

# Some Questions Concerning Development: Comments on "Regional and Economic Development"

**William E. Doolittle**  
*Department of Geography*  
*University of Texas*  
*Austin, TX 78712*

Members of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers are markedly collegial and supportive of each other. This is certainly good, but it has also resulted in few critical debates. In an attempt to instigate such discussion, but hopefully without damaging collegiality, my comments here will be critical. By critical I do not mean that we should, or that I will, derogate or denigrate, but rather that we should constantly question each other in order to sharpen our individual and collective intellectual vision. As scholars, we cannot afford to always pat each other on the back but instead we need to challenge each other and the frontiers of thought. My critical comments are, therefore, couched primarily as questions that I hope will be first pondered, and then debated.

## **EXACTLY WHAT IS "DEVELOPMENT"?**

A few years ago I asked a student who was just entering our graduate program what his interests were. "Cultural geography," he responded. In an attempt to learn something of his perspective on things, I then asked: "What is culture?" Somewhat to my surprise, I was met with what can best be described as a bovine stare and then a loss for words. He had no working definition. Like many people, he assumed that we all know what culture is, so there was no need to define it. I immediately assigned him the task of sorting through the numerous definitions of culture. Before he could begin to talk intelligently about it, he needed to know precisely what it was he was talking about. The same can be said of the terminology used in development. Jargon pervades the development literature to such an extent that arguments become unintelligible to many readers, and, dare I say, perhaps not well thought out by many writers. Bombast, it seems, often gets used in lieu of clear writing and perhaps thinking. Indeed, the term itself is vague. Again, what is "development"?

Most researchers interested in development seem to think that we all know what the term means. Do we? Perhaps the point needs to be discussed, especially its geographical implications. The term implies or connotes change (see Klak, this volume), but a certain kind and direction of change: more or bigger and better. But, of course, bigger is not always better. And, what is it that should be bigger and better? "Better," itself, is difficult to deal with. If better means such things as improved health care, equal rights, greater incomes and reduced debts, and better food produced in an environmentally sound manner, then perhaps, just perhaps, the body of literature on "well-being" renders the development literature moot.

## **ARE THERE LIMITS TO DEVELOPMENT?**

How much development can take place before what might be called overdevelopment occurs? For example, consider a point raised by Klaus Meyer-Arendt in his discussion of recreation and tourism (this volume). What is the point at which there are so many hotels on a beach that the beach becomes unattractive to tourists it is intended to attract? Theoretically, development may eventually work against itself. While overdevelopment probably will not occur any time soon, if ever, across Latin America, it could happen on a small scale locally. For example, a community could increase its production of a good so much that the market price is driven below the point where it is profitable. The limits or the saturation points for various aspects of development seem to be worth considering.

## **WHAT ABOUT PRIORITIES?**

Who determines who needs what and how much?

Some people (those whose way of life is underdeveloped?) may not want what others (those whose way of life is developed) think they need. I raise this point because of two incidents involving native North Americans. The first involves some early meetings of parties interested in planning activities for the upcoming celebration of the Columbian quincentenary. Of the scholars and the lay Spanish- and Italian-Americans in attendance, American [end p. 293] Indians asked: "What is it that we have to celebrate?" Surely it is not the introduction of diseases for which they had no immunity, the loss of land, and the demise of their cultures. The second incident involved events at Wounded Knee and life on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota. Speaking of poverty, malnutrition and alcoholism, among other problems, a member of the tribe argued on a recent episode of *Frontline* on P.B.S. that his people accept these conditions as the price they must pay in choosing to remain on their land and retain their identity. To be sure, they do not like these costs and are working to change them, but they are not willing to leave their homes for so-called "better opportunities" and sacrifice their culture. The issue here, of course, is one of values. Although it is not considered by economists, it is a genuine concern to sociologists and anthropologists working on development. Where, exactly, do geographers stand? About as close as we come to discussing the issue is to advocate "grassroots development" (see Zimmerer, this volume).

## **WHAT IS ALL THE EXCITEMENT ABOUT SO-CALLED "SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE?"**

Does anyone actually argue in favor of non-sustainable agriculture? Of course not. The issue here is one of differences in perspective: which practices are the most suitable for the various ends that can be achieved? Those who think farmers' principal need is to raise their incomes emphasize the role of technology to increase yields. Those who argue that farmers need more than money argue for a more holistic agricultural ecosystem. Clearly, a dilemma exists. Also, the term "sustainable" connotes a static situation; "development" is axiomatically dynamic. Even if sustainable practices can change, can they be sufficiently adaptive to make farmers equal participants in the larger economic picture? Or, does practicing "sustainable agriculture" relegate farmers to a near-subsistence level living in harmony with nature? The "poor" who are "developing" may be getting richer in an absolute sense, but relative to the "rich" who are already "developed," they may in fact be getting poorer. Should we, therefore, be emphasizing the importance of sustainable practices? Of course. More importantly, however, we should be investigating the larger implications of what it entails. We might also start thinking about "sustainable environments."

## **TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD ACADEMICS BE ADVOCATES?**

There is, by its very nature, a strong applied component to development research. But, to what extent should objective scientific study be affected by passionate activism? A philosophical and moral dilemma exists for scholars with university appointments in places such as the United States. How do they resolve studying development as opposed to involving themselves in it? To be sure, such researchers on occasion may be called upon by their hosts, in places such as Peruvian villages, to share their expertise. I trust they all respond willingly and positively. However, it should not be forgotten that their principal job is to ask intellectually provocative questions, not to provide specific answers. Institutions of higher learning exist primarily as bastions of free thought, not as planning centers. The tax-paying citizens of Texas are, for example, paying me to explore the frontiers of geographical thought, disseminate my findings through publication, and expose their sons and daughters to the work of myself and my colleagues. They are not paying me to increase the yields of arroyo-bottom farmers in Mexico, or to teach their offspring how to cure the ills of the Third World.

In closing, I wish to reiterate that these questions and comments are not intended to take to task the work of geographers working on development in Latin America. They are also not intended as evidence that I have thought about things that they have not. I am sure that everyone conducting research on development grapples with these questions on a personal level. What is lacking, however, is open debate. Such would be immensely beneficial for students. The Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers is a sufficiently small and collegial group that such issues could be, and indeed, should be discussed openly and at length.

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