Thinking About Development: The Lived Reality of Globalization

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ABSTRACT

The case is presented for a more human vision of development which would mean a different attitude to globalization. The philosophy of John Macmurray goes beyond traditional dualism of body and mind and the dialectic of Hegel (both of which influence much current theorizing) to give priority to action over thinking. He challenges contemporary orthodoxy by emphasizing the personal and thus raises questions about the value of scientific knowledge for solving the problems of globalization. The strategy of writing development “under erasure” as introduced by Jacques Derrida emphasizes its problematic status. Thus we do have tools to reflect on what is meant by progress and economics and efficiency, and thus reconsider what we might be doing (or destroying) if we are trying to impose change on the “underdeveloped” of the world. Macmurray (1995a) tells us: “All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship” (p. 15). The thinking of Howard Richards and associates, and his account of a specific development project in Chile (P.P.H.) are offered to illustrate this new way of approaching these issues, as it becomes possible to move away from the impersonal conception of efficiency towards the ultimate value of the personal. Thus we can perhaps come to see our future in terms of what we can do to try to build community (community) from the local to the global.

Keywords: Action, Change, Community, Development, Dualism, Economics, Friendship, Globalization, Howard Richards, Jacques Derrida, John Macmurray, Knowledge, the Personal, Power, Reflection, Science, Thinking, “Under Erasure”

By “globalization,” I mean the continuing absorption of “emerging” nations into a global economy which is apparently being accomplished by fostering or imposing “development” on communities deemed to need it. Indeed, some people say, with more or less satisfaction, “you cannot stop progress!” This paper is intended to raise questions about such an attitude.

To regard “globalization” as an impersonal process accords a great deal of power to institutions such that they do seem to gain momentum and become unstoppable by the human beings who make them up (“constitute” them). We need to start to think about human existence from the grass roots rather than top down. Then it would be possible to judge and evaluate policies that affect human lives from the perspective of those living them, allowing us to scrutinize actions and interventions of supra-national bodies from a different angle. This is not merely a criticism of the ruthless exploitation of the “developing” nations, of

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the bizarre assumption that “economic growth” can go on forever, with continual expansion of untapped markets, or of the unbridled greed for wealth and power endemic in a system of international corporations – though such criticism is surely in order.

Well-intentioned interventions by charitable agencies and other NGOs have analogous models of efficiency and theories of how things should be done, which are often enough sadly out of touch with the personal lives and interests of those they affect. Somehow neither the perspective nor the scale of their activities can come close to addressing the situations they are concerned about, which can hardly be seen from so far outside, let alone understood. I am interested in reflecting on how we can best begin to learn to live together in a more human way, in a world that now has become so much smaller that what any of us does affects almost every corner of it, and we are affected in turn. There are patterns of thinking and acting that have been ignored by focus on the “big picture,” and I will argue that they may offer a new way to address these issues if we can free ourselves from the assumptions and logic that “business as usual” takes for granted.

The following, then, is a series of reflections on making sense of development with a view to re-envisioning what is at stake. What exactly does the term refer to? Whose development, of what, by whom, for what purpose? What is it, anyway? As I implied above, one might immediately think of economic development in terms of the growth of capitalism and the maximization of profits. It is not hard to put together a (moral?) case against this ideology with evidence of the inequitable exploitation of natural resources and the inevitable further impoverishment of the “less developed” areas of our world, not to mention the irreversible effect on the world eco-system.

Beyond that, however, even the well-intentioned may be trapped into judging success or failure in implementing development according to criteria which really miss the point. By considering the meaning of the word in contexts other than “globalization,” we may come to see important aspects of the reality of what goes by its name which tend to be obscured when it is thought of in purely economic/political terms. Thus this essay goes beyond decrying the devastation of the planet by short-sighted greed to offer a critique of the kind of thinking that underlies much of what is said and written about these issues. I will be referring to work by Howard Richards, and ideas from John Macmurray, together with use of a move by Jacques Derrida (1974) – that of writing the word “under erasure” (p. 19) – i.e. development.¹

I will say more about this later; for now what matters is the way this is supposed to work in our use of the word. I follow the model of Derrida (1974) writing such words as justice, friend, gift: these words do not denote a fixed reality. What is today called “justice” can be found later to be injustice. To claim to be a friend is to promise some things beyond what I am now in a position to guarantee. A gift may turn out to have strings attached and so not really be a gift at all. Etc. That is to say, if you think you’ve achieved it, you haven’t. It will always be further on, there is always more involved, more to do. And those who claim to have a handle on it – are sure of what “development” consists in and how to make it happen, are, as the existentialists would say, in bad faith. This is particularly clear in that it is usually being foisted on to other people who are said to be in need of “development.”² So I am offering an invitation to what Derrida (1974, 1992) called “deconstruction.” I am not going to try to define that here, but I will say that it has a specific philosophical (grammatological?) meaning and application. It is not something you do, it is something you undergo.³ In a way this essay is offered as an example of how much this attitude is needed, and how it can work in the field, so to speak.⁴

We can certainly start by trying to focus on economic development and without going so far as to want to write it economic, it should be clear its meaning can be contested. From the point of view of the material welfare of any group of people, “economics” describes how resources are shared, that is, the ways in which
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