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HOW THE WEST IS UNDERDEVELOPING ITSELF

Amal Samaha

“[I]f ‘underdevelopment’ were related to anything other than comparing economies, then the most underdeveloped country in the world would be the U.S.A., which practices external oppression on a massive scale, while internally there is a blend of exploitation, brutality, and psychiatric disorder.”

- Walter Rodney

he paradigm of “development” is the chief way through which western economists, international relations experts, and policy makers make pronouncements about the past, present, and future of the periphery. Through them we are told that “developing” nations are mired in problems that are simultaneously easily solved and insurmountable; the product of contradictions which are first economic, then social, then political, and which are simultaneously being solved

through further investment and development, but seemingly never go away.

Throughout all of this, it is implicitly understood that this “developing” world is counterposed against a “developed” one, which has long since achieved those elusive qualities which the remainder strive towards. That the former cannot seem to achieve these qualities is met with frustration, apathy, and sometimes anger. Would it not be easier to simply force the qualities of the developed nations onto the underdeveloped—to intervene in their economies, political systems, and cultural lives? Can they be shown the essential qualities



that will inevitably lead to development, like liberal democracy, free trade, and, fundamentally, *respect* for those institutions?

When such interventions inevitably fail, it only serves to confirm the essential nature of what it means to be “developing.” There must be some other variable, essential to either the people or their environment, which has constrained development. Perhaps it isn’t the fault of the people; it is some microbe in the waters, some tropical disease, or some bloodsucking insect. Or maybe it is a parasite of a different kind, some deeply-held tradition, or superstition, that prevents the efficient exploitation of this forest or that wetland. Maybe it is a cultural predisposition towards corrupt governance that breeds bureaucratic parasites. Only once the parasites are wiped out can development go ahead unhindered.

But what if all the parasites are eliminated, and underdevelopment persists? Perhaps we have missed another parasite contained in one of the many differences between their culture and ours. Maybe it is better to do away with the inferior culture entirely, and transplant onto that nation a culture with a proven history of achieving development.

The paradigm of development is presented as a neutral, dispassionate way of looking at global inequality, one only concerned with measurable outcomes that empirically improve the lives of all peoples. But when the diagnosis of

the economic doctors fails to find the parasite at the root of the problems, cracks begin to appear. These economic doctors present themselves as performing a form of precise and delicate neurosurgery, but after a while, they begin to take the form of the medieval surgeon-barber, bleeding their patient with leeches in a vain attempt to balance humors.

The problems with the “development” paradigm have been well-known, and often commented upon. As we will see, whole schools of criticism have come and gone. Nonetheless, relatively unreconstructed “development” theories continue to crop up among international relations wonks, leading to, among other things, some increasingly derided headlines.¹

More importantly though, perhaps the reason outmoded conceptions of development continue to dominate public discourse lies precisely in the fact that they engender frustration and condescension when it comes to the perceived failures of the periphery. After all, most western interventions have been justified through attempts to impose the kind of democratic institutions seen to best correlate with development. Development experts and the journalists who take them seriously may be the thin end of the wedge, where the thick portion is interventionist factions like the “foreign policy blob” dominating the US Federal Government.²

Rodney's work must be understood as *counterposed* against this rigid, economic definition of develop- ment as relatively linear growth in Gross Domestic Product.

But what if the spotlight of “development” studies is instead shone on the core? Will we find, as studies of the periphery presume, the polar opposite of the “developing world?” Surely, in order for the intensely comparative study of development to make any sense, there must be a standardised set of rules about what constitutes a fully developed nation, be it a certain level of Gross Domestic Product Per Capita, a certain standard of human personal development and agency, or a certain level of productive forces. Certainly it cannot be a standard level of health security, as the COVID-19 pandemic has exploded any illusions of western superiority in terms of healthcare outcomes, such as existed on the eve of the outbreak. If there is ever a museum for artifacts of Western hubris, the 2019 Global Health Security Index³ for pandemic preparedness will take up a whole wing.

Immediately we can see that many of the assumptions of the development paradigm no longer hold, and instead it must be inverted to make sense of the world. Turning the development paradigm on its head is no easy task, but precedent has been set by Guyanese theorist Walter Rodney in his seminal *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.⁴ I will be examining how Rodney defined development and how he perceived differences between the developed and underdeveloped world. Crucially, I also examine how Rodney ultimately refused to reject development as a concept, but instead hoped

to change our understanding by rejecting theories of a passively “developing” world, and instead positing underdevelopment as an active process undertaken by western oligarchies.

I further examine what has changed since Rodney's assassination in 1980, what theories of development rose in his wake, and how the societies he described changed or did not change. In particular, I examine massive developmental changes that occurred in the core under neoliberal regimes, using the example of New Zealand. This includes the role of *reflexive-unproductive* workers in underdeveloping the core, which I began to uncover in my previous article for *Peace, Land & Bread*: “Innovators, Bullshitters and Aristocrats.”⁵ Following Samir Amin, I explore the possibility of two different kinds of development: one rooted in domestic exploitation of workers, and another in the exploitation of trade relationships.

Finally, I analyse more recent debates among Marxists on how we should think about development, especially in regard to the development of productive forces across the periphery, as well as ecosocialist “de-growth” arguments and Amin's theory of de-linking. I come to a conclusion that 21st century socialism cannot afford to be purely productivist, nor anti-growth, our only choice is to radically redefine what development means rather than uncritically accepting, or rejecting wholesale, its aims.



DEVELOPMENT AND WALTER RODNEY

Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* may seem to be a strange place to start. As we will see, very few development theorists in the core, even Marxist ones, have substantially cited Rodney as a development theorist in his own right. Instead he is seen as having produced a serviceable analysis of African development, without innovating in terms of the definition, cause, or purpose of development. I wish to challenge this by showing that Rodney prefigured several later schools of development discourse, and in fact the seed for a new development paradigm can be found in his work. Rodney's incredible prescience, and his pragmatism, are the reasons I base much of this essay in his work. I will start by examining the orthodoxies challenged by Rodney.

In Rodney's time, development was defined in a purely economic manner as a certain level of national income.⁶ This has changed considerably in the intervening years as more sophisticated bourgeois development theorists have come and gone, and we will return to this, but for the time being, Rodney's work must be understood as counterposed against this rigid, economic definition of development as relatively linear growth in Gross Domestic Product.

Another orthodoxy Rodney thought necessary to combat was the then-progressive insistence that underdeveloped nations be called "developing." This, he said, implies that nations in the periphery are capable of, and are in the process of, saving themselves entirely from conditions of underdevelopment, colonisation, and imperialism.⁷ On this, Rodney can only be considered to be entirely correct, as the underdeveloped nations he describes continue to have the same level of development relative to the West to this day. No indicator of this could be more tragic than the fact that the caloric intakes of average Africans Rodney cites, (some 1,870 to 2,290 calories per day) are virtually unchanged, with sub-Saharan Africans receiving about 2,100 calories per capita per day,⁸ some 900 below the recommended level.⁹

How then does Rodney define development, if not as a linear process of increasing incomes? Rodney begins by starting on a level of personal development: a many-sided process of increasing material and emotional wellbeing. Much of this, he says, is a purely subjective process of being able to achieve certain ideals determined by societal superstructures. The only universal statement one can make about personal development, across all historical epochs, is that its achievement depends entirely on environmental and social conditions.¹⁰ Human agency, rather than any growth metric, lies at the root of Rodney's work on devel-



opment.

Next comes development on the level of social groups, which lies in the ability to negotiate conflicts between individuals, be it between people within the group, with other social groups, or with nature.¹¹ On the societal level, it lies in the ability to free whole social groups from the conditions imposed upon them by nature, which is done through understanding nature (science), developing tools (technology), and organising labour as part of a mode of production.¹²

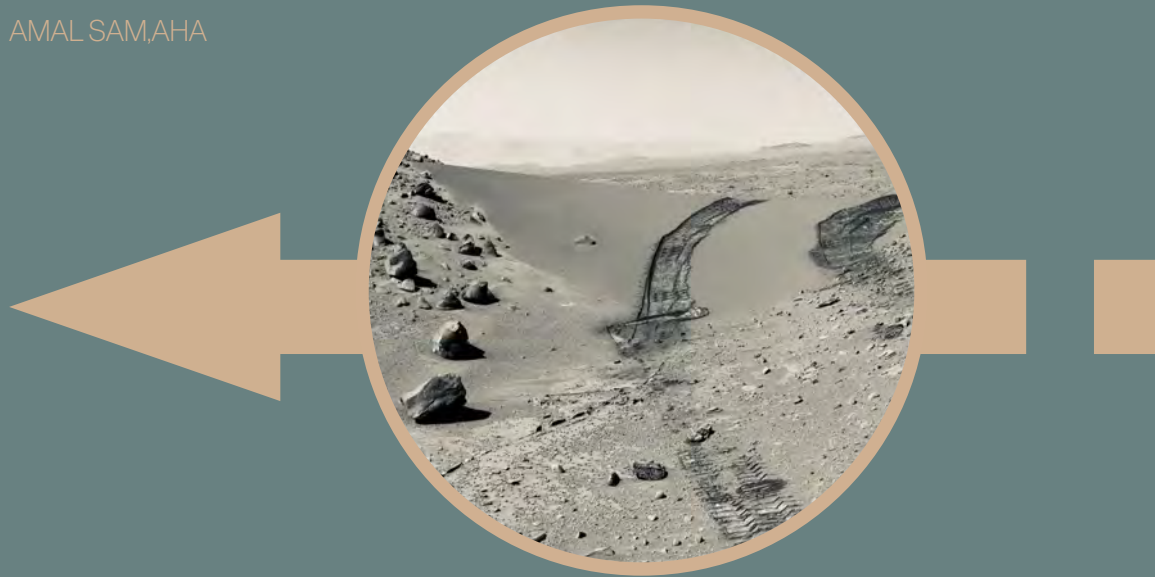
Neither of these higher levels of development negate the need for improving conditions on the level of individual development. On the contrary, for Rodney all development, no matter the scale, serves to increase the basic capacity for individuals to exercise agency, to achieve their moral goals, and to construct new societies. As we will see, this definition stands apart from many others as it is transhistorical; put in the right terms, it would make as much sense to an Achaemenid satrap as a Bohemian burgher or Indonesian planter. Other definitions, such as those based in liberal freedom, often only hold true for the current era, and even then it is debatable.

This definition must be transhistorical because to Rodney, all societies have undergone development, indeed they must have in order to exist at all.¹³ But this does not mean that all societies are *undergoing* development, indeed

many are prevented from doing so by either the imperialist reallocation of surplus value away from the point of origin, or by their own outmoded superstructural arrangements which prevent the efficient utilisation of resources.¹⁴ To be underdeveloped is therefore not a lack of development, but rather to possess a greater number of impediments than other societies which seek dominance.¹⁵

This brings us to Rodney's final innovation in defining development: it is essentially, *intensely* comparative. To speak of the development of one nation makes no sense whatsoever unless it can be counterposed against the development of another.¹⁶ Rodney's analysis of Africa's underdevelopment therefore rests entirely on his analysis of Western development, and the comparisons that can be made between the two.

Rodney's view of what constitutes a developed nation is then particularly important to us in understanding the shifting standards of development through the years. To him, the European and North American nations of the "developed world" are typified by a few shared factors: "the developed countries are all industrialised," and "most of their wealth comes from mines, factories and other industries [...]" They have a high output of labour per man in industry, because of their advanced technology and skills [...]" Their agriculture has become an industry, and the agricultural part of the economy produces more even though it is



small.”¹⁷

What is so striking about this description is how the West has utterly reversed course, or at least stagnated, in each of the points described. The core has rapidly de-industrialised in the years since Rodney’s death, with some countries such as the USA seeing the proportion of industrial employment shrink to levels unseen since the early 19th century.¹⁸ The core’s output of labour per man in industry has also shrunk down through a process of ‘bullshitisation’, or the proliferation of non-productive jobs, a concept to which I will return. The tendency towards automation of agriculture has also stagnated, if not exactly reversed, as agricultural capitalists across the West have turned either to outsourcing or to greater reliance on imported labour rather than costly capital intensification.¹⁹

None of this is to say that Rodney was somehow wrong, these were indeed the shared characteristics of “developed” nations in 1972, even if the overall trend towards deindustrialisation was already emerging. But if Rodney’s theory of development no longer holds true for the developed world, then what of the theories of development that emerged after his untimely death at the hands of a Guyanese government assassin?²⁰

MODERN THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT

As Rodney identified, on some levels development is largely subjective, defined by individual moral goals and the limitations of societal superstructures.²¹ This is the reason development is so amorphous, and so easily distorted to advocate for purely ideological goals.

A quick overview of the history of development studies allows us to identify a few dominant tendencies among development theorists, as this will help us differentiate between the manifold definitions of development and the values underpinning each.

- *Economist approaches:* In the mid-20th century, all states measured their level of economic development against past levels through the use of unitary national accounting methods. Between the 1944 Bretton Woods conference²² and 1993,²³ Gross Domestic Product (the total value of final goods and services) gradually overtook both Gross National Income (the total value of citizens’ income regardless of location) and the Material-Balance planning of socialist states (measurement of all non-labour inputs vs. outputs). Economistic methods have always been criticised as lacking any direct link to quality of life, even by those who helped formulate them²⁴; however, these methods are still used as shorthand for devel-

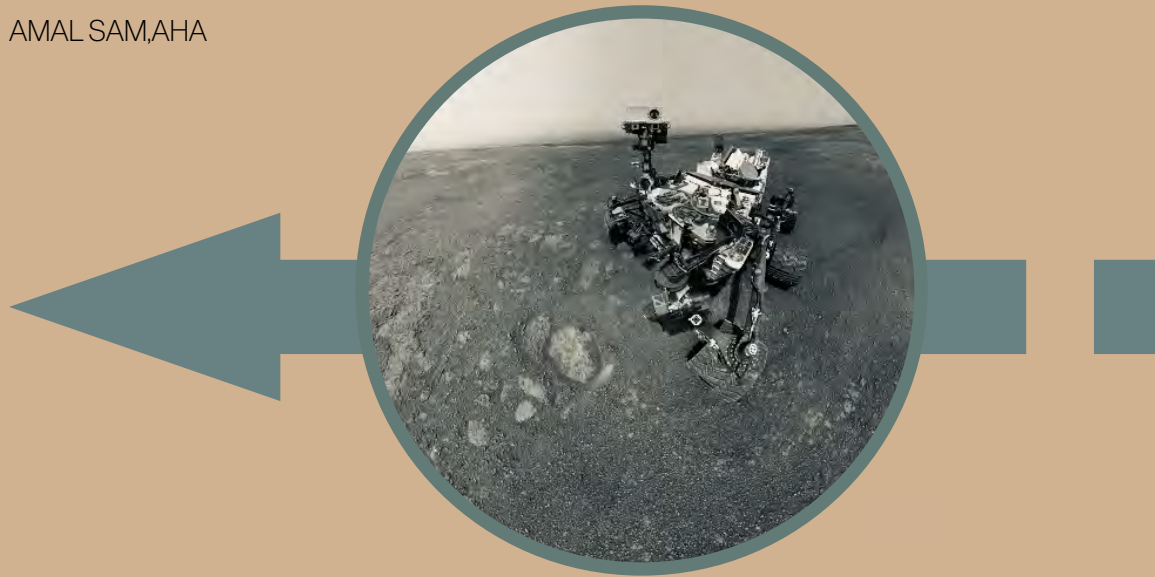


opment in many circles.

- *Holistic approaches:* By the 1960s and 70s, many economists had become increasingly aware of the failures of economic methods in measuring development. These included many loosely progressive figures like the social democrat Gunnar Myrdal.²⁵ These methods were in part inspired by calls from underdeveloped nations at the UN to develop a “unified” theory of development that could account for the problems of diverse nations,²⁶ and thus these methods share a transhistorical, and sometimes decolonial emphasis.
- *Radical approaches:* Around the same time many Marxist authors began writing on the subject of development theory, criticising the liberal notion of permanent progressive development, instead treating it as more of a zero-sum game wherein one nation’s loss is another’s gain. Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, and other writers of the *Monthly Review* magazine contributed to this trend, which was later enriched with Arghiri Emmanuel, Charles Bettelheims, and Samir Amin’s contributions to the study of unequal exchange and wage theories of development blockage.²⁷ Such theories lost influence for many years but have been revived somewhat by Zak Cope, to whom I will refer later.
- *Diagnostic approaches:* Methods which rose to prominence in the 1980s and 90s share a common emphasis upon combining the quan-

tifiable, data-driven models of the economic methods, with the concern for human wellbeing and agency of the holistic methods. In doing so, they often settle upon a single metric which best correlates with development in the broadest sense. Such approaches have been championed by the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen whose work led to the UN’s Human Development Index (which combines health, education, and income into a standardised “score”)²⁸ and later to the “development as freedom” thesis. These methods, and particularly Sen’s “capability approach” are by far the most influential among modern NGOs,²⁹ rights groups, and the UN. The popularity of such theories in US academic and policy making circles has led some to call these problem-solution oriented theories “American development discourse.”³⁰

- *Critical Development approaches:* Gaining popularity in the mid 1990s to 2000s, several European theorists have questioned the development paradigm entirely. Typically these theorists seek to interrogate how development “works” or its rationality, following thinkers like Cornelius Castoriadis, Alan Touraine, or Zygmunt Bauman.³¹ Such thinkers have, naturally, gained little influence over policy, but they have influenced modern development discourse considerably, and some of their critiques of development discourse will be helpful later.



THE DIAGNOSTICIANS

Of the above, it is the diagnostic approaches which have come to dominate modern discourse around development. Each is centred around a preferred metric for development, or their preferred method for deriving aggregate scores from a number of different datasets. Like the UNHDI these scores typically rely on the idea that social factors like education, political freedom, or healthcare correlate directly with human development.

No development theorist is as widely cited as Amartya Sen, on whose work most modern development scholarship is based. Underpinning Sen's work was his effort, begun in the late 1970s, to synthesise different theories of equality common in welfare economics into a unified approach to equality that could inform further studies into development. Sen posited that rather than pure equality of opportunity (Benthamite equality), or a min-maxed approach to welfare in which only the worst off benefit (Rawlsian equality), welfare should be understood based on "basic capability equality," the real ability for people to undertake basic actions in the interests of themselves and their community.³²

Thus the American, diagnostic approach is based, like the holistic approaches, in human agency. Later, Sen re-framed development as a question of freedom,³³ an idea with a long pedi-

gree in American development discourse.³⁴ While Sen's definition of freedom is relatively sophisticated, the "development as freedom" thesis sometimes translated into little more than support for a very American "liberal dogmatism," already common in policy circles.³⁵

Had Walter Rodney been alive to see it, I imagine he would have levied many of the same criticisms he had of the economistic approach against the American diagnosticians. These are:

- *Diagnostic approaches mistake consequences for causes:* Rodney criticises Western "experts" (those who are not openly racist at least) for "giving as causes of underdevelopment the things which really are consequences."³⁶ When groups such as the UN development programme list the educational, economic, and health outcomes of underdeveloped countries, these factors are essentially given as causes of underdevelopment when they are the long-standing consequences of imperialism.
- *Underdevelopment is seen as self-perpetuating:* If the consequences of underdevelopment are also their cause, the problem becomes a closed loop in which no development is possible. Rodney criticises this as an ahistorical claim which can serve to imply that underdevelopment is a consequence of the innate inferiority of underdeveloped peoples.³⁷
- *The effects of Imperialism are hidden:* If un-

The development paradigm changed the underlying relations in the systems it described, molding the real conditions of the world in its image; in other words, the map became the territory.

derdevelopment is its own consequence, then the widening gap between the underdeveloped and developed nations is seen as entirely unrelated to the problem of underdevelopment. As Rodney says: “Mistaken interpretations of the causes of underdevelopment usually stem...from the error of believing that one can learn the answers by looking inside the underdeveloped country.”³⁸ In modern development theories this is often accidental rather than malicious, as can be seen in Sen’s work on the Bengal famine wherein his narrow scope fails to take into account the actively genocidal policies of Churchill.³⁹ Similarly, dependency and exploitation is often erased in the modern vogue for “interdependent” theories of development.⁴⁰

In addition to Rodney’s salient criticisms of such theories I would add one other: The overriding focus on problems within the underdeveloped countries has masked not only imperialism, but the ongoing underdevelopment of the so-called developed countries. No longer can it be said that the world is neatly divided into camps, one of which unquestionably meets any and all definitions of development. Instead the question of “who is developing?” has become considerably more complicated.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand the complexity of whether the West is “developed” is to divide the question into a matter of whether the West meets the many different quantitative criteria for development used

over the years. I will begin with the ways in which the “developed” nations are superior.

When it comes to industrial output, a strong distinction between developed and underdeveloped nations is clear, but shrinking. Developed nations (here meaning the US, Europe, and Japan) are typified by shrinking industrial employment, rising productivity, and a (seemingly)⁴¹ high proportion of machinery to labour.⁴²

Developed nations also have extremely high average incomes, and high median incomes compared to other nations.⁴³ Many workers are employed in the “FIRE economy” of Finance, Insurance and Real-Estate, and employment is shrinking in other sectors.

Finally, developed nations score much higher on the Human Development Index of the UN Development Programme. This is calculated using GDP, Education,⁴⁴ and Health scores. While “underdeveloped” nations sometimes have a very high GDP, for the most part the developed nations have better education and health outcomes, and thus a HDI score much higher than their GDP would indicate.⁴⁵

However there are some ways in which the developed nations are inferior, or the results are quite mixed.

Developed nations tend to score very highly in metrics designed by development experts, but they often perform poorly in measures of a



country's success which depend on speaking to the people living there. Sometimes these results are often written off as byproducts of poor education systems, but I do not believe this can be true of every one of these supposed anomalies. Developed nations often have the most unpopular governments,⁴⁶ leading populations who believe things are only going to get worse, in stark contrast to several underdeveloped nations.⁴⁷ These populations have next to no political say, as hollowed-out democracies in which mass participation is obsolete are increasingly the norm.⁴⁸ Whether or not the response is logical, relative deprivation dominates the psychic landscape of the developed world, and some of the most developed regions suffer the highest suicide rates, especially those countries which have only recently become high-income information economies.⁴⁹

Underdeveloped nations also have a higher rate of profit,⁵⁰ in part because they have historically had a much lower Organic Composition of Capital, and thus their industry has not tended towards overproduction crises and loss of profitability. Because of this, and because of the need for developed nations to offload outdated or surplus fixed capital, they have also had a higher rate of capital intensification. This drastic change in capital intensity may mean that many peripheral countries have, or will soon have, a higher OCC than the core, especially as the latter artificially lowers its own OCC through unproductive workers.⁵¹

On the whole, it cannot be said that the quantitative aspects in which the West is lagging behind outweigh the aspects in which it is truly more developed, but there is also no clear standard for "mature" development.

In one sense the diagnostic theories of development "work" in that they assist quantitative comparisons between developed and underdeveloped nations, even if the quantitative gap between the developed and underdeveloped nations is closing on a number of levels.

But they also do not "work" in that they lack an internal rationality. As Castoriadis suggests, the conventional understanding of development is defined through the actualisation of a virtual state, implying some definition of "mature development" which simply doesn't exist in modern development discourse.⁵² Without a definite end-point of development, development suggests the "injection of infinity into the social-historical world," as Karagiannis says, implying an eventual, absurd mastery of all things: infinite growth.⁵³

This overriding, even absurd, focus on the quantifiable aspects of development hides the qualitative, structural, and relational changes that are taking place in the developed nations, and in-between the developed and underdeveloped nations. The fact that the modern development theory holds true for certain quantifiable changes does not indicate that it is not an increasingly obsolescent paradigm. The



late cybernetician Stafford Beer was fond of saying “absolutum obsoletum” (if it works, it’s out of date) in response to such systems.⁵⁴

The development paradigm changed the underlying relations in the systems it described, molding the real conditions of the world in its image, in other words, the map became the territory. For a long time, developed nations did develop themselves precisely because they were developed nations, and underdeveloped nations lagged behind because they were underdeveloped. Belief is a powerful thing, and through a number of mechanisms, from investor confidence reinforcing existing trends, to racist ideas entrenching themselves, to developmental determinism becoming the norm, development analysis served as a self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing the status quo.

The fact that some underdeveloped nations are breaking through this mold signals a profound shift in the winds. The quantitative measures will take some time to reflect the qualitative shifts below the surface, and we can only understand these shifts by looking beyond a di-agnostic developmental paradigm.

A SKETCH FOR A RELATIONAL MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

At certain points, Walter Rodney points towards a new paradigm of development, without necessarily discarding the previous one. Rodney was conscious of the utility that remained in the conventional development paradigm, and the ways underdeveloped nations could use it despite its growing flaws. He was explicitly conscious of the dangers of prematurely discarding the development paradigm entirely, saying he did not wish “to remove the ultimate responsibility for development from the shoulders of Africans.” Nonetheless I believe the basis for a more relational theory of development can be found in his work. Five points in particular are key:

1. Peripheral economies are fully integrated into the economies of the core,⁵⁵ and should be analysed as one system.
2. The core and peripheral economies exist in a dialectical relationship, and changes in one are largely proportional to changes in the other. One cannot develop without the underdevelopment of the other.⁵⁶
3. Peripheral countries suffer the most when the core countries they are linked to are undergoing hardship or are underdeveloping them-



While even bourgeois economists are ringing the alarm bell, the neoliberal states of the core live in what Kelsey identifies as a state of profound denial.

selves.⁵⁷

4. In many cases, what is presented as development is actually retrogression.⁵⁸

5. Development and underdevelopment are not fundamentally self-perpetuating,⁵⁹ but they have become this way through ideology.

In summary, I believe one of the main failures of previous development theories has been on the question of “where is development generated?” It does not occur *in situ*, instead a relational development theory would examine the development that occurs *in the space between nations*, measured in the transfer of value and power. This is a logical conclusion from Rodney’s assertion that development theory is an exclusively comparative study,⁶⁰ and development’s measurable qualities in core and periphery rise and fall in proportion to one another.⁶¹

In this relational model, I believe it is necessary to identify two different forms of development. On the one hand, there is development which represents an effort to synthesise and overcome the core-periphery dialectic. This I will term *autogenous development*. Contrasted with this is development which serves to exacerbate the underdevelopment of other nations, creating more specialised societies which exist only as parasites on the body of the peripheral nations, which I will term *parasitic development*.

This argument bears some resemblance to Samir Amin’s formulation of *autocentric* versus *extraverted* accumulation, autocentric meaning “accumulation without external expansion of the system”⁶² through a complementary relationship between the means of production and consumption,⁶³ and extraverted meaning that which is forced into specialisation to suit the needs of the core economies to gain cheap goods and reap the rewards of unequal exchange⁶⁴ (poor nations selling the product of many labour hours in return for the product of very few).⁶⁵ Amin’s theory is similar in that it posits “good” and “bad” forms of development, but these are uncovered through a quite narrow focus on conditions within a country, and through accumulative quantities within nations rather than transfers between them. The autocentric/extraverted accumulation dichotomy does not encompass changes within the core, wherein there is now less evidence for conventional autocentric accumulation.

Amin’s theory also has a different internal rationality, in that it defines developmental maturity as a “delinked” country which has completed the “sovereign project” of economics. This sovereign project can be measured as a percentage, thus Amin says China is 50 percent determined by its sovereign project, South Africa is 0 percent determined by its own, and so on.⁶⁶ Amin also has very different conclusions, to which I will return in the final



section.

Instead, the internal rationality of autogenic and parasitic development, or, to draw from Castoriadis, the “definition of maturity” in each, reflects their relationship to the development paradigm itself. Autogenous development in a society is mature once it sublates the core-periphery dialectic (eg. development which is no longer proportional to underdevelopment). Parasitic development achieves maturity when it is consumed by the core-periphery dialectic and produces paradoxical results (eg. a core country underdeveloping itself).

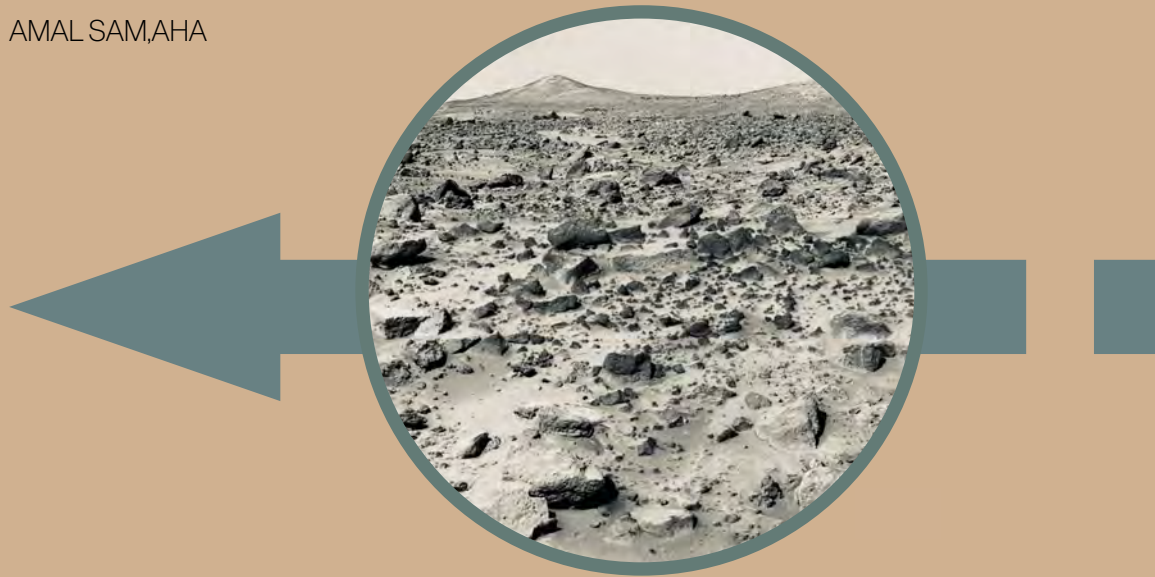
As we will see, parasitic development is by its nature autocannibalistic. It accounts, in part, for the logic of the neoliberal revolution in the West, and the hollowing-out of the liberal-democratic institutions and labour-aristocratic achievements consolidated in the era of class compromise. Parasitic development will lead, in the long run, to the underdevelopment of the core, unless countervailing tendencies emerge.

PARASITIC AND AUTOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT IN THE CORE

Parasitic development is certainly not new. Colonialism in all its forms, from the mercantilist settler-colonialism of the early American colonies, to the more advanced imperialist colonisation of Africa, has involved a parasitic relationship of some sort. However, I would suggest that until relatively recently, all forms of parasitic development were matched by a degree of autogenous development in the core. In the colonial and early imperialist stages, these two forms of development were relatively co-dependent, as parasitic development relied on autogenously-produced military and economic power to maintain a hold over the colonies, while autogenous development relied on parasitic expansion in the colonies to overcome European imperialist stalemates and “export the contradictions” (overproduced goods, surplus labour, etc.) produced by domestic crises.

These are more-or-less historical truisms, but the process deserves elaboration. The settler-colony of New Zealand serves as a good example as it has undergone four identifiable processes which illustrate different aspects of par-





asitic and autogenous development, both as a core nation in the present day, and as a semi-peripheral colony in its early history:

1. It has relied on autogenous development in Britain:

The New Zealand state's early history was marked by repeated appeals to Britain for settlers, investment, and military support. The industrial expansion occurring in Britain, itself the product of both intensified exploitation of British workers and imperial profits from the creation of forced markets in India and China, created the conditions for a British military, economic, and population growth that far outstripped any autogenous potential in the colony. An enormous imperial force was required to defeat the Māori Kīngitanga (itself often militarily superior, but economically inferior)⁶⁷ in the 1860s,⁶⁸ which was maintained largely at the insistence of the Pākehā colonists. In the 1870s, the colony expanded through a series of massive loans from British banks, while encouraging British immigration.⁶⁹ It is deeply unlikely that the New Zealand colony would have established itself without considerable British aid.

2. It has been hindered by parasitic development in Britain:

Early in the colony's history, British capitalists conspired to create more favourable condi-

tions for investment through interfering in the colonial land market and raising land prices,⁷⁰ immiserating early settlers as part of a conscious effort to escape domestic "over-capitalisation and revolutionary tensions."⁷¹

3. It has benefited from its own autogenous development:

After considerable foreign capital investment, the New Zealand economy became largely self-sufficient from the 1900s to the 1970s, dominating the world's wool and refrigerated shipping markets and creating the world's highest standard of living for the majority Pākehā population.⁷² This was dependent upon, but never less than equal to, concomitant parasitic development.

4. It has benefited from its own parasitic development in the Pacific:

Since the Seddon Prime Ministership New Zealand played the role of "junior imperialist" in the Pacific, subjugating island nations. These island economies, as well as the pre-1950s semi-independent Māori economy, served as vast reserve armies of labour, creating a racialised wage hierarchy that enriched Pākehā workers and "plugged gaps" in the main economy.⁷³

At this point it is worth pointing out that none of this is to suggest the co-dependence of auto-



genous and parasitic development in the colonial and early imperialist eras constituted some sort of “interdependent” development with relatively equal trade-offs. At each stage there were winners reaping the benefits of development, and losers who remained underdeveloped, usually Māori and Pacific peoples. Nonetheless, we can see from the New Zealand example that autogenous development was usually matched by some degree of parasitism, and vice-versa. Even if autogenous development was unlikely to succeed without some degree of parasitism, most development which took place in this era was the result of the intra-national exploitation of workers from the majority national group (Pākehā), whereas parasitic development existed in a supporting role to increase industrial outputs (eg. through Pacific phosphate increasing farming output), ensure a labour supply, or act as a “market of last resort” for New Zealand industry (in the case of the Pacific, by providing a market for huge quantities of low-quality corned beef).

This was to change. On 26 July 1984 the neoliberal revolution began in New Zealand. Bruce Jesson captured the mood of the year in *Only Their Purpose is Mad* over a decade later:

“[T]he economy was controlled by producers;⁷⁴ these days the economy is run by financiers. A new elite has evolved globally, and the country is now run for the benefit of rentiers, not producers. Within New Zealand, there has been a phenomenal growth in that

strata of society that identifies with finance, a growth not just in numbers but in political and social impact. This strata represents internally the external appearance of financial markets on a massive scale. Finance has its own culture and, through a process of osmosis, this culture has spread throughout New Zealand society. It is the spread of this finance culture that has underwritten the New Zealand transformation.”⁷⁵

As Jane Kelsey and others have noted, the profound shifts in New Zealand closely matched global trends led by the financial centres of New York, London, and Tokyo,⁷⁶ and the zeal and speed with which New Zealand governments transformed the country make New Zealand the prototypical neoliberal state. In her book *The FIRE Economy*, Kelsey gives an exhaustive list of the changes New Zealand underwent, and the global trends they reflected. First the state transformed its relationship to the economy, becoming more intimate with finance by bringing ideologically committed neoliberals into the treasury, loosening restrictions on finance, and setting up a bonanza of asset sales.⁷⁷ Next the finance sector exploded in size as state owned banks were sold off and private banks reached record sizes, insurance agencies were concentrated into a duopoly, corporate raiders rebranded as private equity firms cannibalised the retail sector, and public/private partnerships (PPPs) took over the infrastructure of the state, even running local



governments.⁷⁸

This financialisation of society had a profound effect upon the autogenous developmental potential of New Zealand in two main ways. Production was entirely hollowed out, with real production falling from 35 to 22 percent of GDP. This was largely because of shareholder capitalism, in which each aspect of production had to justify its existence to shareholders, and the state and boardrooms began to respond to underperformance by stripping away supports to create a “dynamic” economy, in other words, by instituting mass layoffs and offshoring parts of the production chain.⁷⁹ As livelihoods began to suffer, and the cost of living spiked, the state hoped that savings and reinvestment would eventually fix most problems. This never happened, instead there was next to no reinvestment of profits, as it was nearly all paid out as shareholder dividends. Without savings, the economy came to be funded through debt. This was not public debt, which would have likely alleviated the situation, instead it was enormous external debt, a large part of which was intercorporate bank debt, which contributed to a balance-of-payments deficit and further lack of reinvestment.⁸⁰ As the late David Graeber noted, financialised economies really just act as cover for “colluding with government to create, and then trade and manipulate, various forms of debt.”⁸¹

As a Western, white nation, Pākeha New

Zealand demands a certain standard of living. But much as societal development is now funded almost entirely through external debt, personal, human development is now funded through household debt.⁸² With all forms of development in New Zealand now funded by unsustainable, often external debt, can we really say that it is autogenously developing?

Perhaps if this debt-driven society had, at its base, an internal locus of value creation, then we could say that it is. The answer to this lies in the class composition of such societies. This is a question I discussed at length in another article,⁸³ but suffice it to say that while the vast majority of people in core societies are still wage labourers, the kinds of wage labour being performed have drastically diversified since the mid-century height of industrial wage-labour, and many forms of wage labour which do not actually produce use-values have proliferated. Jürgen Habermas hypothesised that such labourers would increase the productivity of other wage labourers,⁸⁴ but David Graeber successfully argued that such workers really do not produce value on their own, nor increase efficiencies elsewhere.⁸⁵ These workers I called *reflexive-unproductive* labourers, which included think-tank employees, university administrators, management consultants, data analysts, supervisors-of-supervisors, et cetera,⁸⁶ all of whom now make up a large proportion of core workers.⁸⁷

Of course value must come from somewhere,

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and as Zak Cope points out, unproductive workers in the core cannot create values themselves unless there has been a proportional amount of productive labour undertaken elsewhere.⁸⁸ In other words, a core economy which is entirely reliant on labour which is not autogenously productive indicates a displacement of the locus of value creation.

If we remember one of the maxims we arrived at earlier, development takes place in the transfers between nations, and this is especially true here. If a society seems to be developed, then we should expect to see signs of external transfers due to parasitic development. In the case of the core countries in the 21st century, most development is an expression of the Imperial Transfer of Value (ITV) identified by Cope, which is composed of direct value transfers, illicit financial flows, and unequal exchange.⁸⁹ Of these factors, unequal exchange, the inequities in the cost of peripheral labour hours vs. those in the core, is the largest component of value transfers. Through an exhaustive process of adding up various forms of ITV, Cope arrives at a total peripheral-core transfer of \$5.2 trillion annually,⁹⁰ of which over half is the product of unequal exchange.⁹¹ This is three times higher than intra-core transfers of wealth.

This may not seem like much when we look at the core nations' (as defined by Cope) combined GDP of about \$44.8 trillion. But when we consider the fact that only \$8.87 trillion of

this is savings, we can see that without parasitic development the core nations *would only have about two-fifths the wealth available for reinvestment.*

This seems to confirm Amin's hypothesis that the periphery is now needed to support the rate of profit in the core, mostly through unequal exchange.⁹² We can only conclude that parasitic development has begun to completely outweigh any autogenous development in the West.

Further confirmation of this comes from the unlikeliest of sources. Even major financial institutions like the IMF have started to be critical of overreliance on parasitic development over the last decade or so. A flurry of IMF documents with titles like "Too Much Finance?" have been released, but as an institution bound by its own propaganda to a certain extent it can hardly point out the contradictions of empire. Instead they provide amusingly simplistic explanations for the phenomena identified, such as that Finance becomes spontaneously unsustainable after taking up a certain arbitrary percentage of the economy.⁹³ Reading between the lines though, we can see that even arch-imperial institutions are becoming dimly aware of their own unsustainability and dependence upon a locus of value creation, even if they don't know where or what that is.

While even bourgeois economists are ringing the alarm bell, the neoliberal states of the core



live in what Kelsey identifies as a state of profound denial. Every effort of the state, even vital ones like crisis recovery, have been given over to the preservation of the current financial regime's credibility.⁹⁴ In many ways, the continued employment of liberal development rhetoric only serves to reinforce this denial. Developed countries *must be developed*, as their standard of living is all that separates them from the peripheral hordes.

In reality, the core countries are more dependent upon unsustainable wealth extraction than ever before. Their expenses are manifold: debt servicing, maintaining a superior standard of living, maintaining *just enough* manufacturing to out-compete peripheral manufacturers. All of this on a wafer-thin margin of profitability, and as a downward trend becomes more and more apparent.

But the trend towards parasitic development is only going to increase as the rate of profit in the core countries falls. In the mid 19th century, profitability hovered at around 40 percent return per unit of capital invested in the core countries. Between 1974 and 2010 this figure has hovered at around 10 to 15 percent. An optimistic projection of this falling rate of profit would have the core countries reaching 0 percent profitability by 2054.⁹⁵

To make up the shortfall, core nations will ramp up the rate of exploitation of the periphery, creating more and more specialised soci-

eties designed to absorb value from overseas more effectively. This will likely include further financialisation, an even greater proliferation of reflexive-unproductive jobs, and a greater reliance on debt to ensure standards of living than ever before. Fundamentally it must include increases to the wages of workers in the core as a means of perpetuating unequal exchange, however this is not to say that such workers will live in luxury. Household debt, and an ever-higher cost of living will likely far outstrip wages, and will in fact act to push wages up by forever staying slightly higher than people can afford.

But what of conditions in the periphery? Some states will likely achieve a degree of autogenous development. States like China already have, even if their increased productive potential enriches the core countries far more than their own workers thanks to unequal exchange. This will likely only abate once wages increase beyond the global median wage.

Other states will not be so lucky, and will remain permanently underdeveloped, locked in place and time by external pressures from the core countries. I believe a vision of the peripheral countries' future can be seen in the Pacific, where island nations which have long since been denuded of natural resources instead act as vast reserve armies of labour for the nations of the Pacific Rim,⁹⁶ with the only relief coming from small remittance incomes.⁹⁷ The core countries watch keenly, ready to force the sig-



nature of trade deals favourable to the core,⁹⁸ rather than allowing the development of multilateral ties which might provide mutual relief between peripheral nations. Any autogenous developmental potential is squeezed out through a combination of competition with Western goods, and an overreliance on foreign aid, which more often than not goes straight back to the core in return for basic imports.

CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND DEVELOPMENT?

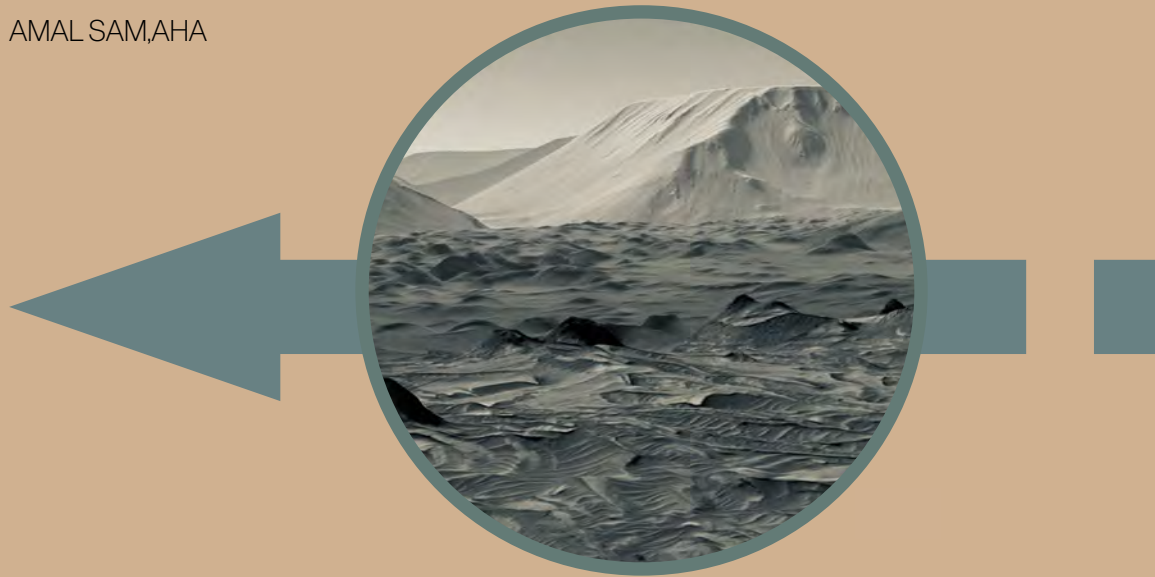
By this point I have discussed various theories of development and whether or not they help us explain our world, but there are other theories I have touched on which look past development, which question the rationality of development, or which reject development as an evil in and of itself. It's at this point that we traverse the gap between simply analysing the world, and asking how we are to change it.

As Castoriadis reminds us, it is rare for development theorists to speak of an endpoint. It is only natural that revolutionaries are among the few to speak of a transformational rupture in development, as only revolution can provide the political will necessary to overcome a totalising paradigm. Karagiannis goes so far as to

say that development discourse is tyrannical, as it takes over domains other than those ascribed to it.⁹⁹ It begins as economics, consumes the social, the political, and does not finish consuming until it has taken on a discussion of every aspect of the human experience. The only way to negate the tyranny of this discourse, she says, is to work through social and political approaches, and re-historicise the developmental paradigm, insisting that each theory of development is a tool, open to a multiplicity of outcomes.¹⁰⁰

It is for these reasons that I have written this as both a short history of development theories, while also rooting this in current and future catastrophe, exploitation, and suffering in the last section. Development discourse always serves to hide these facts, rendering them as small parts in a sterile whole. Perhaps this sanitising quality of development discourse, combined with the naked horror of our world, is why “development” can appear as an inherently toxic concept.

At the intersection of these problems is the fact that development discourse on the left has, tragically, become reduced to a relatively pointless debate about growth vs. degrowth. As Aaron Vansintjan points out, thanks to a misreading of what exactly de-growth arguments *are*, a number of socialists have come out in favour of increased growth, even in terms of the crude metric of GDP.¹⁰¹



Mike Macnair has effectively argued for a more nuanced position on growth in revolutionary societies, correctly pointing out that any socialist society cannot be based on maximising growth, or even efficiency. He traces the idea of *socialism as a developmental regime* back to certain assumptions of Marx in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and their later adoption by Lenin. The idea of the socialist developmental regime, at least one based purely on increased efficiency of surplus value allocation, was flawed, not in that the goal was impossible, but in that the best parts of the Soviet system were those which defied quantitative developmental rationality.¹⁰²

If we have learnt anything from the previous sections, it should be that we have very little to learn from purely quantitative theories of development. There is nothing wrong with measurement, but such approaches tend to overlook the less superficial, more qualitative and relational changes which societies undergo. I believe socialist economics should be fundamentally *ambivalent* to the question of growth or degrowth of total GDP, or efficiency. Much more important is the degree to which different kinds of development, autogenous or parasitic, are taking place within a society. Naturally, some sectors must shrink, others must grow in accordance with qualitative changes to the global system.

This argument is once again similar to one made by Samir Amin decades ago. Delinked

nations would neither expand nor contract, but would rather develop a “national law of value.” This would encourage qualitative shifts in the economy: agriculture would move away from export-oriented monocultures towards gardens for food sovereignty, higher wages at the expense of export competitiveness and so on. Amin insisted that this was different to autarky, and that trade would still take place,¹⁰³ but I think we must explain this further, and move beyond Amin’s sometimes nationalistic (or at least very nation-focused) formulation, as evidenced by the kind of societies he held up as excellent examples of delinking.¹⁰⁴

A relational view of development is incompatible with the negation of either development or relationality. The core-periphery dialectic cannot be overcome by mere disengagement by either core or peripheral nations. Rather it requires active efforts from both worlds to undertake autogenous development in different areas. In the core, this means the de-financialisation of societies, and a degree of re-industrialisation to compensate for a reduction in cheap goods gained through unequal exchange with the periphery. In the periphery, it would mean much of the same restructuring described by Amin, but this can only be done successfully if it is primarily performed through the proliferation of peripheral-to-peripheral transfers, or trade which does not involve unequal exchange. De-linking with the same emphasis on autocentric accumulation Amin de-



scribes simply would not work for nations without natural resources, such as the Pacific.

The necessity of further development in the core is evidence that we have moved past what I described earlier as the root of the radical development theories: that development is a zero-sum game as argued by Baran. In contrast, Macnair argues that, “[C]apitalism cycles between positive-sum games, which make inequalities tolerable and produce reformist versions of liberalism and technocratic progress ideologies, and negative-sum games, in which inequalities become increasingly intolerable.”¹⁰⁵

While I am not sure at which point one cycle has overtaken the other, it is certainly true that both can exist under capitalism. Conventional development theory deludes itself into thinking that development is a positive-sum game, and if we select our data carefully that might seem true, but conversely radical development theories’ zero-sum game almost seems to suggest that the only route to global liberation is the wholesale collapse, even retrogression, of the core countries. This idea has a certain attractiveness for anyone on the receiving end of imperial aggression and expansion, but I would suggest that political collapse is not the same as developmental retrogression. Once again it is the core’s capacity for parasitic growth that must be eliminated, while some autogenous development is necessary to save the captive populations of the core and end

their largely involuntary dependency on peripheral workers.

I wish to return to Rodney for a moment to assess whether I have kept to the key points outlined in my sketch for a relational development model. Peripheral economies are certainly integrated into the core economies, and are in fact becoming more so every day as the Imperial Transfer of Value displaces the autogenously-derived wealth available for reinvestment. The core-periphery dialectic is entrenched, and will continue to entrench itself until peripheral powers gain the wage levels necessary to combat unequal exchange (unless their leadership chooses competitiveness over higher wages). Under parasitic regimes, development is closer than ever before to a zero-sum game in which each win and loss is entirely proportional. As we can see, peripheral countries will suffer more and more as the core becomes more volatile, more dependent, more specialised, and more insecure in their hold over the world. What is now seen as development, especially in the core, is actually greater debt, greater insecurity, and greater reductions in human agency. Development is not self-perpetuating, but rather too much of the wrong kind of development will produce underdevelopment in the long run, even as those at the helm of society slip further into denial of this fact.

The core-periphery dialectic cannot be ignored. It cannot be disengaged from. As Huey Newton once proclaimed, reactionary forms



of relationality must be transformed into revolutionary forms.¹⁰⁶ Our task is qualitative transformation rather than quantitative incrementalism, or worse, retrogression. We must reject the unbuilding of the world.

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