

**DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND THE PEASANTRY:  
WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO AFRICA**

by

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**Abstract:**

This paper reviews the literature concerning development theory. It is recognized that the general problem of Third World underdevelopment has occupied the attention of all development theorists. It is also recognized that the more specific problem of rural development has been addressed by a number of these scholars (Hunter 1969; Bardhan 1970; World Bank 1975; Adams 1978). What seems to have escaped the attention of the majority of them is the centrality of the peasantry in rural development. In particular their failure to recognize and theorize on the articulation of modes of production, with its crucial implications on meaningful Third World development, seems to be a serious theoretical defect. Specifically, it will be argued that three influential theoretical perspectives on development are necessarily defective because of their partial and inappropriate theorisation on the underlying causes of Third World under-development. First, the 'modernisation' theorists saw as their basic problematic the absence of capitalist industrialisation and hence the inadequate capitalist penetration of Third World economies. They therefore assumed that the rural sector and the peasantry, both seen as manifestations of



backwardness or non-modernity, would progressively wither away as it had happened in Western Europe and the USA, thus paving the way for development. (See for instance the works of Hoselitz 1960; Rostow 1960 and the Harrod-Domar growth model based on it; Moore 1963; Smelser 1963; Levy 1966; Bendix 1972; Gusfield 1972; Eisentadt 1973). Second, the 'under-development' theorists inverted the modernists' problematic, arguing that an ending to all forms of capitalist penetration was a 'sine qua non' for Third World development based on the needs of the indigenous population. The under-development theorists thus posited an unfounded assumption that Third World formations could be characterised by a loose coupling between the indigenous socio-economic structures and capitalist mode of production and that all that was necessary was to block and remove capitalist penetration, thereby freeing the path to indigenous socio-economic development geared to the domestic market. (See for instance the works of Baran 1957; Baran & Sweezy 1966; Frank 1967; 1969; 1975; Dos Santos 1970; Furtado 1971; Cardozo 1972; Sweezy 1972). Third, the 'World Economy' perspective, while recognizing the articulation of economies at the global level, posited the stark and glaring imbalances and inequities between nations (at the institutional level) as the central problematic. The reformist implications thus became consequential (see for instance the works of Bhagwati 1977; Lewis 1978; Singh



1977; Tinbergen 1978; Ul Haq 1976; Brandt Commission 1980; 1983).

While the three development perspectives cited above appear to differ radically from each other, they all share a common defect. They do not recognize the problem of an articulation of modes of production in Third World transitional social formations.

Relating the foregoing theoretical issues to the empirical reality in Africa, the study found that the persisting problem of underdevelopment was a function of an articulation of modes of production. In agriculture, there was extreme unevenness between the subsistence sector and the export-oriented sectors. In industry, similar unevenness and dislocations were in evidence between export-oriented extractive sectors and the weak domestic-oriented industrial base. And in employment, there was the evidence of contrasting development between the forces of production in rural areas vis-a-vis the relatively more advanced forces of production in urban wage employment. The dialectical tensions arising from such polarities in development resulted in societies with poor and neglected peasantry: heavily marginalised in India, semi-proletarianised in Latin America and progressively being peasantised in Africa.

From this paper two major implications are summarised. First, the problem of Third World underdevelopment can only be more adequately theorised in terms of an



articulation of modes of production, which puts the peasantry as the essential locus of development discourse. Second, financial intermediation would seem to be critical in the rural development process but its potential role and effectiveness are likely to remain severely limited unless a more interventionist and progressive approach is taken.

