

Before Thinking about *What Next* Prerequisites for alternatives

Gilbert Rist

The critique of religion is the condition of any critique.
Karl Marx

He who believes that exponential growth can go on for ever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist.
Kenneth Boulding

The overall task is clear: the *What Next* project has been conceived as a collective effort to imagine and propose practical alternatives that could help change the present course of world affairs, reduce social inequalities between and among nations, reduce or prevent the risk of environmental hazards, restore a sense of justice and confidence among conflicting groups, and open up a new future for humankind.¹ These are indeed fine objectives, which are shared by all men and women of good will. Some would add that the time is ripe to embark on a global programme of social transformation, not only because of a growing dissatisfaction with the present predicament, but also to take advantage of the momentum gained by the civil society movements that have participated in the World Social Forum rallies.

Some of the steps to be taken are already well defined, and the majority of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are calling for important measures, the need for which has, over the years, won a large consensus: development should become 'sustainable'; the international debt of 'poor countries' should be alleviated or cancelled; trade should become 'fair'; military expenditure should be turned into 'poverty reduction programmes' – or swords into ploughshares; official development aid in member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) should be increased to at least 0.7 per cent of GNP, as promised more than 40 years ago; the structures of UN and Bretton Woods institutions should be

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff for her comments on earlier versions of this text as well as this one.

‘democratised’; human rights should be respected (for example, innocent individuals must be protected from arbitrary arrest; gender equality should be implemented); money laundering and financial corruption should be prosecuted. This list is by no means exhaustive. To mention just a few ‘fashionable’ items currently receiving attention: there is the issue of recommendations on ‘good governance’, to arbitrate on the diverging interests of the State, the private sector and civil society; discussions about the protection of biodiversity, endangered species and nature sanctuaries; and declarations on the necessity to levy taxes on speculative capital-transfer movements. Even if we have reservations about the justification for some of these measures there are reasons to believe that, if they were implemented, a considerable number of people would have a better place to live in. In a sense, therefore, we already know what to do; and what to do next is simply a matter of setting priorities.

Of course, there is a considerable gap between the formulation of a good idea and its implementation. Everything depends on political will. Often, those with an interest in changing a situation lack the power to do so, while those with power have no interest in effecting change. The expectation may be that persisting with hammering in the nail may eventually drive it in: that the balance of power will change, and what was formerly considered unacceptable suddenly becomes feasible.

The trouble is that this outcome is not the most likely one. As so often witnessed, the assumption of power by a former opposition party rarely leads to significant changes in national policy with regard to significant measures to effect much-needed change. This is true not only of so-called democracies, but also of regimes that seize power through a *coup d'état* intended to bring about dramatic change.

Therefore, the question is not, essentially, ‘What to do now?’ or ‘What next?’, but rather ‘Why is it that what we believe to be necessary has proved impossible?’ Radical alternatives to the present system were formulated more than 30 years ago. They are still valid, even if they have never been taken seriously, or have largely been forgotten today. Sometimes, older ideas regain prominence, but they are as difficult to implement as they were previously. Again, my contention is that we should be less concerned with ‘What Next?’ than with a more fundamental question: that is, ‘Why are we unable to translate common-sense alternatives into reality?’



Why is it that what we believe to be necessary has proved impossible?

Reasons for rejecting the ‘development’ paradigm

Why are we at a dead end?

Not long ago, the former USSR tried to build its imperial power through a centrally planned economic system. Four- or five-year plans were solemnly adopted, which defined production objectives to be met by each economic sector. On paper, everything should have worked out smoothly but, in fact, the whole system was chaotic. Moreover, objectives – particularly in agriculture – were rarely met. The weaknesses of the system were public knowledge, including their painful social consequences such as recurring shortages, rationing, a runaway black market, and the like. What was the solution proposed by Soviet bureaucrats to these problems? Starting from the dogma that economic planning was a ‘given’, they argued that failure could only be attributed to lack of proper implementation; thus the remedy to economic planning failure was simply more economic planning.

This reminder of a not-so-distant past could be laughable, had the programme not entailed so many tragic consequences. However, I think that by and large we are not doing any better today than former Soviet bureaucrats. Why? *Because we are so deeply entrenched in our certainties and beliefs that we constantly mistake the problem for the solution.* As the previous example shows, it was easy for those who did not share the dogma of central economic planning to identify the flaw in the reasoning. But this was impossible for those who adhered to such reasoning. It is therefore a matter of identifying the dogma – the belief system – that in our present global society plays the same role as economic planning in the former Soviet society. What is it, today, that is held to be beyond dispute, and a universal solution to all problems? And what, *at the same time*, is the source of the main problems we are faced with? The answer seems pretty obvious: the ‘development’ paradigm and the widely-held belief in the necessity of fostering economic growth are typical of a confusion between problem and solution. In other words, ‘development’ is a serious problem that is usually taken as an all-purpose solution.

Like yesterday’s Soviet bureaucrats, present-day ‘development’ advocates have indeed a blind spot when devising their blueprints for the future. But they are unaware of it. However, to those who have rejected the development-and-growth paradigm, the contradictions are glaring.

More than 50 years after the launching of the ‘development era’ by President Truman, how can we assess it? A very sketchy description of the present situation would show that, in the South, poverty (that is, economic indigence) is still endemic, and basic services such as access to drinkable water, education and medical care are lacking. In the North, unemployment is rampant, and the State can no longer meet its obligations in the field of public services, old age pensions or security. To this rather grim picture might be added the desperate situation of millions of refugees attempting to escape from hunger, war, physical violence, insecurity and repression.

It is not enough merely to list the evils witnessed and experienced today, for there are more to come. As if present circumstances were not worrying enough, the future is likely to be even more gloomy, since man-made ecological catastrophes are in the offing. Here again, the problems lying ahead are well known: among them are the broadening of the hole in the ozone layer, climatic changes due to the greenhouse effect, desertification or flooding of presently vastly populated areas, possible nuclear accidents, exhaustion of non-renewable resources, and drastic reduction of forested areas. Moreover, social catastrophes may also be expected as a result of the development of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or in the nanobiotechnologies that are likely to produce hybrids or semi-living artefacts whose reproduction may well be beyond control.²

In one way or another, all these scourges can be viewed as consequences or by-products of the frantic economic growth witnessed over the last five decades.³ Although a minority of people have managed to become richer during this period, social inequalities have multiplied and the natural environment has been turned into a mere commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. Indeed, if the state of

2 ‘Nanobiotechnology ... refers to the merging of the living and non-living realms to make hybrid material and organisms. ... The merging of biotech and nanotech gives researchers unprecedented potential to modify existing non-living material but also to create living organisms that have never existed before.’ ETC Group ‘Oligopoly, Inc.’, *Communiqué*, No. 82, November-December 2003.

3 UNDP has repeatedly tried to show that great progress had been achieved in the fields of life expectancy and schooling. This may have been true in former decades and, of course, everything depends on the year of reference that is chosen for constructing the argument. But in Russia alone, life expectancy decreased by seven years between 1985 and 1993. In view of the growing importance of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the frequent transfer of the schooling system from the State to the private sector, signs of progress should be accepted with caution.

the world is as depressed as we have described it, it would appear urgent to reverse the course of events. All efforts should henceforth be geared towards devising radical measures to overcome present crises and guard against future disasters.

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Surprisingly, the opposite is true. All over the world, politicians, international organisations and the majority of opinion makers (including political parties in opposition, as well as trade unions) propose that we should continue along the same path, in a relentless pursuit of the same economic goals.⁴ Since political parties – in democratic societies – are usually fighting over ways and means of solving the current problems, one would expect them to be divided over the course to be taken with regard to issues of such paramount importance. But by and large this is not the case. Left- and right-wing parties share the same creed: namely that economic growth and the free interplay of individual interests are the only valid recipes for improving the situation, for reducing unemployment in the North and for procuring a decent income for the billions of poor in the South. Suffice it to mention the present debate on the economic recovery of OECD countries or the official policies of major non-OECD countries such as China, India, South Africa or Brazil.

‘Development’ and economic growth have led us to a dead end. However, for mainstream ‘experts’, the problem has nothing to do with ‘development’ and economic growth as such, for both continue to be viewed as positive: not just desirable, but also necessary. If something goes wrong – as the experts sometimes admit – it is only the result of ‘mismanagement’: in some places, growth has been too slow or unevenly shared; elsewhere, they maintain, political forces or private interests have promoted a biased or dubious form of ‘development’. Excuses are easily found so as to rescue ‘the true (meaning of) development’ as well as the multiple strategies that are supposed to help achieve it.⁵ Once again, the expected solution is the problem. This is the riddle that must be explained and for which we have to find the key.

4 A recent survey carried out on behalf of the World Economic Forum among 7,900 young people in ten Asian countries reveals that the vast majority of them approve of globalisation and that only 2 per cent believe it may have a negative impact. *Le Temps*, 14 October 2003.

5 I include in these strategies what has come to be known as ‘sustainable development’, which is in fact an oxymoron (i.e. a contradiction in terms). Since ‘development’ is nothing but an increase in production with its corresponding increase in destruction (of matter and energy), its ‘sustainability’ is a purely rhetorical one. More often than not, ‘sustainable development’ can be summarised by the formula: ‘Pollute less in order to pollute longer’.

*What is ‘development’ about?*⁶

History, again, might help us to understand the dangerous confusion that hangs over the term ‘development’. Not so long ago, political scientists used to draw a clear line between ‘socialism’, a 19th-century doctrine promoted by Karl Marx, and its historical implementation. On the one hand the term referred to the aim of sharing wealth according to each person’s needs, putting an end to the exploitation of man by man, and promising the whole of humankind a brilliant future. On the other hand was the ‘real socialism’ as promoted in the former Soviet empire – a regime all too often synonymous with shortages for the many, privileges for the few, and pollution.

The same distinction must be made, today, between the ideal of development, which is supposed to bring wellbeing and happiness to all, and the ‘development’ that actually takes place, the adverse effects of which can be witnessed all over the world. In fact, such a distinction is also necessary for methodological reasons: there is a real danger in talking about things that have not been clearly defined from the outset. But there are rules to follow in order to construct a definition. As Durkheim has shown, first it is necessary to set aside preconceptions vis-à-vis the object to be defined, especially those based on emotions; second, the definition should be constructed with reference to external characteristics that can be validated by anyone.⁷ In other words, the definition of ‘development’ has to be constructed without taking into account what we believe ‘development’ to be, or whether we think of it as positive or negative. Moreover, such a definition must be derived from empirical facts.

To cut a long story short, what happens when something called ‘development’ occurs?⁸ To put it differently, what are the main char-



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6 The following paragraphs are largely taken from my book, *The History of Development. From Western Creed to Global Faith*, Zed Books, London, 2001 (1997), and from my article ‘Le “développement”: la violence symbolique d’une croyance’, *Brouillons pour l’avenir. Contributions au débat sur les alternatives, Nouveaux Cahiers de l’IUED*, No. 14, IUED, Geneva, PUF, Paris, 2003, pp. 135–152. As I am obliged to summarise my point of view outrageously, I kindly refer the reader to these texts for a more detailed presentation of my position.

7 Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, PUF, Paris, 1983 [1895].

8 What follows is a summary. I offer a more detailed definition in my book (see note 6).

acteristics of so-called developed countries?⁹ My response is: *we are witnessing a general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations*. The aim of ‘development’ is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand. *‘Development’, as it occurs today, is nothing less than the general commodification of nature and social relations*.

Concretely, when a country becomes ‘developed’, one of the first consequences is the privatisation of the commons and the institution of new property rights¹⁰ over land and water. Subsequently, natural resources (especially non-renewable ones) enter the economic system and are converted into products whose recycling is either problematic or impossible. But this is only the beginning of a long process of commodification of the natural environment that leads to the (private) appropriation of seeds, plants, and biodiversity generally, through licensing procedures. Social relations then undergo the same commodification process. This starts with the introduction of wage labour, replacing ‘autonomous’ work and making subsistence dependent on prices on the labour market. Services that used to be free or exchanged within the kin group must be paid for; children are sent to day nurseries rather than being looked after by their grandparents; leisure becomes costly. But there is more: human beings are turned into ‘resources’ and are expected to know how to sell themselves to potential employers. Prostitution may be officially suppressed¹¹ but it

- 9 I should probably emphasise at this point that I am considering ‘development’ that has ‘succeeded’ in ‘developed’ regions rather than ‘development aid’ or international cooperation that is of marginal importance (0.22 per cent of OECD countries’ GNP). Furthermore, no country has ever become ‘developed’ through foreign-assistance projects or programmes. Development must be envisaged as a global and sweeping movement rather than as a series of success stories about cooperatives, village pumps or vaccination campaigns.
- 10 The introduction of (private) property rights (vs. possession) entails significant consequences since the mortgaging of land is one of the major sources of credit and, hence, of economic growth. For a more detailed presentation of this critical point, see Rolf Steppacher, ‘La petite différence et ses grandes conséquences: possession et propriété’, *Brouillons pour l’avenir. Contributions au débat sur les alternatives, Nouveaux Cahiers de l’IUED*, No. 14, IUED, Geneva, PUF, Paris, 2003, pp. 181–190.
- 11 It is necessary to condemn prostitution (in the narrow sense of engaging in sexual intercourse for money) in order to conceal the fact that, more generally, prostitution is extended to the whole of society, just as it is necessary to create natural parks in order to justify the plundering of natural resources, or to appoint committees on bioethics in order to legitimise further experiments on living material. Let us not be led astray by ‘humanistic’ or ‘ethical’ discourses.

has become the common lot: in a ‘developed’ country, everybody is on sale.¹²

This description of the ‘development process’ – which has been going on since the end of the 18th century – could certainly be more nuanced, but it captures the main elements of a general pattern. Whether we like it or not (and I personally dislike it), ‘*development*’ is *coeval with the generalisation of the capitalist mode of production*. This lies at the root of the problems we are faced with. It is the only possible explanation for increasing social inequalities and present-day ecological problems. Contrary to a widely held opinion, poverty cannot be ‘cured’, since it is not a form of ‘illness’ that demonstrates the malfunctioning of capitalism. We should look at the problem the other way round: poverty is proof of the ‘good health’ of the capitalist system; it is the spur that stimulates new efforts and new forms of accumulation.¹³

And yet, ‘development’ and economic growth continue to be heralded as the only road to salvation, as the universal goal of humankind. The blind spot is obvious. Why is it that we are unable to see that Dr Jekyll is Mr Hyde and that the carrot is the stick?

Development as religion

Many factors explain the universal craze for ‘development’ (taken as a promise of general well-being), although its success has remained uncertain for a long time. Indeed, many other terms could have carried the same meaning, such as ‘modernisation’, ‘Westernisation’, ‘civilisation’, ‘improvement of living conditions’ or, simply ‘extension of capitalism’. But ‘development’ eventually prevailed – for three main reasons.

First, ‘development’ has a long history, which reaches back to the foundations of Western thought. Aristotle teaches that for a ‘scientific’ understanding of the world everything has to be understood ‘according to its nature’. The interesting thing is that, in Greek, the noun ‘nature’ (*physis*) is taken from a verb (*phuo*) meaning ‘to grow, to develop’. Hence, for Aristotle, scientific knowledge was based on

12 My distinction between ‘natural environment’ and ‘human beings’ is perhaps obsolete. As Pat Mooney has shown, at a certain level there is no longer any difference between matter (atomic structure) and living matter (biology and genetics). The wholesale colonisation of the various ‘resources’ of our planet – in the name of profit – is well under way.

13 See Jeremy Seabrook, *The Race for Riches: The Human Cost of Wealth*, Marshall Pickering, Basingstoke, 1988.

the intrinsic ‘development’ of everything (which also implied decay and death). Due to the considerable influence of the Greek philosopher, it became progressively accepted that it was in the ‘nature’ of ‘things’ – whether plants, animals, human beings or social institutions – to ‘develop’. The same idea was later taken up by Saint Augustine whose influence on Christian thinking throughout the ages has been paramount. He applied the same scheme to salvation history, starting with the creation of the world and of our first parents, Adam and Eve, reaching a climax with the incarnation of Jesus Christ and leading inexorably to the end, with the Last Judgement. It was only in the course of the 17th century that those who came to be known as the Moderns (in the wake of a literary dispute opposing the Ancients to the Moderns) transformed this world view (*Weltgeschichte als Heilgeschichte*¹⁴). They claimed that far from being doomed to decay, the world was actually headed for unending progress through the constant accumulation of knowledge. Authors such as Pascal, Perrault and, in particular, Fontenelle, retained from Aristotle the idea that history was driven by a kind of ‘nature’ (that is, development), but rejected its intrinsic consequence, namely that anything that grows is also bound to die or to disappear. In this manner they paved the way for the ideology of Progress, which flourished in the following centuries ... and still haunts our imagination.



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The second reason derives from the previous one. The positive meaning of ‘development’ is closely linked to the biological metaphor. Because everything is supposed to grow or develop, the concept of development has become almost synonymous with that of life. Of course, this constitutes an unjustifiable transposition of a truth that is valid in the biological realm to the social sciences, where the claim for such a truth lacks legitimacy. Progressively, a philosophy of history came to replace ‘real’ history – that is, the human-made course of events, with its ups and downs, its periods of splendour and its tragedies. Thus, the ideology of ‘development’ is nothing but a way of *naturalising history*. And yet we continue to believe that there is an internal necessity in the unfolding of history, as if the destiny of humankind was sealed at its very beginning. In the West, we are prone to ascribing to members of other cultures an inclination towards fatalism. But we do no better! ‘Development’ has become our destiny, our inescapable fate. This philosophy of history has been with us for so long that it is certainly one of the major reasons why it is so difficult to escape from it.

¹⁴ The italicised phrase in German means ‘world history as salvation history’ in English.

Finally, the word ‘development’ gained international acceptance when President Truman – in his Inaugural Address of January 1949 – radically transformed the way of looking at the world scene by turning colonised peoples into ‘underdeveloped’ ones. Instead of recognising that the world consisted of two major blocs – with colonised nations eager to fight for their independence and colonisers determined to keep their possessions – he simply declared the unity of humankind in a common goal to be shared by all, namely ‘development’. Of course, some parts of the world were ‘still underdeveloped’ whereas the Northern hemisphere – in spite of post-war hardships – was considered ‘developed’. This was not seen as a handicap but rather as a challenge. After all, just as an undergraduate student rightly expects to become a graduate, ‘underdeveloped’ nations had good reasons to believe that they might eventually become ‘developed’, provided they complied with the various measures concocted on their behalf to guide them in the path towards ‘development’, wellbeing and happiness.

These explanations have one thing in common: they have nothing to do with the actual course of history. They propagate a kind of *wishful thinking about an eventual happy outcome for all*; they ignore economic and political upheavals; they ascribe to ‘development’ a kind of *necessity* or inevitability constituting ‘the end of history’. Because it has so long been engraved in Western consciousness (and exported to ‘underdeveloped’ nations), the notion of ‘development’, along with the principle of economic growth, is one of the ‘truths’ that tallies very closely with Durkheim’s definition of religion.¹⁵ It functions as



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¹⁵ Durkheim has shown that religion is inseparable from society. Actually, the function of religion, understood as a set of beliefs, and of its corresponding social practices, is to create the unity of the group and to bind its members together (*Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*, PUF, Paris, 1960 [1912]). According to Durkheim, religion does not presuppose the existence of a god, nor of a divine being, nor of a ‘supernatural’ sphere. Buddhism is a case in point, since Buddha – although highly praised and respected – has never been turned into a god. There are, therefore, ‘secular’ or ‘civil’ religions whose function is perfectly similar to any other religion as long as it ‘cements’ the group that holds the same values to be true. Essentially ‘religion’ is therefore very different from ideology. Although ideologies may bind together those who claim to draw their opinions from them, they nevertheless remain subject to debate. Different ideologies may coexist in a given society, as is reflected in the various political parties that compete for power in a democratic State. But, according to Durkheim, in any society, it is religion that binds together those who profess different ideologies. I do not imply that ‘development’ is the unique value commonly shared in Western society. Human rights or democracy are also part of our religion in the Durkheimian sense, as they ›

the binding force of society, as an indisputable truth that transcends ideological divisions (as exemplified during the Cold War when East and West disagreed about almost everything except the necessity of promoting ‘development’). It has become a widely shared belief that, through ‘development’, history is heading towards its end goal and that, despite temporary periods of decline, tomorrow will be a better day. Hence the popularity that the term rapidly gained, and has retained, for it conveys the promise of general wellbeing for the entire planet. Of course, private doubts may be allowed about the justification for ‘development’, but when it comes to public statements, orthodoxy regains the upper hand. No politician seeking votes from his or her constituency would ever dare speak out against ‘development’. One may well reply that numerous critiques have nevertheless been voiced against ‘development’, that alternatives *to* ‘development’ have already been proposed, and that their authors have not been cast out. Indeed, burning witches at the stake is no longer fashionable. But there are more subtle forms of exclusion, such as marginalisation and consigning people to oblivion.¹⁶ Society is strong enough to tolerate some eccentric characters, as long as they do not turn into real trouble-makers. There needs to be serious reflection on this point before any attempt to work out what to do next.

It should be emphasised that to speak out against dominant religious beliefs is by no means an easy task. Protective mechanisms to ensure orthodoxy are powerful, particularly when core beliefs are at stake. But it should also be added that a particular belief never goes alone. Beliefs are organised into clusters, and to criticise one of them may well trigger collective resistance. It is not enough to say that we should simply reject ‘development’. For ‘development’ is only the visible part of the iceberg. All preconceptions about economics lie below this iceberg tip, so to speak. To attack ‘development’ also means questioning the *raison d’être* of economic growth, the ‘natural’ (or primordial) state of scarcity, the evidence of unlimited human needs, the virtue of competition, the invisible hand of the market, the assumption that more is always better – to cite but a few of the ‘truths’ that are usually taken for granted since they all pertain to the same world view and the same set of religious beliefs.

› belong to a common stock of values that can be drawn upon in order to legitimise actions. Cf. Marie-Dominique Perrot, Fabrizio Sabelli, Gilbert Rist, *La mythologie programmée. L’économie des croyances dans la société moderne*, Paris, PUF, 1992.

¹⁶ In economics courses, for instance, critical voices are never mentioned.

To conclude this section, a specific character of religion should be underlined: religions are self-immune. Internal criticism is therefore powerless when it comes to reconciling discourse and action. This is why, for example, Christianity can stand *at the same time* as the religion of love and as the justification for the Crusades, the Inquisition or the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants. Similarly, ‘development’ may stand for a universal promise of happiness and, *at the same time*, for the justification of exploitation. What happens in the heavens often bears no relation to what happens on earth. Some people seem to have a particular propensity for looking upwards, in order to ignore down-to-earth realities. I have opted for the opposite posture and I refuse to blur the issue by resorting to an idealistic discourse that legitimises its opposite. After all, when President Bush attacks Iraq in the name of ‘democracy’, those who have a minimum of knowledge in politics are not fooled. Why should one applaud when millions are expropriated (deprived of land and traditional knowledge, etc.) in the name of ‘development’?

A last point remains to be clarified. What about the objection that many people in the South are clamouring for ‘development’? How could ‘we’ refuse to grant them what they want? But who are ‘they’, and ‘what’ do they actually want? In my view, ‘they’ belong to two different categories. The first encompasses those who are supposed to represent ‘the people’, be it in governments, administrations, international organisations or NGOs (and who have generally received a Western-type education). The second category comprises grassroot individuals who have internalised the mainstream discourse and skillfully take advantage of the naivety of donor agencies in order to get their share of the ‘development’ pie. If we leave aside the latter (who often receive substantial rewards for their ingenuity or deviousness), the former certainly want to achieve ‘development’ as it has been promised to them. Their honesty and their good faith cannot be questioned, but they are typically suffering from the effects of *symbolic violence*. Bourdieu has coined this expression to explain how those who wield power exert their domination with the tacit consent of the dominated party.¹⁷ Symbolic violence is based on a world view serving the interests of the ruling group, while at the same time being accepted by the members of the dominated group in such a way that they have no choice but to match their behaviour to it and, in this manner, to reinforce it. The trick consists in describing a particular world order as ‘natural’, so that the very people who are suffering from it accept it as just and desirable. As



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17 References to symbolic violence are numerous in Bourdieu's work. See, in particular, *Le sens pratique*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1980, and *La domination masculine*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1998.

we have seen, ‘development’ is ideally suited for this purpose, since the promises it holds seem to correspond to some kind of undisputed ‘natural order’.¹⁸ Victims of ‘development’ are not necessarily critical of it. Instead, they may be among its fiercest supporters. In Bourdieu’s words ‘political subversion presupposes cognitive subversion’.¹⁹ The most difficult task therefore consists in *deconstructing the symbolic order that is taken for granted* and in showing that the collective belief in it results from the arbitrary meaning it has been endowed with – a meaning that has surreptitiously been imposed and whose arbitrary character has so far gone unacknowledged.

Thus, *to impose a world view amounts not only to an intellectual exercise of persuasion. It is first and foremost a political act.* By promoting the image of an enchanted world, where power relations have been euphemised (through the new catchword of ‘governance’) and where poor nations have been made to believe that they might eventually catch up with the wealthy, *the ruling group is transforming the members of the dominated group into accomplices or potential associates.*

Redefining a non-ethnocentric agenda

In the preceding section I showed why the ‘development’ paradigm must be rejected altogether. In my view, it cannot be redeemed, as it is both ecologically unsustainable and socially destructive. To persist, notably by promoting yet another qualifier describing allegedly ‘good development’ (human, sustainable, social, endogenous, cultural, and what not) leads nowhere and only increases semantic and political confusion. Rather, we need to complete the process of *cognitive subversion* initiated by Bourdieu.

However, it would hardly be satisfactory to avoid one ‘development’ pitfall, only to fall into others. Indeed, if our *What Next* project is meant to give food for thought (and, possibly, real rather than canned food!) and if we want it to be taken seriously, *we need to make sure that our suggestions do not simply rest on personal or epoch-dependant convictions.* In other words, we should come up with practical recommendations likely to be widely acceptable and capable of implementation.

¹⁸ I am aware that in many languages, particularly in Africa, there is no word that carries the idea conveyed by our use of the term ‘development’. This is evidence of the mainly Western roots of the concept, and also shows the extent to which the religion of ‘development’ came to be accepted as a result of cultural imperialism.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Ce que parler veut dire. L’économie des échanges linguistiques*, Paris, Fayard, 1982, p. 150.

Most reports seem to be shelved almost as soon as they are written. This may be either because they take little or no account of existing social and cultural structures or because their recommendations would involve such considerable transformations (at international, national or local levels) before anything could change that they are simply unrealistic. Our aim, therefore, is to propose forms of action that could be taken immediately and that are broadly considered to be legitimate.

In the next section, I shall make a plea both for the politics of cultural relativism and for a strict definition of solidarity. This, I believe, will help us in defining a common agenda and in setting priorities for tackling global problems.

On changing beliefs

We all have beliefs and convictions. We may even be certain that they are ‘true’. I have no problem with that. We all need to rely on guidelines or moral imperatives that we take to be beyond question. The trouble starts when we feel compelled to convince other people that what we think is good for us is also good for them (this is a renewed and personalised version of ‘What is good for General Motors, or Coca-Cola, is good for the United States or the whole world’). This kind of missionary outlook is usually widespread among the faithful of monotheistic religions, including modern lay converts to ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’ and ‘development’. Yet, people of other creeds have a tendency to keep their gods to themselves. They should be respected. Not only because their present belief suits them well, but because history teaches us that we can never be sure that what we believe today will be relevant tomorrow. Intercultural dialogue should not take place around beliefs, but rather around common social practices. The existence (or non-existence) of God (or gods) cannot be put to the test, nor be proven. But common experiences can be shared.

Different societies’ notions of certainty have varied greatly throughout both time and space. What one considers, here and now, to be a certainty is (or was), elsewhere or yesterday, regarded as a mere *belief*, that is (or has often become) an object of ridicule. Sorcery and witchcraft are self-evident for the vast majority of Africans. The practices associated with them are part of daily life. Africans make use of them in order to gain political power, to win a football match or as a protection against illness or bad luck. Outside Africa, such certainties are considered to be the product of (false) *beliefs*. When a Chinese or a Japanese person meets a fellow citizen, his or her first concern is quickly to evaluate relative social standing vis-à-vis the other person,

in order to speak and behave in accordance with the accepted views on superiority and inferiority within a hierarchical system. In other parts of the world, such concerns are considered obsolete since all human beings have once and for all been declared equal in the Universal Declaration of 1948, and these practices are regarded as remnants of now irrelevant *beliefs* that originated in feudal times.



Our What Next project is meant to give food for thought (and, possibly, real rather than canned food)!

In the West, even educated people were certain, not so long ago, that witches were capable of causing hailstorms that would destroy the harvest, or that they were responsible for miscarriages among the cattle. It was therefore legitimate to burn them at the stake. Today, such former certainties are considered to be superstitions or outrageous *beliefs* that can only be explained by the domination that men and the clergy exerted over women at the time. Today, in the West, even educated people are sure that economics is a science that deserves respect since it is based on mathematical calculations that are universally valid and contain the necessary recipe for achieving the common good. In other parts of the world, economics is either unknown or considered to be a form of fairy tale.

Many more examples could be added to the previous ones. What I mean to say is simply that *there is no point in trying to compel people who hold other beliefs to accept ours,*²⁰ firstly because we can never be sure that what we are now proclaiming as ‘*the truth*’ will be forever considered as such and, secondly, because those whom we want to convince may eventually join our cause for reasons that have nothing to do with a ‘conversion’ of their minds.

Finally, the other conclusion that can be drawn from these remarks is that only ‘unbelievers’ are able to identify a (false) ‘belief’ behind what is (or has been) accepted as a truth by the faithful. *The What Next project needs unbelievers* who can draw our attention to any missionary drift based on fake universalism, where a parochial truth is elevated to the level of a universal one.

In defence of the politics of cultural relativism

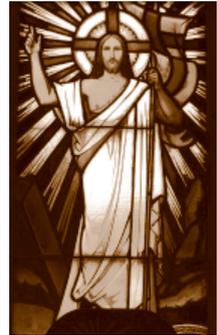
I am well aware of the debate among anthropologists on the problems of cultural relativism. I fully share the idea that reification of cultures creates insurmountable theoretical problems, and that nobody can be viewed as a representative of his or her culture. I know that all social groups have always migrated and have survived by borrowing and

²⁰ This, of course, applies to beliefs (which are beyond dispute for those who hold them) and not to ideological stances, which can vary within a given society.

exchanging (willingly or unwillingly) ideas, techniques, languages and experiences. I am convinced that any recourse to ‘authenticity’ is doomed to failure. I have no difficulty in explaining why, in the extreme, cultural relativism may legitimise practices that are injurious to human dignity. For all these reasons, I am aware that what has come to be known as cultural relativism is no longer fashionable in academic circles. Even if some colleagues have gone too far – in my view – in criticising it, they have undoubtedly made some valuable points.²¹

But whereas anthropologists have always been careful to maintain relativism and universalism simultaneously (in spite of cross-criticism), *the scholarly critique of cultural relativism has been recently taken over by political movements or activists in order to comfort universalistic claims.* Universalism is indeed deeply ingrained in monotheism and thus part of Western tradition. Since the Crusades, all through the conquest of the Americas and colonisation, and continuing in the age of globalisation, the West has never ceased to try to convert the rest of the world to its own certainties, whether the Christian faith, ‘civilisation’, economic liberalism, democracy, human rights and the like. *Reasons and motivations have changed over time, but the trend has remained remarkably constant – with repeatedly disastrous consequences.* Good intentions have more often than not played havoc, even if it has sometimes taken generations before this has been admitted. Furthermore, it is certainly illusory to think that, at a particular point in time, all people have the same aspirations and share the same values. About such matters, diversity will always prevail, for better or worse, but we cannot pass judgement on what is right or wrong. We may have our private preferences but we have to accept that other people may disagree with them and choose another course. *If relativism is considered to be ‘dangerous’ today in certain circles, is this not, first of all, because it calls into question the legitimacy of the Western missionary attitude? If Islamic salafism is regarded today as the centre of the ‘axis of evil’, is this not because its followers are disputing the Western monopoly of truth?*²²

This is why I strongly believe that, *for political reasons, we should not be terrorised by the anti-culturalist stance.* We should refrain from imposing on the world (and on those who do not necessarily share our worldview) issues that have been formatted to suit Western ideology



Since the Crusades, all through the conquest of the Americas and colonisation, and continuing in the age of globalisation, the West has never ceased to try to convert the rest of the world to its own certainties.

21 Suffice it to say that cultural relativism (or suspension of judgement) is a prerequisite for any anthropological fieldwork. It is not enough to rely on similarities between human beings of various cultures; differences also exist.

22 Salafism is a doctrine that promotes a strict observance of the principles of the Koran.

and interests.²³ Of course, it may sometimes be hard and destabilising to admit that our most cherished truths are nothing but tomorrow's fairy tales. But this is the price to pay if we want to 'think outside of the box' and refuse to be embroiled – even unwittingly – in the usual Western hegemonic programme. Throughout history, Westerners have been experts in transmogrifying their parochial truths into 'universal' obligations, which they have subsequently imposed on the rest of the world in the name of God or the general good.²⁴ To repeat such errors would deprive our project of all credibility.

This succession of caveats makes our task rather difficult. But there is a way out of the maze. My contention here is that the content of our project should derive from a clear definition of global solidarity.

The demanding conditions for true solidarity

The term 'solidarity' has been used and abused. The notions of 'development aid', humanitarian action, fundraising in the wake of natural disasters, and relief operations generally, are usually presented as 'expressions of solidarity' with victims. Thus, the term 'solidarity' simply means compassion, pity, tender feelings, unselfishness or generosity. It implies a transitive action from a giver to a receiver, or a beneficiary. No reverse movement is anticipated, except, in some cases, expressions of gratitude. These lofty feelings are certainly commendable, but they have nothing to do with real solidarity, which is much more demanding.

Actually, to establish solidarity, four conditions must be met. Firstly, there needs to be a commonality of interests between partners; secondly, the group of partners needs to face an external group with divergent views or interests; thirdly, partners must be – morally or contractually – obliged to each other; finally, partners must jointly and evenly share both profits and losses resulting from their actions. Examples of solidarity can be found when trade union workers go on strike, when soldiers face their enemies, or when private bankers, who are also the owners of the firm, are managing their business... In these cases, *people are jointly liable*, and no free rider is tolerated.

²³ Of course, the opposite danger also exists. The pseudo-scientific theories elaborated by Samuel Huntington are a case in point.

²⁴ 'Global proposals are necessarily parochial: they inevitably express the specific vision and interests of a small group of people, even when they are supposedly formulated in the interests of humanity' (Vandana Shiva, quoted in Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism*, Zed Books, London, 1998, p. 27).

Whereas the loose meaning of solidarity presupposes that actors are disinterested (and that they are likely to express ‘solidarity’ with people they have never seen!), the full meaning insists on *the necessity of a common interest among associates*. This, of course, means a complete reversal of perspective.²⁵ Therefore, to establish the *What Next* project on the foundations of true solidarity, we have to abandon the idea that, in order to improve world conditions, the haves should become generous enough to give something to the have-nots, or that those who know what is good for others should disseminate their knowledge among the ignorant ones. Quite the contrary: we have to start by identifying *common interests* that could be fought for collectively.

Of course, the second condition for true solidarity (the existence of an outside group facing the group of associates) is rather problematic at first sight. There seems to be a limit in extending our solidarity to the whole of humankind since, in that case, no ‘enemy’ is left to face the group of associates. If Martians are not likely to invade our planet, other phenomena are clearly endangering our living conditions. Foreign or class enemies have been replaced by ecological ones; the greenhouse effect, the thinning of the ozone layer, deforestation, water shortages, climate change, depletion of natural (mineral and living) resources, etc. (i.e. the consequences of the ‘development’ paradigm) are real threats that should not be underestimated. And depending on whether or not we take them seriously, we will also, collectively, lose or gain. I, therefore, think that it is vital to focus on those issues that can be viewed as ‘global’ and concentrate our energy on commonly shared problems.

Thinking differently

As I have mentioned before, many alternatives have already been proposed. There is no need to repeat, yet again, what is already known. Furthermore, it would be far too easy just to imagine what *should be done*. Actually, this kind of exercise requires no imagination at all since (almost) everything has already been said and written time and again. I do not mean to undervalue the contributions of the many authors who have identified various measures aimed at making the

25 Development aid is sometimes justified on the basis of a paradoxical formulation: we have an interest in being disinterested. In other words, we have an interest in making other people richer in order that we also acquire new customers. The statement sounds fine but, as we all know, what happens in practice is different, since development assistance mainly benefits donor countries.

world a better place.²⁶ Quite the contrary: we should re-read what they have written and take stock of it. Many of their ideas are still valid and stimulating. But in repeating what *should* be done, is there not an implicit avowal of powerlessness?

Therefore, priority has to be given to examining the *preconditions* for our reflection, the intellectual framework that determines what we are able to see and conceptualise but also what we fail to grasp or discover. We do not know the many things we are unaware of. In other words, our task lies upstream from politics; it mainly consists in *decolonising our imaginary*, in exposing the fallacy of what we take for granted, in stepping aside from mainstream thinking (not only from neo-classical economic theory but from the epistemological conditions that rendered neo-classical theory possible).

Foreign or class enemies have been replaced by ecological ones; the greenhouse effect, the thinning of the ozone layer, deforestation, water shortages, climate change, depletion of natural (mineral and living) resources, etc.



²⁶ The *What Now* report is a case in point; both its theoretical framework and its concrete proposals still stand. A great number of authors could also be mentioned: Gustavo Esteva, Alain Gras, Ivan Illich, Serge Latouche, François Partant, Majid Rahnema, Pierre Thuiller and Wolfgang Sachs have all been concerned with what has come to be known as the 'post-development' school. Needless to say, many names could be added to the list and I apologise to those I have forgotten.

Why don't we believe in what we know to be certain?

Whether we like it or not, thinking about the risk of various types of catastrophe likely to occur has indeed become a priority. The idea is not, however, to revive the figure of the prophet of doom. To anticipate a catastrophe does not mean to wring one's hands, but rather *to take it so seriously that it will eventually not happen*. An example can be taken from a contemporary piece of news, which, although thought-provoking, went almost unnoticed. Towards the end of September 2003 a terrible earthquake occurred on the island of Hokkaido, reaching 8 degrees on the Richter scale. TV programmes showed upsetting pictures of staggering houses and falling cupboards. And what was the outcome of such an impressive phenomenon? There was only one casualty. One dares not imagine what would have happened in any country other than Japan under similar circumstances. What are the lessons to be drawn from this example? First, the Japanese know very well that earthquakes and subsequent tidal waves (*tsunamis*) are likely to occur. Secondly, their collective behaviour is not dependent on risk evaluation based on probability (if the risk probability is – say – less than 2 per cent, then we are ready to run the risk). On the contrary, *they take the catastrophe for granted*, and behave according to this conviction, enforce anti-seismic standards in the construction industry, etc. Of course, this does not prevent earthquakes from happening, but it prevents them from turning into catastrophes.

In one of his recent books, Jean-Pierre Dupuy recalls that, before September 11, 2001, US intelligence services had intercepted messages indicating that a major terrorist operation involving civilian aircraft was under preparation.²⁷ So they knew. But the content of the information seemed so unlikely (in the sense of incredible) that *they did not believe it and therefore did not act upon it*. This is why the catastrophe occurred. What had so far been taken as unlikely, unbelievable or impossible suddenly became a reality. But if, beforehand, the possibility of the catastrophe had been taken for granted, it would never have happened.

It has become fashionable to talk about 'risk society'. Experts are requested to evaluate the potential dangers of chemical or nuclear plants, climate warming, pollution of all kinds, etc., in order to tell

27 *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé. Quand l'impossible est certain*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2002. Most of the views that are put forward in this section rely on the aforementioned book as well as on Jean-Pierre Dupuy's article 'Pourquoi la peur peut être une bonne conseillère', *Brouillons pour l'avenir. Contributions au débat sur les alternatives*, (Comelliau, Christian, ed.) *Nouveaux Cahiers de l'IUED*, No. 14, IUED, Geneva, PUF, Paris, 2003, pp. 159–169.

technocrats how to cope with ‘natural’ (actually man-made) hazards. Although concern with potential dangers may seem a positive thing, it may also mean that the real problems elude us. The actual uncertainty of climatic models (some of them forecast a temperature rise of ‘only’ 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, whereas others go as high as 5 degrees) is used as an excuse for not taking action. But the well-known fact is that if major countries such as China, India or Brazil persist in trying to catch up, according to the dominant model of ‘development’, present climatic models will become totally obsolete. As Dupuy has shown, what prevents us from taking action is therefore not that we are unable to *imagine* or to anticipate the catastrophe, but that *we do not believe in what we know*. Unlike the Japanese in the previous example, as long as the catastrophe has not occurred, we take it to be impossible, whereas we should regard it as a certainty. The only solution is to replace our old belief in ‘development’ by a new one, based on a certain number of truths that so far we are refusing to take seriously.



Priority has to be given to examining the preconditions for our reflection, the intellectual framework that determines what we are able to see and conceptualise but also what we fail to grasp or discover.

How are we to do this? Through the heuristic of fear: that is, a simulation of the fear we might experience when the worst happens. Fear should not be confused with panic. Fear helps us to anticipate the future and retrospectively to assess what we are presently doing (or not doing) – which determines what will happen later and trigger off our fear. A change in belief will only take place if we look at our present time in, as it were, a rear-view mirror placed some decades ahead of us. Instead of deluding ourselves with the unverified idea, implicit in the notion of ‘development’, that tomorrow will be a better day, we have to act now *as if* the most feared catastrophes lying ahead were certain ... in order to prevent them from happening. Amerindian wisdom tells us ‘we hold the Earth in trust for our children’. We therefore have to give greater significance to the future. Our social bonds are not limited to those whom we already know. They extend to our descendants for whose survival we are responsible. Such a change entails a revolutionary shift in our way of looking at history, away from a benign belief in its necessary unfolding, or ‘development’. This also implies changes in our daily lives. If we seriously take into account the various risks that are hanging over us, our behaviour must change, not only because we feel under a moral obligation, but because we must be utterly convinced that changes are not only ‘rationally’ necessary but that they may actually procure a better life. Ecological problems have too often been presented in a rather discouraging way. Necessary efforts to curb the present trend are usually seen as a rationing process, indeed a rather unattractive way of encouraging a move towards change. There is no doubt about

the necessity of slowing down economic growth, limiting pollution, or reducing the rate at which we use up non-renewable resources. But these measures should not be considered as entailing loss, but rather as procuring a gain. *There is a positive side in restoring a sense of limits.* Not only because it may delay the catastrophe but because it may improve our wellbeing, our social relations, etc. In other words, we must consider not only what have we *lost* in the course of the industrialisation and globalisation process, but also what we are to *gain* if we reduce its importance.

In the search for new concepts

In real life, we all behave according to our available kit of terminology that gives meaning to natural or social phenomena, as if they were ‘real’. But we cannot exclude the possibility that some ‘things’ may exist, or be possible, for which we have no word. Thus, in a recent lecture given to a group of English-speaking students, I tried to find a word to convey the idea carried in the French word ‘*décroissance*’. I asked for the help of the audience, but no satisfactory answer emerged. This, of course, does not imply that French is a richer language than English. It means that some French scholars have invented a word, and therefore a way of looking at our social world, which does not (yet) open a ‘window of understanding’ in the English academic world.²⁸

Now, what do I mean by ‘*décroissance*’? Certainly not what economists call ‘negative growth’ (a very strange oxymoron!), thus implicitly assuming that (global) economic growth is positive *per se* and that a deficit in economic growth should necessarily be viewed as something negative. The word ‘*décroissance*’ could perhaps be best explained by combining Georgescu-Roegen’s concept of entropy and Illich’s idea of counter-productivity.²⁹ From this perspective, global (or general) growth is beside the point. *The question is not whether there should be economic growth or not, but how a more decent life can be attained, given natural constraints (the finite quantity of non-renewable resources) with-*



A change in belief will only take place if we look at our present time in, as it were, a rear-view mirror placed some decades ahead of us.

28 I hasten to say that I am not entirely satisfied with this word (even if it has become popular among critics of ‘development’) because its negative prefix (‘*dé*-*croissance*) may carry the idea that what is needed is simply ‘less of the same’.

29 Cf. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *La décroissance*, Preface and translation by Jacques Grinevald and Ivo Rens, Paris, Sang de la Terre, 1995, and also the proceedings of the symposium, ‘*La décroissance soutenable. Bioéconomie, écologie et simplicité volontaire*’, Lyon, 26–27 September 2003, www.decroissance.org.

out depending on huge techno-structures (producing energy, food, transportation, etc.), and by restoring former social relations that have been destroyed by ‘development’.³⁰ It is obvious that no one can live indefinitely on his capital, but this is what we actually do by depleting non-renewable resources in order to foster endless economic growth. We therefore need to *regain a sense of limits* in order to live on our income (flows) rather than on a capital that does not belong to us alone.

‘Décroissance’ does not mean ‘decline’. Of course, it entails considerable change in our consumption patterns. But it does not suggest that we should ‘go back’ (whatever that means, if it means anything ...) to previous ages, using candles rather than electricity. It also means, for example, that we may have to reduce drastically our consumption of imported fruits and vegetables (even those labelled as ‘fair trade’ products!), our dependence on cars or aeroplanes, our addiction to dispensable gadgets that are great drains on energy.³¹ In other words, instead of relocating industry (abroad) and of multiplying the transfers of goods (and often of the same goods!) from one place to the other (in order to ‘add value’ to it), one should rather ‘relocalise’ trade and industry. We must shift ‘from global dependency to local interdependency’ (Helena Norberg-Hodge). This may of course sound utopian, particularly in the Northern hemisphere. But the potential for ‘décroissance’ – without reducing wellbeing – is very high. *The actual challenge is to show that ‘décroissance’ is not only necessary, but also desirable* and that a more sober life may be as pleasant as what we are used to.³² What is needed is not so much a ‘simpler life’ but a *simplified* way of life. If we do not start now to accept change voluntarily along these lines, soon governments, faced with overwhelming problems, will have no other solution but to impose an authoritarian society.

30 The car industry is, of course, a case in point. Even in a country such as Switzerland (where there is no car factory) it accounts for 18 per cent of the GNP. A collective change of attitude vis-à-vis ‘private mobility’ (which could be brought about by increasing taxes on, or rationing, petrol) would entail not only a decrease in the GNP – and perhaps an increase in unemployment – but also a reduction of noise and pollution, a more convivial way of life, fewer road accidents, changes in consumption patterns (by making outskirts supermarkets less attractive), etc.

31 We cannot expect the World Trade Organization or individual governments to enforce trade restrictions on dispensable products. But international boycott campaigns could initiate the movement.

32 For example, we should stop confusing the ‘standard of living’ (which measures a level of production and consumption) with the ‘quality of life’. What makes people happy is largely beyond their purchasing power.

To avoid misunderstanding, I am not contending that the above-mentioned ideas or measures could not be imagined unless the concept of ‘décroissance’ is available. What I mean to say is that alternative policies need alternative concepts, which are not simply the opposite of dominant ones (e.g. ‘negative growth’) but which rather convey a different approach to the issues at stake. Finally, to restore the old idea of *self-reliance* (which, before being called a ‘development strategy’, was simply the age-old way of life for humankind) may indicate another way of reaching the main objectives of ‘décroissance’: by and large, the ‘development era’ has lasted for two centuries, indeed a very short period of time compared to the entire history of humankind. The time has come to close the parenthesis.

Rebuilding economic theory

Obviously, economic thinking is largely responsible for the maze in which we are presently trapped. I am not referring to neo-classical economic doctrine only, as if other forms of economics (Marxist, Keynesian, etc.) escape criticism. The problem lies much deeper and points to the basic assumptions shared by all mainstream economists.³³ As mentioned above, these assumptions can be taken as ‘minor beliefs’, which are part and parcel of the religion of ‘development’, and reinforce it. To deconstruct them requires an interdisciplinary approach in which history and social anthropology play a crucial role.

The trouble is that most of the basic assumptions of economics are false. For example, mainstream economics assumes from the outset that human beings have always lived in a state of ‘natural’ scarcity, constantly eking out a living, unable as they are to satisfy their ‘unlimited’ needs. This founding tale of the discipline has been proven wrong a long time ago by economic anthropology,³⁴ but it is nevertheless recited at the beginning of any economics course. The reason why economists stick to their misrepresentations is quite obvious: if scarcity is ‘natural’ (rather than socially constructed by the market system combined with private ownership regulations) and human beings have unlimited needs, unlimited growth is necessary to satisfy these needs, and the division of labour and market exchange are best suited to increase production. Conversely, the necessity of growth lies at the root of the continued fabrication of new needs. No wonder, there-

33 For a more detailed presentation of this section, cf. Rist, Gilbert, ‘Préalables à une théorie de l’échange’, *Pratiques de la dissidence économique*, Yvonne Preiswerk and Fabrizio Sabelli (eds.), *Nouveaux Cahiers de l’IUED*, No. 7, IUED, Geneva, PUF, Paris, 1998, pp. 17–41.

34 Cf. Sahlins, Marshall, *Stone Age Economics*, Aldine, Chicago, 1972.

fore, that the economic system produces simultaneously both affluence and scarcity.

The trouble is that most of the basic assumptions of economics are false.



The whole question of exchange is also biased by the constant reference to Adam Smith's famous statement that human beings have 'a natural propensity to barter, truck and exchange', which leads him to restrict his theory to *market exchange*, i.e. an immediate exchange of 'values' (goods, services or money) based on the principle of equivalence. Here again, by harping on about the 'natural' foundation of their theory, economists are suggesting that the theory is beyond dispute; thus, it has to be swallowed by anyone who wants to be accepted into the clan. This theory is all the more attractive for being ethically neutral: economic prosperity has replaced the old 'common good' (*bonum commune*). The main problem is that exchange is thus reduced to *one of its possible forms*, i.e. market exchange, whereas historians and anthropologists have shown that exchange can take on a variety of forms, such as gift exchange (simple or generalised reciprocity), redistribution, domestic (autonomous) exchange and symbolic exchange (through ostentatious destruction of wealth in, for example, potlatch).³⁵ Here is not the proper place to restate the findings of economic anthropology or history (one could again go back to Aristotle who made a clear distinction between 'oikonomia' – domestic management – and 'chrematistics' – financial enrichment). Suffice it to say that *the puzzling aspect of economics lies in its attempt to explain the various social practices that ensure human livelihood, while it is based on fanciful ideas that bear no relation whatsoever to social life.*

Finally, at another level, mainstream economic theory is both anachronistic and obsolete as it is based on a Newtonian and mechanistic paradigm (where celestial mechanics is transposed to the social sphere). It totally ignores the law of entropy, which shows that any production of energy and matter also entails a corresponding destruction. Economic theory is caught in a 19th-century worldview, with dramatic consequences.³⁶ No wonder, then, that *economists are unable to understand the real functioning of social exchange³⁷ and of the environment.* Their only way out is to bring the world into conformity with their

35 Cf. Polanyi, Karl, *The Great Transformation*, New York, Rinehart, 1944.

36 Cf. Grinevald, Jacques, 'Georgescu-Roegen, bioéconomie et biosphère', in *Objectif décroissance. Vers une société harmonieuse*, (Bernard, Michel, Cheynet, Vincent, and Clémentin, Bruno, eds.), Parangon, Paris, 2003, pp. 44–57. For relevant publication in English, see the works of Hermann Daly.

37 This has already been explored by Dudley Seers in a forgotten article: 'The Limitation of the Special Case', *Bulletin of the Oxford Institute of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 25, No. 2, May 1963, pp. 77–98.

theories, to promote ‘development’, generalised commodification of goods and services, and unending growth.

To reverse this trend, there is an urgent need for real change in economic discourse and theory.³⁸ This should be viewed in a context of decolonising our imagination, as a critique of the religious beliefs that prevent us from formulating real alternatives or, conversely, prevent real alternatives from being taken seriously and adopted.

Listening to other voices

I am not sure that the majority of so-called ‘underdeveloped’ people really envy us our way of life, nor that they are in a hurry to ‘catch up’. Of course, in any country, even in a ‘less developed’ one, a visible minority is already enjoying the delights of Western life, sometimes beyond what Westerners could dream up for themselves. But it certainly cannot be considered as a historical vanguard. In fact, the vast majority of people have not (yet) been corrupted by ‘development’, even if they suffer from it. But they are silent. Not because they have nothing to say, but because they have not been trained to transform their thoughts into acceptable language. Speech access has always been restricted to those who master the basic rules of speech (which are not only grammatical ones) and who are prepared to play in a field whose orthodoxy is defined by those who retain a dominant position. Being silenced, they have no other way of expressing themselves than to behave in a dissident way. Their ‘*language of practices*’ has replaced *explicit speech*. They do not follow the rules of market exchange, nor do they believe they have unlimited needs. They practice other forms of exchange, they spend lavishly what they do not possess because weddings and funerals are socially important, and they are content with what is available to them, without looking for more than they already have. This does not mean restoring the image of the ‘noble savage’. It only describes how those who have been spared from wars, exploitation and ‘development’ are living. In a frugal way, for sure, but which does not preclude moments of real happiness.³⁹

To the eyes of World Bank experts, these people are ‘poor’. Which means that they have (or are?) ‘a problem’. Like all those who happen to be discriminated against by those who dominate them. Whites



Whites also used to have a problem with Blacks and men with women, until it was discovered that this kind of problem results from social relations in which both parties are involved. If there is a poverty problem, there must also be a wealth problem.

38 Cf. Brockway, George P., *The End of Economic Man. Principles of Any Future Economics*, Cornelia and Michael Bessie Books, New York, 1991.

39 Cf. Rahnama, Majid, *Quand la misère chasse la pauvreté*, Paris, Fayard, Actes Sud, 2003. A book that radically questions the criteria of the World Bank (and other international organisations) for defining poverty.

also used to have a problem with Blacks and men with women, until it was discovered that this kind of problem results from social relations in which both parties are involved. If there is a poverty problem, there must also be a wealth problem. As a Tswana saying goes: ‘Where there is no wealth there is no poverty either’. To attack (or eradicate) poverty, to use the international parlance, makes no sense unless one is also prepared to attack wealth. *Why should poverty be more scandalous than its opposite?* But it is much more difficult to take up the fight against wealth rather than poverty. Once again, we should not be taken in by slogans, even when these are formulated to appeal to human feelings.

Obviously, any human being living in difficult circumstances hopes that his or her children will enjoy a better life than the one he or she was forced to live. For millions, improvement of their living conditions is a necessity. For most, their present predicament depends on exterior factors, such as wars (fought for objectives that are beyond their understanding), unjust laws or political oppression. Some are suffering because of the expropriation of their means of livelihood in the name of commercial or financial interests that lie beyond their control. These cases have nothing to do with ‘development’ or humanitarian aid. They have to be settled at the national or international political level: they require struggle, demonstrations, and even perhaps some forms of violence in order to succeed.⁴⁰ As for the rest, strategies

⁴⁰ This is why I am not really convinced that ‘development’ will eventually come about thanks to the anarcho-hedonist virtues of ‘civil society’ (just as the suffering proletariat was expected to launch the ‘final struggle’ and open the path for Revolution) or thanks to the managerial virtues that came to be known as ‘governance’ (just another way of excluding politics from the debate). Firstly, ‘civil society’ does not exist *per se*, and it is difficult to define its constituency. Moreover, it lacks political legitimacy since its members are not easily identified (compare the debate between Gramsci and Lenin about this concept, which I cannot go into in such a short presentation). If civil society is what is left once the Prince-government and the Merchant-business have been ‘subtracted’ from global society, one should nevertheless recognise that any member of ‘civil society’ may also be a civil servant or a tradesman during working hours. Secondly, in the Western tradition, ‘civil’ refers to someone who is neither a soldier nor a member of the clergy. But this does not ensure that such a person is necessarily a supporter of democracy. Thirdly, if a tight network of associations (parents’ associations, church choirs, trade unions, women’s groups, etc.) and substantial social capital (in Putnam’s sense) may indeed contribute to social change, the values on which ‘civil society’ is based (e.g. sacrifice of time or money for a common cause) stand in total contradiction to those of the dominant system and run the risk of being eroded by the very success of ‘development’ (cf. Rist, Gilbert, ‘La cultura y el capital social: cómplices o víctimas del “desarrollo?”’, *Capital social y cultura: claves estatégicas*)

are to be invented and we (sitting outside) have no right whatsoever to dictate their course. To take just one example, in an article entitled ‘Development only benefits a tiny minority’⁴¹ the Peruvian anthropologist Grimaldo Rengifo clearly demonstrates that ‘development’ projects have failed, mainly because they have ignored local organisation structures⁴² as well as the Andean vision of the cosmos. Instead of ‘development’ – which produces a form of impoverishing wealth – villagers practise what they call ‘reinforcement’ (*vigoracion*), mainly relying on their own traditions without precluding innovation. They have no particular devotion to the past but they have discovered that ‘future-oriented’ models lead nowhere. This confirms what has already been said by Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash: ‘Self-sufficiency and autonomy are now political demands, well rooted in the experience of millions of Indians, *campesinos*, “urban marginals” and many other groups in the southern part of the globe. Re-rooting and regenerating themselves in their own spaces, they are creating effective responses to the “global forces” trying to displace them.’⁴³

It would be paradoxical – and dishonest – for me to try to become the spokesman of these ‘other voices’. Especially because *what people do is often more important than what they say*. Their ‘language of practices’ must be deciphered and interpreted. So-called ‘failures’ of well-intentioned ‘development’ projects should not be seen as an indication of ‘native’ stupidity, irrationality, lack of anticipation, and mismanagement, but as *an expression of dissent*, a rejection of a way of life imposed on them.



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› *para el desarrollo* (Kliksberg, Bernardo, Tomassini, Luciano, dir.), Banco interamericano de desarrollo, Fundación Felipe Herrera, Universidad de Maryland, Fondo de cultura económica, Washington, Buenos Aires, 2000, pp. 129–150) and also André-Marcel d’Ans: ‘Société civile, gouvernance: nouvelles notions, nouveaux mirages?’, *La lettre du Forum de Delphes*, No. 54, March–April 2004, pp. 2–3. This having been said, I readily admit that some social movements are working for positive social change.

41 ‘Le développement ne profite qu’à une petite minorité’, *Le Courrier*, 15 May 2004, p. 7.

42 This is also evident, to take just one other example, in Afghanistan, according to my colleague Alessandro Monsutti who documents this view in his book, *Guerres et migrations. Réseaux sociaux et stratégies économiques des Hazaras d’Afghanistan*, Neuchâtel, Institut d’ethnologie, Maison des sciences de l’homme, Paris, 2004.

43 Cf. Esteva, Gustavo and Prakash, Madhu Suri, *Grassroots Post-Modernism*, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

Concluding remarks

I am fully aware that this paper raises more questions than answers. This is deliberate. I do not feel entitled to speak as if I were looking at reality from above, nor to speak on behalf of other people, nor to give unwanted advice. I have no interest in drafting blueprints for a new and better world and I know too well that change (even for the better) cannot be forced on people. Putting in place what we consider to be desirable is always harmful to opposing interests, and historical change always occurs through struggle, suffering and pain. Reason rarely prevails. Enlightened views are surrounded by darkness and it usually takes a long time before they are acknowledged for what they are. Impatience is often a bad guide.

My purpose is therefore much more modest. I am speaking from my own position in my own society. I am just sharing the results of my research, experience, concerns and doubts. I do not claim to propose universally valid truths or to dictate the course of history. But I feel strongly that intellectuals are responsible for questioning the world in which they live. I have progressively come to ascertain the dangers of mainstream thinking, and I have learned that alternatives start with our way of looking at ‘realities’ that are changing according to the adopted point of view. If we fail to be critical and provocative, we become useless. Sometimes, ideas that were supposedly heretical or irrelevant come to be progressively shared by an increasing number of people. This still does not mean that they are actually implemented. But they find their way into the collective conscience and prepare the ground for new forms of action. To summarise, let me simply reiterate a few points that I believe to be of fundamental importance for our collective reflection.

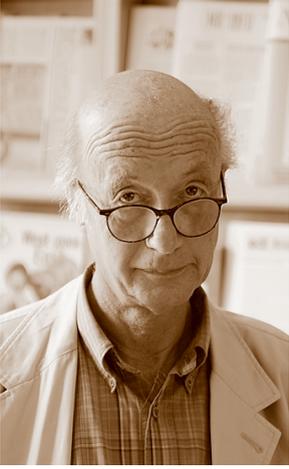
1. The current ‘development’ paradigm, which entails progressive commodification of the natural environment and social relations, endangers our common survival, as has been clearly documented by the scientific community.
2. The ‘development’ that has taken place has come about through a long historical process that started towards the end of the 18th century and not through a ‘secret plan’ (or plot) devised by a bunch of evil-minded politicians, bureaucrats or managers. It is therefore pointless to imagine a kind of universal ‘counter-plan’ that would lead to ‘good development’. This is not how history proceeds.

3. More and more people, both in the South and the North, are protesting against the devastation of the natural environment and an imposed way of life. They tend to trust their own capabilities, resources, values and imagination rather than ‘global’ solutions.
4. Economic ‘science’ (as taught in universities and put into practice by ‘decision makers’) is based on ‘our obsolete market mentality’ (Polanyi), which ignores the thermo-industrial revolution that took place in the 19th century. It totally distorts reality by selecting some of its aspects and ignoring others, thus making it impossible to understand the world in which we live.
5. It is more illuminating *to consider actual practices* in order to understand reality than to rely on what people believe reality to be.

These points are submitted in the form of statements. They are open to debate. If some kind of agreement can be found on some (or all) of them, it will soon be possible to decide what should be done from now on. The danger would be to start the other way round: to talk about what should be done, before considering what actually happens.



Enlightened views are surrounded by darkness and it usually takes a long time before they are acknowledged for what they are.



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