contacts with speakers of European and other native languages<sup>1</sup>. Guaraní speakers, particularly outside Paraguay, were culturally transfigured through the Westernization of social and economic relations and, marginalized as social actors, abandoned the language. Nowadays, even when cooperative policies are being conducted, the tendency is to privilege languages with more political prestige in the target societies (the indigenous and the foreign), and it is not coincidental that, in Mercosul, the choice fell in the two modern European languages, Spanish and Portuguese.

The problem of domination remains because of the conservation of relationships established in our history of foreign language policies. Historically, the diffusion of modern European languages in non-Western and underdeveloped countries (categories with a great degree of overlapping) has been primarily attached to the colonial and neo-colonial processes. Conversely, programs established by West Europe countries (later, also by the US) devoted to the teaching and learning of non-European languages have often served to same, or connected, purposes of conserving submissive relations. Incorporated in the modes of living of both donating and recipient communities as a consequence of the process of cultural transfiguration, this generalized acceptance of the European “ethos” generated, in global scale, a mercantilist (not social) orientation to our inter-community relations, including our language policies and some of our approaches to foreign language learning.

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<sup>1</sup> The range of the Guaraní as a native speech and a lingua franca extended, in the colonial period, to the whole South American region of the *Plata*, that is, Paraguay, Uruguay, North of Argentina, and, in Brazil, the South, Mato Grosso and also spoken by the “bandeirantes” from São Paulo, who constantly invaded the Plata region to capture and enslave its native populations (Ribeiro, 2007). In other regions of Brazil, other lingua franca were spoken, also based in a Tupi language, the *lingua geral*, or *nheengatu*.

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