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Agents of "development"

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The author contends that the analysis of development has now entered into a phase of perplexity and disillusionment. "Development" of a sort has taken place, according to conventional statistical indicators, but seems to have reached an impasse. Neither collective nor professional agents have consistently played the parts assigned to them in the 1950s and 1960s. Their meager capacity to influence the course of events, the often perverse consequences of their efforts to do so, and the failure of most of them even to foresee the nature of the many-faceted crises in which Latin America now finds itself are of particular concern. Meanwhile governments and political movements, even if convinced that their countries need bold innovations in development policy, are overwhelmed by the tasks of crisis management and baffled by the discredit into which all schools of development theory have fallen. The radically critical movement for "another development" which flourished in the 1970s under the stimulus provided by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation might have been expected to take advantage of this situation. It has failed to do so, however, largely because of an inability to identify agents capable of carrying out the planned transformation, whose importance for mankind's well-being has been convincingly demonstrated. Its main contribution at present seems to be more modest, at the local level of popular organization and self-management.

In the author's view, some comfort is to be found in the reinvigoration of pluralist democracy in the face of the crisis and in a more realistic willingness on the part of potential agents to accept that no single category among them has the right or capacity to impose infallible prescriptions for "development" on society. These trends are examined in the concluding section of the article.

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I

What agents? Agents of what?

One of the several dictionary definitions of "agent" satisfies present purposes: "One who exerts power or produces an effect". In the discourse on development policy up to the present, different theorists and ideologists have looked to two main kinds of agents: a) collective agents, i.e., a class or subclass destined to bring about social and economic transformation through the pursuit of its own interests; b) a professional *élite* possessing a correct theory and technical training, capable of planning transformation in line with some broad conception of the national interest. Practically all interpretations of development look to both kinds of agents, but with wide variations in their emphasis on processes subject to their own laws and on the feasibility or desirability of intervention by political movements or the State under the guidance of professional agents. Obviously, moreover, different ideologies look to quite different collective and professional agents, from the industrial entrepreneur to the proletariat and from the professional planner to the professional revolutionary.

Let us first look at the many different categories of agents that must be taken into account in any realistic consideration of development policy formation and then at some of the implications of their diversity. In each case, one must keep in mind at least three levels of power and visibility having differing rationales for action: the top leaders, spokesmen and theorists; the intermediaries and functionaries; and the rank-and-file, or mass following.

II

Categories of agents

a) Political leaders: who must form their own judgments concerning the desirability and feasibility of development policies, preside over the bargaining and compromises needed to get the policies under way and try to "sell" the policies to their own parties and the wider public. The

pitfalls in this role (voluntarism, improvisation, and infatuation with personally-chosen and simplistic solutions) have been demonstrated repeatedly in the Latin American experience, as elsewhere. At the same time, experience has demonstrated that effective national policies require personification in a leader possessing a difficult combination of self-confidence and self-restraint and able to infuse confidence that the major national problems are solvable, that the deficiencies of previous ways of conducting public affairs can be overcome, and that all legitimate interests can get a hearing.

b) Planners and other public technocrats: who advise on and administer policies on the basis of their claims to specialized expertise.

These agents are in a peculiarly ambiguous position at present: the prestige of their expertise has declined, while their numbers have increased and the indispensability of their services to the State has been augmented by the complexity of the problems now confronted and the need to reverse a trend towards deterioration and privatization in the State's performance of social and economic functions.

c) Other bureaucrats: who generally try to manage the State machinery and the use of public resources based on a rationality quite different from that of political leaders or planner-technocrats.

d) Capitalists and entrepreneurs: a category which can be divided into industrialists, financiers, merchants, owners of modern farms and agribusinesses, and illicit entrepreneurs (mainly involved in drug traffic). These groups frequently overlap but, at the same time, have very different immediate interests and demands on the State. It can be assumed that future development policies worthy of support will try to bring these groups under more effective control, will stimulate some of them while restricting or eliminating others, will curb their export of capital, and will seek to capture a major part of their surplus for public needs. The objective of inducing the agents in these groups to "play a role in a concerted planning effort" cannot be given up as utopian, but it will obviously require complex bargaining, in which conflict will be more prominent than consensus and in which all parties will distrust the motives and tactics of their interlocutors.

e) Managers and other private technocrats: a category which is increasingly being internationalized through the employment of these agents by transnational enterprises; their training is similar to that of category c), and they sometimes shift between public and private employment. Agents in this category may be somewhat more disposed than those of the preceding category to negotiate policies with their counterparts in the public sector, and this introduces a likelihood that bargains may be struck with the public while even the political leadership may be kept in the dark.

f) Military officers: a category of agents notoriously prone to acting as "terrible simplifiers" of development as well as of national security policy under the tutelage of political ideologists and economists. These agents are probably somewhat chastened by the consequences of their recent interventions, but the problem of limiting them to their legitimate functions and to a modest share of public resources will always exist.

g) Judges and lawyers: another category of agents with a rationality of its own, who are in a position to check arbitrariness in policy application, but also to complicate and delay it.

h) Trade union leaders: a category now in a difficult position, torn between the demands of their members and the present incapacity of the State or employers to offer them significant gains. Their traditional ideologies are in disarray; moreover, they are frequently emerging from periods of repression and are often trying to rebuild unions in a setting of high unemployment.

i) Leaders of associations of professionals, small businessmen, farmers and other "middle class" groups. This category generally combines a good deal of reliance on some lines of government action with a persistent suspicion that government intervention is designed to favour unduly the wealthy, the poor, or the bureaucracy itself. Some of its components have a formidable capacity to block the application of development policies perceived as endangering their interests.

j) Owners of mass communication media, editors, journalists, television and radio commentators and other publicists. Ideally, this category of agents should offer the general public objective information on development problems and policies, criticize the policies and expose shortcomings in their execution, and maintain a forum for debate in which all ideologies and interests can make themselves heard. In most of

Latin America, at least some of the mass media probably perform these functions more satisfactorily than do their counterparts in other parts of the world. Obviously, no society has come close to the ideal, either in the contributions by the media to informed democratic discussion of development alternatives or in the public's receptivity to the contributions that are made. Since independent criticism is just as important a function as the provision of information, any effort by agents of the State to manipulate the media in the interest of its current policy must be viewed with suspicion.

k) Academics, intellectuals and "enlightened" opinion in general. A good many members of this category shift, in the course of national political changes, between the roles of independent theorist and critic of development policies and the role of planner or technocrat, but the roles themselves are obviously quite distinct. In recent years the numbers of persons with an advanced education relevant to development policy in universities and independent research institutions has increased very considerably. Presumably the experiences of recent years have enhanced their capacity to confront problems with less dogmatism and subservience to imported theories than heretofore.

l) Leaders and spokesmen of religious movements and organizations. This category has assumed great importance in confronting development policies with the values of human rights and social justice and in helping the poorest and most powerless strata of society to defend their own interests.

m) Leaders of student organizations. This category continually waxes and wanes in its capacity to mobilize a mass following and in its degree of autonomy from the political factions in the national society. It can be expected to continue to play several contradictory roles: as a source of radical criticism and protest against the development policies of the State; as an interest-group defending privileges associated with higher education; and as a recruiting ground for national political and technocratic leadership.

n) Leaders and ideologists who reject the market-oriented economy and the dominant international order, including Marxists and other socialists; movements combatting the ecological and cultural disbenefits of the Latin American variants of dependent capitalist development; and advocates of self-management, cooperativism, decentralization and community autonomy. Within this very diverse and internally conflictive category, there seems to have been a good deal of erosion of faith in a revolutionary seizure of power as the first step to authentic development, as well as an increased influence of ideologies calling for autonomous popular organization, action at the local level, and the transformation of values and cultures as a requisite for "another development".

o) Leaders of movements of the rural and urban poor. This group is generally localized and precarious, vulnerable to repression or manipulation by agents of the State and, frequently, dependent on stimuli from categories l), m) and n).

In practically all of these categories of agents, regional and international linkages are complex and influential in ways that can be only superficially suggested here. Academic training abroad, the prestige of theories fashionable in the central countries, contacts with organized interest-group counterparts, the research and advisory activities of international organizations, the imported content of the press and television, the transnationalization of industry and finance, and the increasing scale and diversity of population movements between Latin America and the central countries —all these factors shape the expectations of the various agents and set limits on their thinking. Even the localized leadership of the poor may have firmer ties with external sources of aid than with domestic allies. Even aside from the contradictory messages and definitions of allies and adversaries that derive directly from superpower rivalries, the external influences are very diverse and often deliberately designed to frustrate one another. One need only mention the contradictory character of government policies and private counter-policies emanating from the United States. Care should be taken not to exaggerate the dependence of national agents on influences from abroad, and significant influences acting in the other direction can also be identified, but any attempt to define the roles of "agents" in development must give serious study to their international dimensions.

III

Problems standing in the way of coherent policies understood and backed by broad coalitions of agents

A mere listing of the categories of agents which have some influence on policy formation —all of them being very far from internally unified as regards ideologies and perceived interests— might well make one despair of the possibility of generalizing about "the role they should play in a concerted planning effort". Let us try to summarize the problems before seeking a way ahead:

a) The relatively long history of governmental efforts to mobilize consensus behind ambitious development policies and plans is one aspect of the present difficulties. Some of these efforts have led nowhere, while others have had outcomes quite different from those promised. The stronger groups in society have good reason to rely on their ability to manipulate or sabotage policies, while the weaker groups have good reason to distrust appeals for shared sacrifices and patience. In fact, both try to extricate themselves from dependence on national development: the strong by exporting their capital, the weak by exporting their labour.

b) The different categories of agents have quite different rationales for action and presuppositions concerning "development", based on a combination of habit, ideology and perceived self-interest. Even those agents which are most articulate and disposed to broad views of the national interest have a weak capacity for introspection and self-criticism regarding the sources of their views. Most of them are also over-ready to "demonize" the motives of other agents.

c) In categories of agents involving the leadership of mass followings and complex organizations —including the executive power of the State itself— there are generally wide gaps among the rationales of the leaders, the intermediaries and the base. The leaders tend to exaggerate their capacity to control the intermediaries and to mobilize the rank and file.

d) Policy formation up to the present has shown a curious juxtaposition of narrow opportunism and improvisation combined with a faith in utopias and infallible prescriptions. Agents concerned with broad policy and planning have to some extent deluded themselves by focusing on imaginary harmonious societies capable of applying their prescriptions, and when unable to ignore the discrepancies between suppositions and realities, they have retreated into ritual activities and facade planning.

e) Until the beginning of the 1980s, the record of development in Latin America was sufficiently ambiguous so that agents identified with a wide range of policies could feel reasonably confident that things would go their way in the future.

Rising levels of production and income, an enormous expansion of education and, to a lesser extent, of other social services, and the greatly enhanced administrative capacity of the State seemed to promise that, one way or another, the notorious inequities could be corrected in the course of continuing economic growth. The argument advanced by ECLAC —that Latin America had achieved an income level at which it could eliminate extreme poverty by diversion of a modest share of increments in the incomes of the better-off— seemed plausible. Since then, events have shaken the confidence of all the key agents. For one thing, most of the planners and intellectual agents —including those most critical of prevailing styles of development— seem to have been taken by surprise by the character of the crises and the consequences of growth stimulated by lavish external credits. For another, the crisis has demonstrated —most glaringly in the case of Mexico— that even a long period of satisfactory growth as measured by the conventional indicators, political stability, and continuity in the main lines of policy can leave the majority of the population as badly off as ever and can leave the State and society less prepared to cope with adversity than at the much lower income levels of 40 years ago. To resume sustained growth, even if it is feasible and necessary, can thus hardly become once again an aim sufficiently inspiring to mobilize the key agents, unless they find reason to hope for a quite different pattern of growth.

f) The crises have thus left the governments and the agents in the private sector nearly bereft

of the development ideologies that served at least as a rationalization for their actions and have concentrated their attention on improvisations to stave off economic collapse and political upheaval. This means, in the case of the agents in the public sector, coping with debt negotiations, stagnant export markets, and the resistence of all strata of society to meeting the costs; in the case of the agents in the private sector, it means finding ways of defending acquired advantages or bare subsistence.

IV

The way ahead

Any effort to proceed beyond this bleak sketch of an impasse bristling with conflicts and cross-purposes risks falling into simplistic exhortations or "on-the-one-hand-but-on-the-other" evasions. The international jokes about expert advice of this kind are too well-known to need repetition.

A few suppositions may be made explicit at the outset:

a) No single category of agents can be nominated for the honour of *deus ex machina*, and no category need be dismissed as altogether irrelevant or obstructive. No category of agents is going to become so enlightened as to consistently play the role defined for it by planners (not even the planners themselves).

b) For the immediate future, at least, the major agents and the forces they represent can neither trust each other, dictate to each other, nor dispense with each other. One can hope, however, that most of them, in differing combinations in individual countries, will take part in free and rational public deliberation and, through it, reach some degree of mutual understanding with respect to viable policies and their own role in such policies. The current proposals for national pacts and concerted planning express this hope.

c) No style of development, in Latin America or elsewhere, is likely to achieve an ideal coherence. The styles most likely to achieve a reasonable degree of viability as well as acceptability in terms of human values and rights will be those in which the State has no doctrinal objection to vigorous planned intervention designed to redress the shortcomings of the market or, in Dr. Raúl Prebisch's words, to the "socialization of the surplus", but in which the agents of the State also keep in mind their own fallibility and the recalcitrance of complex societies to centralized direction. Such styles presuppose a permanent tension between sober realism and the striving for a new and better order.

These suppositions have a corollary with encouraging as well as discouraging aspects. No radically new and convincing prescriptions for development are at hand. The present crises may eventually lead back to reactionary or radical solutions, applied through renewed repression or social revolution. However, experience has, for most agents, dimmed the appeal of such extreme solutions even more than the appeal of "developmentalism". If this is so, then the governments and agents representing major social forces will have to choose among the policies which they have been trying to carry out, or claiming to carry out, since the 1950s or earlier and try to apply them more effectively. Many such policies faded from public attention during the credit-induced complacency of the late 1970s, and formulations of these policies remain embalmed in the resolutions of ECLAC and other institutions. They carry with them a burden of disillusionment with unhonoured governmental promises and lost opportunities. They also, however, contain a wealth of experience that planners and other intellectual agents should be studying. Some of them were quite successful as long as the distribution of power and the ideological preferences of those holding power permitted them to function. Others proved hopelessly inapplicable or had results quite different from those promised, yet nonetheless represent lines of action which national societies can hardly avoid entering upon once again. The saying that "those who ignore history are con-

demned to repeat it" comes to mind. Agents may be quite justified in resuming many of the lines of development policy pursued earlier, but it would be inexcusable for them to do so without a historical awareness of the past of these policies.

In fact, Latin America has made enormous advances in research and intellectual discourse on social, economic and political questions in recent years. Repression, economic crisis and disillusionment with simplistic prescriptions have stimulated as well as obstructed these advances. Studies of the functioning of the political and economic systems, of the State technocracies and bureaucracies, of the social classes, of the features of urbanization and agrarian transformation, and of the directions of ecological and demographic change have all put agents who are willing to learn in a better position to understand the environment upon which they are trying to act than they were a few years ago. ECLAC and ILPES have been among the major contributors to these advances.

Such progress, of course, does not justify intellectual *hubris*. These advances do not lend themselves to incontrovertible theories or tactics for the manipulation of society. The realities which they address continue to change rapidly. They are harder for political leaders as well as planners to assimilate than the statistical aggregates and indicators on which most planning has relied. The latter, generally based on data of dubious reliability supplemented by statistical ingenuity, have encouraged the predisposition to plan for imaginary societies that are more manipulable than the real ones. An important desideratum for the present is to make the advances in information and understanding more accessible to the general public as well as to the agents in leadership and planning positions, and to introduce these advances into a free and rational public deliberation of possible futures, as both a stimulus and a corrective.

In the discussion of agents of policy and planning in settings of economic depression, shrinking resources available for distribution, subjection to the dictates of external creditors and investors, and immediate policy alternatives that all seem distasteful, dangerous or inaccessible, there is a strong temptation to evade one issue that has presented itself ever more insistently in Latin America since the beginning of the debate on development. This is the issue of autonomous organized participation by the social classes and groups which have so far been virtually excluded from control over their own livelihood and the services that the State provides, supposedly for their well-being. This is one of the most complex desiderata of an acceptable style of development, and it is susceptible to many variants of distortion, from the traditional populist appeals to the masses, to the regimented and ritualized participatory machinery of some socialist States.

Authentic participation requires the emergence of informed and experienced leaders who can represent excluded groups in the national political arena and *vis-a-vis* the agents of the State. It also requires continual vigilance by the excluded groups in order to control the leaders who claim to represent them, as well as a struggle to overcome deeply rooted patterns of clientelism and paternalism. Unfortunately, it also requires resilience and ingenuity on the part of the excluded groups and their leaders in order to cope with the periodic repression of their protests. Experience of such struggles in Latin America is extensive, and in recent years academic, political and religious allies have helped some of the excluded towards a historical understanding of them, on the whole with more flexible ideological preconceptions than previously.[1] The recent regional trend towards political democratization gives the excluded groups somewhat more latitude than before in advancing their own perceived interests. At the same time, since the resources of the State for responding to their demands are under rigid constraints (except in the sense of the State's disposition to encourage or tolerate popular organization), the excluded and their allies, may be forced to develop a high degree of self-reliance and innovativeness.

Lastly, the furtherance of authentic participation requires that even the best-intentioned and most technically competent agents within the State machinery must restrain their own urges to accumulate power and their preoccupa-

[1]The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, through its Participation Programme, has collaborated with national research institutions on a series of studies concerning these questions as they relate to different groups in Latin America. The reports are in the process of publication by UNRISD in Geneva.

tion with standardized norms. "Conscientization" of the poor has long been a goal which some of their allies have valiantly striven to attain. "Conscientization" of the agents of the State is an aspiration of particular importance, on the supposition that recent research into bureaucracy can be enlightening and that such agents have a certain degree of autonomy and some capacity for self-criticism.