

Original Research

DOI: To be assigned

## Rethinking the Development Discourses: A Decolonial Critique of Western Modernity

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### Article History

Received: 16 Feb 2026

Accepted: 26 Feb 2026

Published: 28 Feb 2026

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*\*\*Related declarations are provided in the final section of this article.*

### Abstract

This manuscript critically examines mainstream development discourses, challenging the homogenous, Eurocentric, and capitalist frameworks that have historically defined global progress. Moving beyond classical Marxist, modernization, and neo-Marxist perspectives, the study highlights how traditional development paradigms perpetuate coloniality, systemic inequality, and the objectification of the Global South. By problematizing the historical and political logic of Western modernity, this paper advocates for a profound "epistemic decolonial turn". It argues that true societal advancement requires dismantling universalist Eurocentric epistemologies, reviving marginalized local histories, and shifting the geography of reason to construct a more equitable, pluriversal global future.

**Keywords:** Decoloniality; Development Discourse; Eurocentric Epistemology; Global South; Modernity; Colonialist of Knowledge; Epistemic Turn; Global Capitalism

### Introduction

Although narratives of societal progress have long anchored debates within the global International Political Economy, contemporary academics increasingly warn against treating development as a uniform, homogenous phenomenon. Past efforts to define this growth have frequently relied on anti-colonial frameworks that ultimately fail to acknowledge the specific cognitive and political arenas that the concept of development actually inhabits. Moving away from the modernist perspective—which treats progress as a sequential ladder—Neo-Marxist scholars instead frame development as an outgrowth of social evolution inherently tied to the global capitalist framework. These thinkers argue that mainstream development narratives serve as instruments designed to birth, maintain, and institutionalize capitalist ideologies within governmental policies and societal structures. Building upon this, post-development theorists categorize mainstream progress paradigms as fundamentally Eurocentric projects forced upon the Global South.

This manuscript highlights the analytical flaws and methodological pessimism inherent in discussions that overlook the profound impact of historical context, political maneuvering, and globalized capitalism on a nation's trajectory. While the theoretical desire for advancement is important, it is practically counterproductive when it merely reinforces the historical mechanics of capitalism, which inherently rely on creating binary divisions such as developed versus underdeveloped, modern versus backward, core versus periphery, and rich versus poor.

By problematizing the current discourse, this paper addresses the following inquiries:

- What historical mechanics underpin the concept of development?
- Why has the global community elevated this concept to its current central status?
- Can development be rethought from a decolonial perspective?

Ultimately, this analysis argues that development is the direct outcome of historical and political intersections between state functions and global capitalism. It emphasizes a decolonial perspective as the necessary framework for interrogating and truly comprehending the global development debate.

### **Conceptualizing Development Discourse: Theoretical Interpretations**

At its core, the quest to define development often circles back to a single motive: escaping the indignified condition associated with "underdevelopment". Since gaining prominence in the 1930s, the term has been treated as a magic word meant to resolve the complex mysteries and challenges facing emerging nations. Despite this broad perception, the concept is underpinned by distinct theoretical frameworks, primarily categorized into Classical Marxist theories, Modernization theories, and Neo-Marxist approaches, specifically Dependency and World Systems theories.

#### **Classical Marxist Theories**

Karl Marx remains a pivotal figure in deciphering the link between capitalism and societal advancement. Within a capitalist world system, any analysis of progress or stagnation must carefully evaluate the prevailing modes of production and the inherent dynamics of class conflict. Classical Marxists argue that a society's material and economic foundation dictates its political, legal, and social superstructures, and that society is defined by the friction between the proletariat (the working class) and the bourgeoisie (those who own the means of production). This class friction is considered an inevitable by-product of the capitalist model. According to this framework, once inequality and workplace exploitation reach an intolerable breaking point, the working class will inevitably instigate a revolution to dismantle the capitalist regime, paving the way for a socialist paradigm free from systemic injustice and discrimination.

Furthermore, classical Marxists contend that capitalism aggressively encroaches upon pre-existing socioeconomic systems by generating surplus production, which in turn fuels the perpetuation of the capitalist machine. A defining trait of this modern economic system is alienation, wherein the creators of goods are fundamentally separated from their means of production. Therefore, classical theorists assert that any development model ignoring class struggle and production modes cannot adequately explain contemporary development

discourse. Capitalism's inescapable nature has fractured society into the resource-holding elite and the laborers whose only asset is their physical capability. While workers trade their labor for mere survival wages, the bourgeoisie continually maximize profit margins by hyper-exploiting workers through poor working environments and extended hours. Marxist political economy highlights how these bourgeoisie-elite alliances have expanded transnationally, exploiting resources from Third World countries to fuel Western and European advancement. Ultimately, the prosperity of the West is viewed as the direct result of the unequal treatment and extraction of resources from the Third World.

## Modernization Theories

Following the Second World War, modernization theory gained traction due to three primary historical catalysts: the emergence of the United States as a dominant superpower amidst the decline of European powers like Great Britain, France, and Germany; the expansion of a united global communist movement; and the disintegration of colonial empires across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which birthed numerous newly independent Third World states. Originating as a response to the global depression in 1930s Latin America, the theory posits that newly formed states possess great potential for economic and political prosperity if they are guided by the developed West through trade, investment, and industrialization.

While modernization is a broad school of thought, its foundational tenets are heavily attributed to W. W. Rostow, who conceptualized progress as a linear, five-stage journey: Traditional Society, Pre-take-off, Take-off, Drive to maturity, and High mass consumption. Modernists view this evolution as a homogenous and irreversible trajectory. They argue that once a society enters the initial phase, it proceeds through to the final stage; interaction with Western ideals makes the modernization drive impossible to resist. Thus, this pathway is deemed both progressively inevitable and highly desirable.

Rostow's stages of economic growth are defined as follows:

1. **Traditional Society:** Agrarian communities reliant on subsistence farming, constrained by limited investment wealth, and lacking access to modern industry and science. Rostow viewed these societies as heavily hindered by cultural barriers to development.
2. **Pre-take-off:** The transitional phase where traditional norms shift to accommodate modern science and mitigate diminishing returns. Here, economic growth is recognized as a vital prerequisite for national progress and overall societal welfare. This stage requires substantial investments in Western-style education, infrastructure, financial institutions, and political stability. These conditions strengthen the economy and attract foreign development companies.
3. **Take-off:** The critical juncture where historical blocks and resistances are overcome, and steady economic expansion becomes the normal condition. Modern scientific innovations replace antiquated practices, and industrial classes gain political power. Routine, large-scale financial investments in productive facilities become standard.
4. **Drive to Maturity:** Occurring roughly 40 to 60 years post-take-off, assuming uninterrupted economic progress. This phase is marked by economic diversification and massive investments into projects that support continued maturity.

5. **High Mass Consumption:** The final stage shifts focus from heavy industrialization to service-oriented consumer goods. Individuals gain control over their consumption. It is characterized by stability and increased incomes due to advanced human resource skills utilized in formal sectors.

Ultimately, modernization equates development directly with Westernization, prescribing a unilineal track from traditional to modern that all societies must follow. Western historical achievements are offered as strict footprints for underdeveloped nations to mimic. However, critics argue this perspective unfairly casts blame on less developed countries, attributing their poverty solely to internal constraints. Modernization theorists fundamentally fail to account for the role of history and the expansion of global capitalism in producing uneven development.

Neo-Marxist Theories: Dependency and World Systems

In contrast to classical Marxists who examined imperialism through the perspective of core capitalist nations, neo-Marxists focus on the consequences of imperialism and capitalism on peripheral economies. Rejecting the classical Marxist belief in historically progressive unilinearity, neo-Marxists argue that capitalism actively generates underdevelopment and poverty in the peripheries rather than promoting development. Consequently, neo-Marxists emphasize psychological and humane liberation over radical political revolution for social change. This school of thought provides two particular theoretical explanations: Dependency Theory and World Systems Theory.

**Dependency Theory** Emerging as a critique of modernization theory's claim that social progress relies on adopting modern practices, dependency theory originated in 1960s Latin America. It was a reaction to the failures of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), high import tariffs, and domestic subsidies that failed to stimulate development. It also critiqued Marxism and Modernization for failing to adequately explain economic stagnation, political despotism, and the widening gap between rich and poor countries.

Dependency proponents like Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin challenged modernist claims by highlighting that the development of specific states occurred simultaneously with the underdevelopment of others. They argued that development paradigms from the 1930s to 1950s reflected ethnocentric underpinnings that ignored the historical impacts of colonization, imperialism, and capitalism. Frank provided a definition of dependency asserting that underdevelopment in the Third World is the active creation of developed capitalist countries, dividing the world-economy into metropolises and satellites (or cores and peripheries). Dependency theorists argue that economic surplus continuously flows from the satellite to the metropolis.

This dependency is a historical condition shaping a world economy that favors some countries while limiting the development possibilities of subordinate economies. Underdeveloped nations remain so because they are economically dominated by capitalist nations that continually extract their wealth. The relationship is strictly contextualized in terms of exploitation and subjugation. Consequently, the developmental strategies and decisions of Third World states are either controlled or constrained by foreign superpowers. In this view, the development of rich nations and the underdevelopment of poor ones are two

sides of the same coin. In the long run, the primary victims are the vast majority of peasants and urban workers within the underdeveloped world.

By showing that development is not linear, dependency theory demands new approaches. However, it has its own shortcomings. Tucker argues that depentialists, like modernists, focused predominantly on economics and politics, failing to address the instrumental role of culture in defining development. Bundling all cultures together risks creating cultural racism. Tucker calls for a broader definition encompassing culture, knowledge production, power relations, and social dynamics, as they are intertwined. Nevertheless, dependency theory successfully extended the knowledge base explaining the structural causes of underdevelopment.

**World Systems Theory** Emerging in the 1970s due to the explanatory inabilities of previous theories, World Systems Theory, theorized by Immanuel Wallerstein in 1974, argues that development cannot be understood outside the global world system. It asserts that the global capitalist economy, existing since the 16th century, has overwhelmed isolated societies into a complex, interconnected matrix. This expansion caused both geographic broadening and socioeconomic deepening across continents.

Wallerstein observed a tripartite hierarchical structure: core, periphery, and semi-periphery countries. Core countries dominate the economy through industrialization, central administration, and skilled labor, while peripheral countries mainly export agricultural products and raw materials. Peripheral nations are characterized by weak rulers dependent on core politics. The political and economic hegemony of core nations allows them to accumulate surplus from peripheries through unequal and asymmetric trade relations. The military and technological dominance of the core dictates these terms of trade. Semi-peripheral countries act as buffer zones, functioning as manufacturing hubs that import advanced technology from the core and raw materials from the periphery to export goods back to the core. However, like dependency theory, World Systems Theory overlooks the socio-cultural and political diversities, as well as class analysis, within Third World countries.

**A Critique of Modern Discourse of Development: Depentialists and Post-Development Theorists**

Despite the innovative claims of classic theorists, Gustavo Esteva argues that development has always carried an insidious implication: a mandatory step from simple to complex, inferior to superior, indicating advancement toward a universal, desirable goal. To frame this discussion, this section critiques development discourse, arguing it is a product of historical and political interactions between capitalism and state functioning.

Tracing the modern rhetoric to U.S. President Harry S. Truman's 1949 inaugural address, development was defined as an escape from the undignified condition of underdevelopment. Truman urged a "bold new program" to export American scientific and industrial progress to underdeveloped areas, describing their economic life as primitive, stagnant, and a threat to prosperous areas. He aimed to help "free peoples" produce more mechanical power to lighten their burdens. According to Esteva, this speech created an emblem for American hegemony, laying the foundation for a bifurcated world-system: the self and the other, the

developed and the underdeveloped. Consequently, for two-thirds of the earth's population, development became a constant reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition.

This underscores the significance of politics and the capitalist logic that seeks to dominate and control 'underdeveloped' countries. State action powerfully complements capitalist dynamics in shaping development outcomes. Capitalism and the state are fundamentally integrated. The complex position of the state within global capitalism is daunting; Peter Evans argues that "statelessness" has become a dominant global ideology, creating a genuine, defensive crisis of state capacity. Evans warns that accepting meaner, more repressive state organization is seen as the only way to avoid institutional collapse, overshadowing optimistic prospects for increasing state capacity to meet new demands. He notes that globalization causes the perception that state authority has evaporated or leaked away. To Evans, reducing state power to interfere increases collective risk more than it expands individual profits.

While Evans champions progressive nationalism, Hugo argues this fails to grasp modern capitalism's integration of 'national' and 'global' spaces, and the central role of labor. Economic activity is intrinsically both national and international, and globalization is best understood as an aspect of capitalism, demanding that labor be central to the analysis. Conversely, Clarke analyzes the state through class struggle, asserting that the capitalist state developed alongside the class struggle it accompanies, regulating capital-labor relationships to favor the reproduction of capital and surplus value. Clarke rejects assumptions of state autonomy, noting that the state enforces capitalist relations by forcibly excluding the working class from the means of production and appropriating their product. The state's essential feature is its class character. Thus, development motives are jointly determined by the exploitative nature of capitalism and the state in the Global South.

Beyond state-market debates, Tucker argues against the flaws of Eurocentric paradigms that provide false hope while ignoring local challenges. He asserts that developing nations are worse off due to the failure of Western programs, describing development as an intrusion by the industrialized North. Tucker defines development as an imperial process where other peoples are dominated, turned into objects, and their destinies shaped according to a Western worldview. It allows developed countries to manage and create the Third World economically and culturally. Programs disguised as stabilization efforts merely recreate imperial exploitation. Western thinkers have distanced themselves from Southern realities, imposing ideas and manufacturing mistakes. Tucker questions if civilization as we know it is compulsory, criticizing the disguise of progress that results in biological and cultural racism. He demands that development reflect local realities, not external impositions.

Similarly, James Ferguson's analysis of Lesotho shows how development rhetoric turns fundamental political and power questions into mere technical problems solvable by foreign aid. Development projects extend bureaucratic control over local populations adversely. Drawing on Foucault, Ferguson highlights how top-down aid is disconnected from local realities and instrumentalized by politics, using a "neutral" approach to justify agendas that fail the poor.

Arturo Escobar dismisses the concept entirely as an imperialistic, hegemonic discourse used to define people as subjects of Euro-American power. He calls development a "historical

construct" that specifies and intervenes upon poor countries. Escobar defines it as a discursive formation relying on forms of knowledge, systems of power, and fostered subjectivities that cause people to recognize themselves as underdeveloped. Motivated by political and economic interests to win markets and raw materials, the Global North controls Third World development processes. It remains a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach treating cultures as abstract statistical figures. Ironically acting in the name of people's interests, development became a destructive, authoritative mechanism of domination.

Escobar proposes abandoning the entire epistemological field of postwar development, rejecting its ecocidal character, and defending pluralistic grassroots movements to create a different relation between truth and reality. However, questioning how far we can abandon entrenched epistemologies, Okot p'Bitek suggests we desist from "Apemanship"—which kills creativity—and instead borrow what is relevant to our conditional realities. Escobar also emphasizes the importance of listening to Southern voices without compelling them into a need for development. Ultimately, post-development scholars confront the fraudulent motivations of the North, viewing development as a technocratic replacement for colonial hegemony.

### **Rethinking Development from a Decolonial Perspective**

Rethinking development from a decolonial lens provides a robust framework to double-check and question mainstream progress. Decolonial scholars argue for the 'indigenization' of the concept. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni asserts that un-decolonized discourse objectifies Africans, presenting them as problems to be solved while hiding the structural causes of their underdevelopment under a humanistic guise. Decoloniality critically analyzes dominant power-knowledge relations that falsely claim there is only one path to modernity.

These scholars reject the exogenous, Orientalist belief that Europe miraculously possesses the sole blueprint for industrialization and civilization. A decolonial approach discards the universalistic assumptions of Eurocentric epistemologies, privileging multiple local histories and ways of knowing to build global futures aspiring to the fullness of life, rather than individual capitalist success at the planet's expense. Originating primarily with Latin American scholars from zones that suffered the negative impacts of modernity, decoloniality insists that modernity and coloniality are inherently intertwined. Mignolo argues that the rhetoric of modernity is salvation, but its logic is imperial oppression; the unfinished project of modernity carries the unfinished project of coloniality. This relationship naturalizes inherent differences established by Eurocentric thinkers, silencing alternative knowledges and expressing them as a "lack".

A decolonial approach revives buried knowledge by uncovering how particularized European knowledge falsely constituted itself as universal. Scholars envision delinking from this matrix. They argue that eliminating colonial administrators did not decolonize the world; it merely shifted global colonialism to global coloniality. Coloniality refers to present situations structurally maintained within the capitalist world system, even without direct colonial administrators. Development, like modernity, is a teleological narrative positioning European knowledge at the center of all processes. As Escobar notes, no other idea has gone so unchallenged in setting the terms for how under-developed countries should behave,

turning them into objects of development. It is merely a modern technocratic way for the West to manage the rest.

Decolonial analysis relies on foundational questions of power, epistemology, and ontology. Sabelo emphasizes that constructing a pluriverse begins with the decolonization of knowledge. The organizing principle of coloniality is race, which sustains asymmetrical global power and a single Eurocentric epistemology. Racial classification created new identities that controlled unpaid labor, later translating into the capitalist mode of production. Quijano regards capitalism as the extension of racial classification, codifying differences between conquerors and conquered to legitimize colonial power structures. This "coloniality of labor" articulated all historical forms of control around capitalist wage-labor relations.

Sabelo identifies coloniality as a vertical global power structure that bifurcates societies, leaving some to suffer the "darker side" of coloniality. Decoloniality challenges globalization's universalist pretensions, aiming to unmask Eurocentric rhetoric, introduce epistemologies from the South, and retell history from the vantage point of the marginalized. The core agenda is shifting the geography and biography of knowledge to seek epistemic liberation. Grosfoguel calls for an "epistemic decolonial turn" to emphasize subalternized knowledge, counter-posing a double gesture: uncovering the limits of modern knowledge and promoting an 'other' thinking that demands intercultural dialogue.

Through a decolonial lens, Sabelo proposes five strategies: returning to the locus of enunciation; shifting the geography of knowledge; decolonising the foundation of critical theory; rethinking thinking itself; and learning to unlearn in order to relearn. This involves appreciating diverse forms of knowledge and provincializing Africa to rethink its historical placement by Western canons. It directly addresses the metaphysical empire's damages, such as epistemicides, linguicides, and cultural alienation. Rethinking thinking requires recognizing the cultural asphyxiation of the 'others' and bringing new categories of self-definition into universal concern.

The decolonial attitude demands the conviction that all human beings are legitimate producers of knowledge. We must unlearn to relearn, moving beyond Euro-American scholars to open space for other knowledges. This project summons a shift in the geography of reason, unthinking assumptions contaminated by Eurocentrism. Decolonization of knowledge is a double task of deconstruction and reconstruction—dismantling erroneous writings and rebuilding new stories. We must interrogate pathological, deficit-based theorizing of the colonized 'other' while envisioning the future. While Sabelo does not provide a single magic bullet, he points to vital channels for attaining epistemic freedom in the Global South.

## Conclusion

Rethinking development discourse from a decoloniality lens provides a way out of the enigma of the continuities of colonialism and the coloniality of knowledge through a proposed 'epistemic turn'. While development has historically been theorised as a phased process, a manifestation of social class struggle, or a Eurocentric global capitalist project,

true advancement must be conceptualised through the decolonization of knowledge production. This requires dismantling systems that deconstruct knowledge from the Global South while centralizing knowledge from the Global North. Sabelo rightly postulates that the prerequisite to decolonizing power, knowledge, and being is to de-provincialize the Global South and provincialize Europe, ultimately paving the way for the creation of a truly equitable pluriverse.

### **Article Publication Details**

This article is published in the **OpenMind Journal of Humanities, Arts & Creative Studies**, ISSN XXXX-XXXX (Online). In Volume 2 (2026), Issue 1 (January- February) - 2026  
The journal is published and managed by **OMR PUBLICATION** .

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### **Acknowledgements**

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

### **Authors' contributions**

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### **Funding**

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

### **Data availability**

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

### **Declarations**

#### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The author(s) declare that not applicable.

#### **Consent for publication**

The author(s) declare that not applicable.

## Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

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