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# LATIN AMERICAN CHALLENGES AND THE TRANSITION TO POST-DEVELOPMENT

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Fander Falconí

**Falconí, F. (2025). Latin American challenges and the transition to post-development. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(93), 1-20.**

The objective of this article is to specify the challenges of the Latin American left in the current complex context. As such, the article has limitations, since it is part of the programmatic debate and not derived from the practice of real politics, a transformative political subject, or the articulation of specific actors.

In exercising its power, the current Latin American left has placed emphasis on recovering the role of the State, prioritised economic growth, activated redistributive policies, strengthened labour and social rights, and made significant investments in public education and health infrastructure. At the international level, it has demanded respect for economic sovereignty and has sought Latin American integration.

The redefinition of development is a pending task for the Latin American left, with contributions from new trends such as degrowth, post-development and eco-Marxism. We face a multiform and multidimensional crisis of civilisational nature, economic thought and the very notion of development. When we observe the results of unrestrained developmentalism (excessive and insatiable growth in rich countries and environmental destruction in impoverished countries extracting wealth for others), we find a lack of reasoning. The time has come for a Copernican shift of thought, focusing on Nature and social equity.

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The article proposes that only a programmatic and political revamping of the left can confront the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Latin America and the Caribbean, only a political movement that proposes concrete alternatives to developmentalism and extractivism, limits productive scale in socially and culturally valuable sites, and unhesitatingly adopts an agenda of social participation, inclusion, fundamental freedoms and the Rights of Nature and women, has the capacity to consolidate social and political change.

**Keywords:** Development; left; post-development.

**JEL:** B50.

**Falconí, F. (2025). Desafíos de la izquierda latinoamericana en la actual complejidad. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(93), 1-20.**

El artículo precisa los desafíos que la izquierda latinoamericana enfrenta, desde la complejidad actual. El artículo tiene limitaciones, pues se inscribe en el debate programático; no en la práctica que involucra la política real, el sujeto político transformador ni la articulación con actores concretos.

La izquierda latinoamericana actual, en su ejercicio del poder, ha enfatizado en la recuperación del papel del Estado, ha priorizado el crecimiento económico, ha activado las políticas redistributivas, ha profundizado los derechos laborales y sociales y ha hecho inversiones significativas en infraestructura pública, educación y salud. En el ámbito internacional, ha exigido el respeto por la soberanía económica y ha buscado la integración latinoamericana.

Redefinir el desarrollo es una tarea pendiente de la izquierda latinoamericana, con aportes de tendencias nuevas, como el decrecimiento, el posdesarrollo y el ecomarxismo. El argumento central del artículo es que enfrentamos una crisis multiforme y multidimensional —civilizatoria, del pensamiento económico y de la propia noción de desarrollo—. Cuando vemos los resultados del desarrollismo a ultranza (crecimiento desmedido e insaciable en los países ricos; y destrucción del ambiente por extraer riquezas para otros, en los países empobrecidos), concluimos que no estamos razonando bien y que ha llegado la hora de dar un giro copernicano al pensamiento, centrándolo en la naturaleza y la equidad social.

Se propone que solo una izquierda remozada en lo programático y lo político puede enfrentar los desafíos del siglo XXI. En América Latina y el Caribe, solo un movimiento político que proponga salidas concretas al desarrollismo y el extractivismo; limite la escala productiva en los sitios de alto valor social y cultural; y adopte, sin vacilaciones, una agenda de la participación social, la inclusión, de las libertades fundamentales y de los derechos de la naturaleza y las mujeres tiene la capacidad de aglutinar un cambio social y político.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo; izquierda; posdesarrollo; crecimiento económico.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although the nomenclature of left and right was born with the French Revolution (the nobility and the clergy sat on the right, while the bourgeoisie occupied the left side of the assembly), the idea of these two tendencies comes from much earlier, at least since the Roman Republic over two thousand years ago. The Roman patricians were grouped into the Optimates party (the best, what would be considered right-wing today), while the plebeians were active in the Populares party (those of the people or populists, the left). The most famous case of a populist militant is that of Julius Caesar, born into a patrician family but becoming a populist leader. His assassination ended the Republic and established the Empire with his godson Octavian, later called Augustus. Feudalism emerged after the fall of the Western Empire in the 4th century, ushering in the Middle Ages. The rise of the bourgeoisie, from the 14th century, ended that system and introduced capitalism to the world scene. Thus, the bourgeoisie began as the left. Within the bourgeois system, two factions soon clashed: the conservative (right) against the liberal (left). This struggle took place in Spain and Portugal, and continues throughout Latin America to this day; we Hispanic Americans even inherited the term '*godo*' to refer to conservatives or ultramontains. However, this brief account does not delve into the complexity of the story.

In the Latin American and Caribbean case, political actors have always varied between countries: workers, the indigenous movement, the military, the church, etc. For example, in the Ecuadorian case, the military has been responsible for several social transformations since 1885: the liberal revolution in 1895, the Alfarista reaffirmation of 1906, the Julian revolution against corrupt banking in 1925, the signing of the labour code and the establishment of social security in 1938, and the nationalisation of oil in 1972, among others. This contrasts with armies such as the Chilean, Brazilian, Argentine or Uruguayan equivalents, architects of brutal military dictatorships in the Southern cone. The Latin American Catholic Church underwent a crisis in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the Second Vatican Council, and a part of the institution took the side of the poor (for example, with liberation theology), although the other half did bless the right.

The Empire and local right-wing forces have opposed every attempt by the left to seize power in Latin America; examples abound. Guatemala, June 1954. The CIA, sponsored by United Fruit, overthrow legitimate president Jacobo Arbenz; power was handed over to a military *junta*. Arbenz had dared to carry out agrarian reform in his country, among other moderate changes. Brazil, 10 years later. The CIA overthrow another legitimate president, Joao Goulart, in 1964. Dominican Republic, 1965. This time, there was no coup d'état, rather a direct intervention by the US military forces. Chile, September 1973. A third legitimate president, Salvador Allende, is assassinated and overthrown by the CIA, the military and transnational companies.

Left and right have transformed to adapt to the circumstances. The Cuban revolutionary movement itself did not adhere to the orthodox alignment of the country's

communist party. There have always been ideological disputes within the traditional communist parties, or between them and the vanguards of change. In practical terms, these discrepancies led to the conception of the party, the definition of a political subject for change, and political activities such as the constitution of broad fronts expressed in an amalgamation of coalitions between left-wing and social democratic parties (in the Latin American fashion). There are cases of politicians who do agree with his right-wing ideology, such as the case of Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador, a banker and follower of Opus Dei. Meanwhile, Pope Francis continues to scandalise the ossified half of the Vatican and continues to open fundamental debates such as those proposed in his encyclical letter *'Laudato si'* (2015) and his apostolic exhortation *Laudate deum* (2023) on the climate crisis.

In its exercise of power, the current Latin American left has placed emphasis on recovering the role of the State, prioritised economic growth, activated redistributive policies, deepened labour and social rights, and made significant investments in public education and health infrastructure. At the international level, it has demanded respect for economic sovereignty and has sought Latin American integration.

The left faces great challenges in this post-pandemic period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can group these challenges into two major issues: 1) refuting the right's discourse and practice with arguments that the majority can understand and access, and 2) updating left-wing programmes so that their postulates are attractive to new generations, tired of the worn-out speeches of traditional politicians. Given that there are obvious structural economic and social conditions such as unemployment or the fear or neglect of social groups, both issues explain, in part, why self-named anti-political or outsider candidates attract young people.

Trump, in the United States, and Bolsonaro, in Brazil, appeared as outsiders, separate from the establishment. However, Trump's actions were a continuation of the neoliberal capitalism of Reagan and Bush (Falconí, 2020). The policies of Bolsonaro, the tropical version of the North American leader seeking a new mandate, showed a mix of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, regression of rights and destruction of nature (Rodrigues, 2022).

The 'anti-political' politician Milei won the Argentine presidential elections of 2023, applauded by a poorly educated right-wing current. This current ignores the historical lessons of what happened in Italy, Germany and Spain a century ago. By proclaiming himself a right-wing libertarian or anarcho-capitalist, Milei is not original; he is repeating something he admires in the new American right. Newman (2010, p. 43) explains this:

... it is important to distinguish between anarchism and certain strands of right-wing libertarianisms, which at times go by the same name (for example, Murray Rothbard's anarcho-capitalism). There is a complex debate within this tradition between those [such as] Robert Nozick, who advocate a 'minimal state', and those like Rothbard who want to do away with the state alto-

gether and allow all transactions to be governed by the market alone... From an anarchist perspective, however, both positions —the minimal state (minarchist) and the no-state (anarchist) positions— neglect the problem of economic domination; in other words, they neglect the hierarchies, oppressions and forms of exploitation that would inevitably arise in a *laissez-faire* ‘free’ market... Anarchism, therefore, has no truck with this sort of right-wing libertarianism, not only because it neglects economic inequality and domination, but also because in practice (and indeed in theory) it is highly inconsistent and contradictory. The individual freedom they invoked by right-wings libertarians is only a narrow economic freedom with the constraints of a capitalist market, which, as anarchists show, is no freedom at all.

Philosopher Daniel Innerarity (2023) argues that the right, traditionally defenders of order, tradition, and stability, have mutated their discourse towards the defence of freedom, understood as individual property, in the liberal and even libertarian sense. The conventional axis of debate has been modified in that the left represents freedom, and the right represents resignation. What distinguishes the two currents “is not the principle of individual freedom, but the way of understanding it” (Innerarity, 2023, p. 15). In this sense, other debates now arise, such as how to understand the principle of freedom, the complexity of the world, and democracy. The above does not negate the conventional left-right categorisation, but it cannot simplify the two visions to an opposition between the State and the market (Alberola, 2020).

In addition, vital issues now arise that the dogmatic left had not previously addressed, and the renewed right looks greedily on. Currently, fighting corruption is an urgent social need, as are reproductive rights. The freedom to decide whether to have children or not, the quantity and spacing between them, the type of family to form, access to information and planning to do so, contraceptives, legal and safe abortion, as well as fertility and pregnancy services are all essential (Fundación Huésped, 2024).

The left faces new challenges when it adds to the classical capital-labor contradiction, studied by Marx, the capital-nature contradiction, as proposed by James O’Connor (1998). Eco-Marxism, with authors such as Foster (2000) and Burkett (1999), foregrounds the relationship between capitalist accumulation and environmental degradation, renewing critical thought by connecting social struggles with ecological crises. In the region, new approaches have emerged that question notions of development and well-being (Unceta, 2022). Furthermore, key actors are emerging from distributive ecological conflicts caused by the expansion of social metabolism and the intensification of extractivism, particularly in Latin America, as highlighted by Joan Martínez Alier (2023). Those most affected by the exploitation of labor and the expansion of ecological and territorial frontiers (Moore, 2015) are the poor, women, and indigenous communities. Nancy Fraser (2013) had already emphasized the importance of leftist movements in the critique of neoliberalism, advocating for the integration of social protection with eman-



cipation, as well as promoting an alliance between feminism and anti-capitalist forces to achieve justice through redistribution, recognition, and representation.

Redefining development is another pending task for the Latin American left, and this reflection constitutes the central axis of the article, considering contributions from new trends such as degrowth, post-development and eco-Marxism. How can we respond to the unprecedented challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which no longer simply imply a better life but have become questions of life or death? How can we face civilisational crisis and debate the limits of developmentalism?

To answer these questions, after this introduction, the second section proposes the notion of multiform and multidimensional crisis – very notion of development and civilisational, economic thought. The third section presents the need to look for new references, particularly the reconsideration of the outdated idea of development. A new left, capable of aligning with new progressive actors and founded on degrowth with social justice and environmentalism, could change the panorama of the region. Finally, the fourth section presents the conclusions.

## Development crisis

The ideal of *development* will soon turn a century old. As it is so general, the concept has always needed a complement: first it was economic, then human, and today it is sustainable. It is ubiquitous, although it has never ceased to be the preferred synonym for economic growth. Conceptually, it has generated many theories in perpetual dispute. The practice of development is no less controversial. In many ways, humanity – at least a part of it – enjoys unique well-being, extraordinary technologies and sumptuous material affluence. However, inequality has ravaged society and nature, affecting all of humanity; the abuse of economic and political power, exercised in its name, restricts human capabilities and atrophies democracy; and the environmental crisis is the direct consequence of the processes of accumulation/dispossession on a planetary scale (Harvey, 2005).

If the study of development invites intellectual contest, its practice, focused on closing gaps, embraces essential physical, social, political, cultural and economic impossibilities. However, it persists in public, national, and international agendas, increasingly resembling a myth rather than a theory with positive and normative content, like any other subdiscipline of economic orthodoxy. Despite its constant challenges, development withstands in academic centres. It is constantly invoked in policy agendas and is a priority topic in scientific dissemination channels. What is the reason for this unusual resilience?

## Development and crisis

British economist Dudley Seers, pioneer in poverty measurement and professor at the London School of Economics and the University of Sussex, was among the first to claim that development doctrines were “in ruins” (1978). Years later, Wolfgang Sachs (1992) stated that the “last forty years can be called the age of develop-

ment. This era has come to an end. The time has come to write its obituary.” Three decades later, another prominent specialist, Cristobal Kay, concluded that “development theory reached an impasse, requiring – and resulting in – a serious reconsideration of the entire development project” (2011, p. 72).

It would seem that the development project, as Kay calls it, is in constant crisis. But, *what* is in crisis? The reality to which these theories refer, or the theories themselves? Were both the first and second not in crisis at some point or other? Or, to put it positively, did development theory have a stage of ‘normal science’, in the sense of Kuhn (2004), at some point in its already long history? Given that we speak of development theories in the plural, is this area of economic science in a state of perpetual paradigmatic competition?

A larger crisis subsumes the crisis of development theories: the crisis of economic thought. At the end of the last century, Robert Heilbroner and William Milberg argued that economic science suffers from a crisis of vision, because in “its peak moments, ‘strong theorizing’ [...] reaches a degree of unreality that can only be compared to medieval scholasticism” (1998, p. 18).<sup>1</sup> As J.A. Schumpeter (1971) poses, these authors consider the difference between analysis and vision:

By analysis we mean the process of deducing consequences from initial conditions, of paying [scrupulous] attention to chains of reasoning, and of guarding against the ever-present temptation to substitute demagoguery for intellectual exchange. By vision we mean the political fears and hopes, social stereotypes and value judgments – all of them [...] unarticulated – that permeate all social thought, not by their clandestine entry into what would otherwise be a pristine realm, but as psychological or perhaps existential needs. (Heilbroner & Milberg, 1998, p 18)

From an epistemology that remains positivist, Heilbroner and Milberg affirm that other branches of the study of society, even psychology, “do not possess the behavioral regularities that establish economics as a field of social analysis, investing it uniquely with the characteristics of a social “science”. In economic science, these regularities make it easier to postulate chains of reasoning that allow the development of “causal sequences” that would be the envy of sociologists and political scientists. For this reason, they argue, “analysis has become [...] the crown jewel of economics.” The problem is that “analysis has gradually become the crown itself, overshadowing the material base in which the jewel is set” (1998, p. 19). This is objectionable in every sense, since “without a base there would be no crown”.

Currently, that jewel – analysis – dominates the stage without the need to be enshrined in any crown – vision. Lacking vision, the analytical dimension of economics proclaims itself universal. However, the vision of capitalism cannot be “the vision by which we would see and understand tribal, imperial, feudal or com-

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<sup>1</sup> The perception that mainstream economic thought has become a religion, or a “new theology,” is not uncommon. See, for example, Nelson (1994) or Stahel (2021).

munal societies, if we ourselves were members of these societies” (Heilbroner & Milberg, 1998, p. 20). If this observation is relevant to central capitalism, it is also relevant to peripheral capitalism. Development analysis is meaningless without historical and socio-political context. By disregarding the context, this analysis would be nothing more than authoritarian regulation, power discourse and denial of intellectual exchange. The alleged scientific timelessness of the mainstream economic thought applied to development would, in practice, be the justifying rhetoric of capitalism.

The lack of vision pointed out by Heilbroner and Milberg is not the only cause of the development theories crisis. This subdiscipline of economics was officially born in 1949, when President Harry Truman called “for the United States and the world to solve the problems of the ‘underdeveloped areas’ of the globe” (Escobar, 2014, p. 49).<sup>2</sup> Since then, development has mutated from economic to human then to sustainable, always promising to eliminate the *gaps* between the poor and the rich.<sup>3</sup> Reality, however, seems willing to reiterate the impossibility of achieving this, albeit stubbornly so.

This economic thinking (that is, the empire of the analytical, devoid of the fears, political hopes and value judgments that make up the vision of the world, and the process of simplification that has turned it into a narrative of growth) is one of the main drivers of a major crisis, of civilisational dimensions and planetary reach. The philosopher and sociologist Armando Bartra maintains that humanity faces “a polymorphous, but unitary emergency. A great crisis whose [...] manifestations make up a historical period of intense turbulence [...] a planetary strangulation [...] that is particularly harsh on the poorest: poorest classes, poorest nations, poorest regions” (2013, p. 23).

This great crisis is one, though multiform and multidimensional. As Johan Rockström et al. (2009) and Will Steffen et al. (2015) demonstrate, the intensity of human activities have exceeded the global limits of several key systems, which regulate the stability of the planet and allow humanity to operate safely. Capitalism depletes natural resources, contributes to continually diminishing the capacity of ecosystems to provide living beings with vital environmental services, alters biogeochemical cycles (phosphorus and nitrogen), causes changes in the Earth’s system and has caused a climate crisis, which is the ultimate expression of the civilisational crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> The sociologist Orlando Fals Borda is forceful when he prefaces the first edition of this book by Escobar: “‘Confronting development’ – not routinely accepting it as the panacea of point IV proposed by President Truman in 1949 – is a vital necessity for us of the dependent world. Vital, because autonomy, personality and culture, the productive bases and the vision of the world that have given us the breath of life as human beings and peoples worthy of respect and a better future are at stake” (Escobar, 2014, p. 43).

<sup>3</sup> It is essential to point out that in these successive ‘stages’ of development theories the objective of economic growth has been a kind of lowest common denominator. Or, if you want, a simile of the development that has served to facilitate the expansion of capitalism and to postpone redistributive policies.

## **The Oxymoron of the dominant discourse: Sustainable development**

In the intellectual tradition of Rostow (1959; 1960) the notion of development is inseparably linked to the need for economic growth. Based on this need, it is possible to differentiate the successive theoretical moments, according to the different factors considered determining factors. The provision of infrastructure immediately after the Second World War. Import substitution industrialisation in the periphery of the system during the following two decades. The opening and free flow of goods and capital at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, considering the “law” of Ricardian comparative advantages. Finally, updated by the alarms raised at the United Nations Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro, June 1992), development assumed the quality of being ‘sustainable’.<sup>4</sup>

Development as a synonym for growth is a significant example of reductionism, since this assumes that a complex notion, which involves social, environmental, cultural, political, geostrategic and economic processes can be reduced, with advantage, to its economic dimension. Another case of a jewel without a crown, or analysis without vision, if preferred.

Reducing the notion of development in societies to economic growth is also entropically impossible. If the planet no longer has the capacity to assimilate (metabolise) the environmental burden caused by excessive consumerism, sustainable development becomes a contradiction.

Belatedly, the United Nations Brundtland Commission disseminated the contradictory term of sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Development – authentic mimesis of economic growth – is linked to more production and more consumption, while sustainability refers to the carrying capacity of ecosystems, that is, the maximum population that a given environment can support without suffering significant negative impacts. The expansion of development entails irreversible environmental degradation, in accordance with the laws of thermodynamics.

In 2015, the United Nations established 17 sustainable development goals (an oxymoron?) in an attempt to avoid the civilisational crisis we face, without questioning the core of the problem. Moreover, the eighth goal promotes economic growth. It is necessary to find alternatives, such as reducing the growth rate of rich and industrialised societies, redefining consumption patterns and, especially, establishing social and environmental justice.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2015, the United Nations established 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that would be, according to their theorists, sufficient to avoid climate change generated by the exceeding of planetary limits.

## Other references

Latin American structuralism was the first theory of development not originating from the centre of the capitalist system. With the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), as its epicentre, it had great influence between the 1940s and 1960s,<sup>5</sup> and served as a precedent for the emergence of the dependency approach. Both theories share the need for historical analysis, which gives specificity to the processes. Meanwhile, the theories of the orthodox tradition assume that their economic “laws” have universal validity; considering differences originating in “historical formations” was seen as unnecessary. The heterodox tradition offers broader epistemic possibilities than those allowed by the reductionism of orthodox economics, which, as noted, confuses development with growth (with the notable exception of the theory of human development, fundamentally supported by Amartya Sen (2000)).

The dependency approach was one of the four most important schools of thought on economic development in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with modernisation theory, the structuralism of ECLAC and the neoclassical counter-revolution, which included “structural reform” and the “Washington Consensus”. The dependency approach was more political and radical than structuralism. It conceived underdevelopment in terms of international and national power relations, of institutional and structural rigidities, which resulted in dual economies and societies both within countries and globally (Todaro & Smith, 2003, p. 110).

Since the social and economic upheaval that Latin America experienced during the lost decade of the 1980s, there has been a deliberate attempt to forget the theory of dependence. One of the problems of Latin American social theory, reflects Maristella Svampa (2016), is the accumulation deficit caused by “erasure”, devaluation and oblivion. This deficit is also linked to the anthropophagic vocation of Latin American culture: nothing foreign is strange to us, we are willing to incorporate it to create a complex identity. A marked intellectual dependence is the counterpart to this cultural element. Added to this are the “processes of epistemic expropriation”, a naturalised gesture in the dominant academic habitus (that of the United States and Europe). There are few academics from central countries who are willing to open dialogues of North-South knowledge, which contributes to epistemic expropriation and the consolidation of asymmetries, “... both the invisibilisation of Latin American theoretical production and the process of epistemic expropriation fuel the idea that in Latin America there would be no general theories, but rather a ‘specific look’, a sort of ‘local production’” (Svampa, 2016, p. 14).

At this point we must recognise that the description of development theories is insufficient for a proper evaluation of them. The application of a policy inferred from a theoretical approach (its normative dimension, if you prefer) depends on conditions external to its epistemological validity. In more simple terms, it depends

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<sup>5</sup> This United Nations organisation was established by resolution 106 (VI) of the Economic and Social Council, on February 25, 1948. It began to operate that same year in Santiago, Chile.

on specific power relations, both internal and international. A proper understanding of the crisis of development theories – the central hypothesis of this document – requires a critical evaluation of their epistemic merits/demerits, as well as the consequences of their application (such as the structuralist attempt or neoliberal imposition) or their non-application (as occurred with dependency theories).

It can be said that development economics has been in a phase of “extraordinary science” since the 1970s, in response to T. Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions (2004). The emergence of new references, such as feminist economics, ecological economics, anti-development and post-development corroborate this statement.

Feminist economics (FE) questions conventional economics and its foundations of economic rationality (*homo economicus*) and methodological and masculinised individualism. It introduces the analysis of gender relations and reproductive roles as part of economic life. It seeks to vindicate culturally, symbolically and economically (even salary) reproductive work and aims to make domestic work visible while reducing and more evenly distributing it. It also takes on the study of care economy, as part of unpaid domestic work. FE economics questions the traditional economic structures that frequently ignore or underestimate the work and contributions of women in economic life: in markets, for neoclassical feminist economists, in social reproduction for feminist economists of the Marxist tradition, and in eco-social sustainability, for ecological economists.

Ecological economics, on the other hand, is the field of interdisciplinary studies which integrates knowledge to understand the complex relationship between economy and environment. In other words, according to Joan Martínez Alier (1999) it seeks to understand the economy as part of Nature, one of its most relevant exponents. In conjunction with political ecology, ecological economics analyses ecological distribution conflicts, a term for defining environmental injustices and their relationship with power (Martínez Alier, 2023).

Understanding the economy as a social metabolism, as part of a broader natural system open to the input of energy and the output of waste and residual heat, allows us to question theories centred on growth and development (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971). Economic processes change the environment in an irrevocable manner, and vice versa, due to the law of entropy (Georgescu-Roegen, 1977). Capitalist economies cannot balance themselves with growth or the almost infinite possibility of replacing ‘natural capital’ with economic capital.

The subordination and exploitation of nature (Shiva & Mies, 2013) are concurrent and share the same essence: patriarchal society and submission to capitalist accumulation. This has given rise to an interdisciplinary field of study around feminist and ecological theories, aimed at making visible and denouncing the patriarchy’s social and environmental dispossession. It also seeks to recognise non-market values and influence the formulation of public policies.

An alternative to reconciling the economy with the environment consists of promoting a capitalist economy without growth. Early on, Kenneth Boulding (1966) proposed a shift from a “cowboy” economy – based on unlimited growth – to a “spaceship Earth” economy, emphasising respect for planetary limits. Economic growth ultimately implies the depletion of accessible resources (Georgescu Roegen, 1975). André Gorz advocated for “degrowth” in response to the first report from the Club of Rome (Meadows et al., 1972), addressing the limits of growth (Martínez Alier, 2019). According to Serge Latouche (2010), degrowth is “a different civilisational option”, as evidenced by his declaration of “degrowth or barbarism!” (Di Donato, 2009, p. 165). The economic degrowth movement proposes reducing production and consumption, leading to lives with fewer possessions, less work, and improved well-being (Love, 2019).

This concept aims to limit excessive consumption and promote distributive and intergenerational equity (Hickel, 2021; Hickel et al., 2022). Therefore, it is absurd to suggest the degrowth movement opposes the well-being of people. On the contrary, the movement seeks to satisfy essential human needs within a social and ecological framework (Max-Neef, 1993). These needs are not infinite but finite, few, and classifiable (Max-Neef & Smith, 2014).

Essentially, these options constitute the antithesis of the central idea of development, as it has been generally understood and practiced until now. Degrowth is an ecological option for counteracting the consequences of growth, which radically questions the capitalist economic system (Kallis, 2018).

Andrew Ahern (2023), one of the best-known proponents of degrowth, explains this proposal:

While degrowth predominantly targets the Global North’s unsustainable use of fossil-fuels or contributions to biodiversity loss, in a highly interconnected global system, growth in the North necessarily impacts the South in terms of [its] development, [its] ecosystems, and the kind of vulnerability these countries are subject to. At the most basic level, increased economic growth means more demand for energy and materials. In a period of an energy transition where those materials are largely found in the Global South—Latin America, Asia, and Africa predominantly—conflicts, injustice, and green-washing would be inevitable without some kind of just transition that reduces the relative demand for these materials. This is where degrowth’s commitment to global justice and ecological sustainability set it apart from other green transition narratives.

## **Post-Development**

Latin America has had its own thinking on key aspects such as development and post-development, marginality and social exclusion, agrarian, gender and migration studies. Latin American economic and social thought has been linked to cultural manifestations, for example the literary ‘boom’ in the 1960s coincided with

the awareness of the Great Homeland. Classical and heterodox Marxism, whose most notable expression was dependency theory, has nourished the Latin American left. In some cases, multiple variants of the left in Latin America have adopted reformist views of the capitalist system itself.

Latin American thought has also created a new goal for the people: good living (*Buen Vivir* in Spanish), which assimilates concepts from the Andean worldview that resonate with the Aristotelian conception. The vindication of nature begins with the rethinking of the outdated idea of development. We live in the era of post-development, as Latin American thinker Eduardo Gudynas (2011) explains. To achieve this, he draws on new concepts from Latin American thought, such as the rights of nature and good living. According to the Uruguayan researcher (Gudynas, 2011), good living represents an alternative to conventional development concepts. We must acknowledge that this concept is in construction, as it needs to be adapted to the social and environmental reality of each place and can only be generalised once it is contrasted with diverse realities. It is the moment to consider these concepts, especially those related to post-development or development without growth.

The critique of development is based on its unjust motivation, claiming that it presents developed nations as a golden dream while making them almost unattainable for the 'underdeveloped' poor. The argument of this critique is well constructed, but what should most interest the left is the proposal of an alternative.

Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2014) unmasked the notion of development as a political ideological device used to articulate and consolidate the dominance of capitalism in the world. Reduced to its economic dimension, this notion is already useless and irresponsible in the face of the challenges facing humanity. Planned social change will only occur if categories and meanings are redefined. This raises the urgency of expanding the ontological reference of economic knowledge, and of overcoming the traditional methodology, which inevitably parcels out scientific knowledge in the positivist tradition of science.

Escobar (2014) vindicates post-development from three axes: it "decentre[s]" the development discussion towards the local; it is not an alternative to development, but to the very foundations of the concept of development. It is the rejection of the entire paradigm (2014, p. 293) and to capitalist modernity; and alternatives should come from the knowledge and practices of social movements, as per the "political economy of truth".

Post-development is born from a critical scrutiny of the new emerging geography in a post-colonial world. The relationships that previously shaped the planet have changed, including the role of imperialism and neo-colonialism. This new world must be conceptually redrawn (Sidaway, 2007). Alberto Acosta (2010) equates post-development with good living and the Ecuadorian constitution of 2008, highlighting that it is the first in the world to recognise the rights of Nature.



## Eco-Marxism

All these issues lead us to raise the question of whether the left needs a renewal while maintaining the idea of changing the current social organisation, or whether it will be possible to reformulate capitalism. The latter has an aggravating factor: by definition it means unlimited growth, but our generation has seen that we live in a limited world.

If it is a matter of changing the current social organisation and the capitalist mode of production, one option would be eco-socialism. According to Michäel Löwy (2005), this is a movement of ecological thought and action that draws on the contributions of Marxism while keeping a distance from its lingering productivist residue, associated with the development of productive forces at all costs. This was a characteristic of the so-called ‘real socialism’.

On one hand, eco-socialism refers to the ideas put forward by classical authors such as Marx and, to a lesser extent, Engels, who identified critical elements in the relationship between capitalism and nature, such as the overexploitation of resources and the metabolic rift between society and the environment. As philosopher Manuel Sacristán (2021, p. 41)<sup>6</sup> points out in his political-ecological writings, this is expressed through questioning the predatory technological progress (a very ecological term) of both the worker and the land in capitalism. The germ of a ecological economy can already be found in Marx, particularly in the concept of the metabolic rift in capitalism and the crossing of planetary boundaries, as explained by John Bellamy Foster (2000). The capitalist system causes a metabolic rift or an irreparable disconnection between humans and Nature (Foster, 1999).

If the distinctive feature of capitalism is endless accumulation, it is necessary to abandon the possibilities of achieving a ‘green capitalism’ by replacing economic capital with ‘natural capital’. This implies Nature has a monetary value, and an increasing commodification of nature and environmental services. Likewise, it is essential to show caution around discourse that suggests solving the environmental crisis using only technological solutions, deliberately omitting that the economy is entropic and not circular (Martínez Alier, 2015).

Eco-socialism also refers to the ecological elaborations of Marxism, akin to the second contradiction of capitalism (O’Connor, 1988; 2001). Capitalism has unleashed the well-known capital-labour contradiction and another essential contradiction between capital and nature, kept in a larval state since the first industrial revolution. James O’Connor patented this more than 30 years ago, affirming that the expansion of capitalism undermines life, its own existence and conditions of production (1988; 2001). Capitalism – economic growth – depletes natural resources, introduces dangerous technologies and generates new forms of pollution, but lacks the means to prevent or correct these damages.

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<sup>6</sup> The original text of this writing by Manuel Sacristán was published in the magazine “Mientras Tanto,” No. 21, in December 1984.

The discussion around eco-Marxism (as a valid new path or as an adaptation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century view) continues to be discussed and can be extended. What really matters, however, is determining whether or not its basic approach is viable for the world that lies ahead.

## CONCLUSIONS

The challenge for the left is understanding the complexity of the present and acting on specific aspects. Latin American thought, despite its enormous wealth, has also been influenced by a vision of development that has assimilated the idea of economic growth. The humanistic vision of the left needs to expand to post-development and eco-Marxism, given the crisis of thought and the clear symptoms of exhaustion, as well as the planet's civilisational crisis which is precisely due to a model that prioritises growth and development. This is not an easy task, but with a will to work on the formulation of this new broad vision an emphasis on the collective action of the left, it is possible.

To find a way out, we obviously cannot delve into conventional economic thinking. Instead, the escape lies in valuing the wealth of Latin American social thought, without omitting a critical balance. We require an interdisciplinary vision, sustained in the social and environmental matters, a revaluation of Latin American heterodox thought, and a connection between feminist and environmental theories, as fundamental pillars of all human action.

Canadian historian Ronald Wright (2006) argues that civilisations are often unaware of the imminence of their own collapse until it is too late. This statement is the corollary of a brief review of the end of several ancient civilisations which came as a result of environmental degradation, resource depletion, overpopulation and other factors. The entire planet has been incorporated into what can now be called the civilisation of capital. Unlike the long-lasting civilisations of Antiquity, the civilisation of capital has rapidly ascended and is already facing a crisis that compromises the survival of humanity and millions of other species. In less than three centuries, what was a mode of production has escalated to become a civilisation that conditions the sustainability of the planet. Consequently, there are many scientists who propose the advent of a new geological era and discuss whether we are already in the Capitalocene or the Anthropocene era (Wedekind & Milanez, 2017; Moore, 2020).

A “vibrant alternative to capitalism” is indispensable today more than ever (Wright, 2012). To move towards that alternative, Wright proposes developing a “real utopia” (which could be an alternative to the oxymoron of the dominant discourse: sustainable development), based on emancipatory scientific knowledge.

The idea of real utopia embraces the tension between pragmatism and dream: utopia implies the development of alternatives to dominant institutions that embody our deepest aspirations for a world in which all people have access

to conditions that allow them to live prosperous lives; real means proposing alternatives concerned with problems of unintended consequences, self-destructive dynamics, and complex dilemmas caused by normative trade-offs. (Wright, 2012, p. 3)<sup>7</sup>

The exploration of a real utopia is part of the broader agenda of emancipatory scientific knowledge, which begins by specifying the underlying moral principles for critique and diagnosis and culminates in the formulation of a theory of transformation to achieve the proposed alternatives. Wright proposes three principles that could serve as the basis for this theory:

*Equality:* In a socially just community, all people should generally have equal access to social and material conditions necessary for living prosperous lives.

*Democracy:* In an authentically democratic community, all people should generally have equal access to the means necessary to participate meaningfully in decisions about matters that affect their lives.

*Sustainability:* Future generations must have access to social and material conditions that make it easier for them to live in prosperity, at least at levels similar to those of the current generation (Wright, 2012, p. 3-6).

A transformative endeavour of these dimensions should urgently make sense of the whole and far exceeds the scope of development theories. To put it in epistemological terms, it is a transdisciplinary endeavour requiring a post-normal methodology (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993; Funtowicz & Ravetz, 2000). Denis Goulet (1971; 1992), founder of development ethics as an independent field of study, advises wisdom (as well as scientific knowledge). That is, that unity of meaning achieved after processing complexity, contradiction and antagonism, to see the relative importance of all parts in that whole. As has already been emphasised, the path that “leads to wisdom necessarily involves us in a dialogue between cultures, as no wisdom can be obtained simply by assuming that it already exists, in an adequate or finished form, within the confines of a single system of cultural meaning” (Goulet, 1992, p. 472).

From development theories, we can provide a significant contribution to the theory of transformation that humanity requires to overcome the unprecedented predicament it faces. This begins with the humble acknowledgment of past mistakes and the recognition that achieving the alternatives proposed by this transformational theory depends on more human and complex civilisational dimensions than those determined by the logic of the accumulation of capital.

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<sup>7</sup> The term “flourishing lives” is used, which refers to the notion of capabilities developed by Sen (1999; 2000) and Nussbaum (2000).

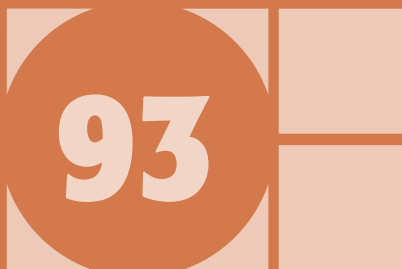
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## FOREWORD

GONZALO CÓMBITA MORA AND MATÍAS VERNENGO

Special Issue: A new turn to the left in Latin America?

vii

## PAPERS

FANDER FALCONI

Latin American Challenges and the Transition to Post-Development

1

LEONARDO VERA

Towards a progressive economic development agenda for countries endowed with natural resources: Lessons from the rise and demise of the Bolivarian Revolution

21

MANUEL VALENCIA DELGADO AND JUAN JOSÉ LÓPEZ ROGEL

Challenges to the left in Central America: A comparative political economy analysis based on a Structuralist-Keynesian approach

47

FABIÁN AMICO

Conflicting claims over income distribution and financial dollarisation in Argentina

87

LUIZ CARLOS BRESSER-PEREIRA

Why left and right-wing governments fail in Latin America. With a critique of Gabriel Palma

117

ARIEL BERNARDO IBAÑEZ-CHOQUE

Will Bolivia be able to remain as an emblematic example of democratic socialism?

131

MIGUEL TORRES

The development dilemma in contemporary Chile: A historical-structural analysis

157

JEANNETTE SÁNCHEZ

Progresismo en Ecuador: políticas socioeconómicas para el buen vivir (2007-2017)

197

NOEMI LEVY

Política económica del primer gobierno de la 4T. ¿Qué sigue?

237

GERMÁN BIDEGAIN, MARTÍN FREIGEDO AND CRISTINA ZURBRIGGEN

The stability of change: State and public policies during leftist administrations in Uruguay (2005-2020)

263

FERNANDO LORENZO

Economic policy and structural reforms in Uruguayan left-wing administrations

285

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9 3