

The Development Discourse

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Discourse on development has gone a long way, and rightly so. After all, much has changed since the Middle Ages gave way to the Industrial Revolution. Or, since the Middle Kingdom became communist. And, less so, but significant just the same, since the Philippine Republic adopted its fifth constitution.

Eighteenth century Western civilization discourse centered on how to realize the full potential of the individual — specifically, how to get wealthy. Adam Smith argued that the wealth of nations came, not from the precious ores won by might and stealth of adventurers and stacked in treasure boxes to be delivered to the King or Queen, but from the productive labor of its citizens. He provided the scientific treatise to why we should steer away from agriculture. With its limited division of labor and productive capacity, agriculture was no match to the creativity of unrestrained capital and the efficiency of machines and factory labor segmented into a production line working round the clock. Individuals, of course, must be left alone to pursue their profit motivation since these independent initiatives will boil down to the development of the state.

Those countries that went the way of Smith did get rich but not without creating abysmal gaps in ownership of wealth. Thus, discourse by the late 19th century largely centered on the question of development for whom. Development, Marxist and neo-Marxist writings argued, had largely benefited the capitalist class and the state that served its interest. The metropolises were

enriched while the countries in the periphery or what we have called the Third World stagnated. Modelling socialist economies extricated from this neocolonial orbit thus captured the imagination of many.

But even as the 20th century gave birth to socialist revolutions, multilateral lending agencies and multinational corporations more successfully fashioned the world in their image. The economic blueprint for an export-oriented industrialization they aggressively peddled in the 1970s saw more adherents, notably, among authoritarian states of the so-called free world. In a decade's time, the NIC phenomenon was born.

As the economies of these first and second-generation NICs boomed, so did discourse on the politics of these economies. The dominant thesis that emerged from this discourse was that dictatorship had augured well for development.

Fortunately, the preeminence of the development-without-democracy model that seemed so true up to the first half of the 1990s decade ("seemed" because while many cases were put up as proofs, so many more dictatorships ended up in disasters) is slowly being eroded. Current transitions to more democratic governance beg for decent compromises between economic growth and democratic concerns. In socialist states that have opened up their economies, there are brewing pressures for political reforms to catch up with economic changes.

Moreover, increasing concern over depleting resources and degraded ecosystems have broadened the human-focused philosophies engendered by the Renaissance to encompass global ecological concerns. Development has become not merely a question of for whom, but also, at what expense to nature. Thus, the buzz word "sustainable development," to refer to a development path that takes into account the preservation of a healthy ecosystem for succeeding generations.

For this reason, Philippine civil society groups are knocking heads to come up with alternative sustainable development-with-democracy paradigms. In his book, Yoshihara Kunio had used the term "growth-friendly democracy." He considered this better than the trodden path of authoritarianism with growth but finds the chances for the Philippines

to go that way slim. Correspondingly, his advice was retrogressive — another shot at dictatorship and who knows, it might work this time.

The emerging scenario among thinkers from the ranks of the Philippine Left is one where the state is not relegated to a mere mediating role in the classic liberal sense but where, in fact, the state is an active actor. Walden Bello, in one forum, called for "an interventionist state in a democracy." Similarly, the draft platform of a Left political party saw a strong activist state and a strong civil society as two elements that can go into this alternative model. "A strong activist state shall provide leadership for the economic development effort, harness private interests in the service of the national interest, carry out agrarian reform and other redistributive measures, end the rape of our natural resources, and negotiate effectively with foreign capital." In this model, the state is strong because it is effective and autonomous from vested interests to carry out structural reforms and redistributive policies, within the framework of a mixed market economy.

This activist state is checked, balanced and complemented by a vibrant civil society, unlike what happened in socialist states where the Party usurped both the state and society. Civil society guards against excesses of state power and contributes, through voluntary organizations and other forms, its efforts to the development process.

Can the sustainable development-with-democracy model indeed provide the dominant alternative for the 21st Century? Will it be able to withstand the pressure of economic globalization where the forces of capital and the market intend to prevail, and where export competitiveness is the primary criteria for keeping the economy afloat? Will forces supportive of this model override the drive for meaner technologies, or the spate of upheavals springing from the platform of primordial sentiments founded on race, religion and culture?

To be sure, civil society will have to do most of the spadework to realize this alternative and flesh out its mechanics and features in specific contexts. It's a tough task — actualizing, say, such a scenario in the Suharto or the SLORC era. But definitely, on the eve of the next century, all arrows are pointing at civil society as the next centerpiece of the development discourse.