

# Theories of Development and the Underdevelopment of the Orang Asli

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## ABSTRACT

*This article attempts an analysis of some theories of development in the Third World. Among the theories discussed are those of modernization and economic growth, structuralism, dependency, and the mode of production and articulation. The writer points out weaknesses in each theory to explain the reasons for cases for Third World underdevelopment. However, here he explains that the mode of production and articulation theory is most appropriate to explain empirically why underdevelopment takes place among the Semai of Malaysia.*

## ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini cuba mengupas beberapa teori pembangunan yang telah dimajukan untuk menghuraikan sebab berlakunya kurang pembangunan di Dunia Ketiga. Antara teori yang telah diberikan perhatian ialah teori modenisasi dan pertumbuhan ekonomi, teori strukturalis, teori pergantungan dan kurang pembangunan serta teori mod pengeluaran dan artikulasi. Penulis telah menunjukkan kelemahan setiap teori ini dalam menghuraikan sebab berlakunya kurang pembangunan di Dunia Ketiga. Namun demikian penulis mendapati teori mod pengeluaran dan artikulasi itu lebih berupaya menghuraikan sebab mengapa kemerosotan berlaku dalam kehidupan masyarakat Semai di Malaysia.*

## INTRODUCTION

The years following World War II saw a succession of theories purporting to resolve the problem of underdevelopment in Third World countries. These range from the neo-classical quantitative approaches to the structural and articulation models of the neo-Marxist schools. All, however, sought to explain how "traditional" social formations were transformed into "modern" ones.

Depending on which theoretical model one employs to understand the changes occurring (or needed to occur) in a particular social formation, the implications for the community or sector concerned can be quite far-reaching.

In this paper, the form and content of development theories as they emerged over the last 40 years or so will be surveyed. It should be noted, however, that the theories discussed below relate, to a large extent, to social formations at the national level rather than to small local communities. To attempt to apply such theories to the case of the Orang Asli may seem inappropriate. However, given that the Malaysian state, through its intermediary, the JHEOA, is adopting the "Stages of Growth" model of development in its efforts to uplift the Orang Asli, it is perhaps pertinent to begin with an evaluation of such development models followed by an evaluation of contemporary theories which seem more adept at explaining the changes occurring at the level of smaller, discrete social formations.

In an effort to evaluate the current development efforts towards the Orang Asli, an attempt will be made to analyse the economy of the Semai in Pahang using a model which emphasises the changing relations of production.

## ECONOMIC GROWTH AND MODERNIZATION THEORIES

The neo-classical economics of the late 19th century posed the problem of economics as one of scarcity. It was founded on the assumption that individuals, firms and nations are economically rational and will choose always to maximise profits/utility and minimise costs. The insatiable quest for wealth and profit was seen as one of the major motives for economic and social development.

Taylor (1975: 4-7), among others, argued that these "axioms" caused conventional economics to be turned into an exclusively quantitative analysis. "Development" was distinguished from "underdevelopment" by some purely quantitative indicator such as income per head. Subsequently, the developed sector was identified as "capitalist". The underlying assumption was that the traditional sector lacked initiative and innovation to develop on its own and hence, it had to be developed. The two sectors were considered separate from each other, so that the problem of development could be defined as discovering means to transfer labour and resources from the non-capitalist sector to the capitalist sector — as in the theory of economic dualism (Taylor 1975:4).

The most influential of the neo-classical growth economists was W.W. Rostow who argued that all societies had to pass through five stages in their effort to develop. These were: the traditional society, the preconditions for take-off, the take-off itself, the drive to maturity and, ultimately, the age of high mass consumption (Rostow 1960). He postulated that the failure of most less-developed countries (LDCs) to progress along the runway to "take-off" was due to the difficulty of mobilizing domestic and foreign savings needed to generate productive investment. This interpretation came to be applied in a gross, macro-structural sense (e.g. Domar 1946;

Harrod 1959) in which the role of the individuals involved in the process became completely unimportant compared to the commodity produced and the proportion set aside as savings for further investment (Mabogunje 1980: 36). As a result, policy prescriptions of the neo-classical growth models tended to create a system of social relations in production which reflected the very assumptions on which the theory was originally formulated.

The necessity for every society to pass through the same stages of development in a deterministic and progressive manner has been rightly rejected. The consensus is that even if certain societies were to converge in their development, the processes by which this occurs could differ in critical ways. Balogh (1982: 1) contends that the major weakness of the growth theories was their failure, or refusal, to recognise the actual nature of economic relationships. This was partly due to the restricted view of what was conventionally regarded as economic relationships to the exclusion of other vital influences as well as to the inadmissible method of analysis to which this narrow view gave rise. More succinctly, Blaug (1980: 254), in no kindly manner, reduced modern growth theories to mere "old style stationary state analysis" in which an element of compound growth was introduced by adding factor-augmenting technical change and exogenous increase in labour supply to an otherwise static one-period general equilibrium model of the economy.

By the early 1960s, consequently, it became necessary to re-define the excessively narrow economic interpretation of development to include changes of a social, psychological and political nature. Underdevelopment was now believed to exist because the cultures of the LDCs were antagonistic to the competitive values of Western capitalism (Cléments 1980:13).

The new emphasis on development as modernization then revolved around ways to ensure that "modern" culture replaced "traditional" culture so that traditionalist obstacles to development could be reduced, if not eliminated. This meant inculcating wealth-oriented behaviour and values individuals, representing an apparent shift from a commodity to a human approach (Mabogunje 1980: 38-9). It saw a new concentration in the provision of educational and health facilities, better housing and recreation, and renewed interest in youth and cultural activities. There was also a cultural dimension to it: to be modern meant to endeavour to consume goods and services of the kind usually manufactured in the advanced industrial countries. This prompted Toynbee (1962: 24, cited in Alatas 1972: 196) to regard the agreeable word "modern" as an euphemism and a substitute for a less agreeable word "western".

Development as "modernization", as such, was thought to result from the diffusion of modern values and modernizing attitudes from the developed West to the less-developed Third World countries. However, the growth and development that these diffusion processes were expected to

bring did not materialise. Instead of modernizing, the LDCs came to develop "dependent" economies (Baran & Sweezy 1968; Frank 1967) and a bias towards the intensive capitalization of urban areas which promoted the stratification of the populace (Lipton 1977). Trickle-down benefits did not occur as expected and the social and economic conditions of the great majority in the LDCs remained unchanged (or sometimes worsened) despite impressive overall growth record. This gave rise to the "growth with poverty" puzzle.

In spite of such ironies in its implementation, the modernization model still remains popular with economists and policy-makers. Clements (1980: 16) suggests that the most possible explanation for the popularity of the modernization theory is that its central assumptions leave the world economic system intact, does not demand any radical restructuring of the domestic economy and can be accommodated to the most conservative political philosophies.

### STRUCTURALIST THEORIES

When the neo-classicalist models were unable to explain why the LCDs (especially those in Latin America) failed to develop themselves, the "structuralist" model of development was advanced. Pioneered by Prebisch (1959, 1963), and later extended by others such as Furtado (1973), Myint (1964) and Dos Santos (1973), the structuralist school explained underdevelopment in terms of the manner in which colonies and neo-colonies of the 19th century had been integrated into the world economy by the advanced capitalist nations. In the process the structure of production and consumption was dislocated such that the LCDs were producing goods they never used and were consuming those they could not produce (Taylor 1975:9). Prebisch and other structuralists were particularly pessimistic about the gains to be achieved from free trade practices advocated by the neo-classicalists and asserted that the main obstacle to development was the external dependence of LDCs on the industrialized nations. In particular, the adverse terms of trade experienced by LDCs usually led to an unfavourable balance of payments position. These external economic relationships were believed to explain the LDC's underdevelopment and its structural distortion, particularly the uneven, slow pace of industrialization and the reflexive, dependent process of growth (Goodman and Redclift 1981: 30-1). The structuralist thus prescribed independent, self-propelling capitalist development by calling upon the local urban-industrialists and the technocratic state apparatus to embark on a national "project" of development and modernization.

However, because of the absence of a massive dose of political will to apply the reforms, and the entrenched nature of business and political

interests in Latin American countries, structuralism was eventually abandoned.

## UNDERDEVELOPMENT AND DEPENDENCY THEORIES

The Underdevelopment/Dependency school of thought takes over from structuralism's failure to provide a conclusive critique of modernization theories. While modernization theories argued that "diffusion" brought growth, dependency theorists contended that "dependence" brought stagnation and underdevelopment. Foremost among the underdevelopment/dependency theorists was A.G. Frank (1967) who provided empirical evidence to show how the mechanisms of dependency and imperialism — such as superexploitation of labour, transfer-pricing by multi-national corporations (MNCs), tied loans and MNC take-over of imports substitution projects — resulted in metropolitan appropriation of the economic surplus from the Third World "satellite states". Studies by Graham (1982) and Dinham and Hines (1983) on Ghana and Africa respectively, provide extensive documentary support for Frank's assertions. Khor (1983) argues the same for the case of Malaysia.

The appropriation of raw materials and agricultural commodities on extremely favourable terms for the industrial countries, rather than the direct appropriation of the surplus of the workers' labour, was what characterized the underdevelopment process of most of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It was the metropolitan capitalist development on a world scale, and its consequent drainage of economic surplus from the underdeveloped satellites, which created the "development of underdevelopment" in the Third World. This was believed to take place when the metropolitan capitalist social formations penetrated natural economies and appropriated the economic surplus, resulting in an almost immediate reproduction of capitalism as the dominant mode of production and the destruction of the existing natural economy (Frank 1967: 9, cited in Taylor 1975: 85). From this, Frank concluded that there could be no underdevelopment if there was no development in the first place. Development and underdevelopment were thus seen as two sides of the same coin. As such, the areas which were usually the most backward were those which had been strongly linked to the metropole. Conversely, economic development would only be experienced if the metropolitan linkages were weakened (Frank 1967: 4-15).

Later dependency theorists (e.g. Laclau 1971, Dos Santos 1973, Cardoso 1976 and Petras 1970) developed Frank's thesis but continued to rely on imagery and descriptive categories to define the relationships which condition peripheral economies and sustain underdevelopment (Goodman and Redclift 1981: 49). However, the crucial question of how dependency

relations have altered capitalist laws of motion and so redefined the movement of social formations have not been answered.

## MODE OF PRODUCTION AND ARTICULATION THEORIES

In an attempt to demonstrate how insertion into the capitalist world economy has transformed pre-capitalist societies and determined the emergence of new class structures, the mode of production approach and its "articulation" variant were developed. These models focused strongly on the development of commodity relations<sup>1</sup> at the level of exchange where it manifests itself rather than at the level of production where it should be actually situated.

The mode of production,<sup>2</sup> a Marxian concept expounded in Volumes I and III of *Capital* (Marx 1959; 1976), specifies what has been variously described as a "social totality" or a "structured whole", and is claimed to be the key to understanding a particular society. In conceptualizing a mode of production, the conditions for reproduction must be defined, and this requires that the class and political structures instrumental in maintaining the relations be specified. At this level of analysis, it is then possible to establish the nexus between the economic base of a mode of production, the specific class and political structures, and its reproduction. Involvement in market relations (exchange) is irrelevant to the definition of a mode of production.

However, it must be emphasized that a mode of production is never just a mode of production. It is always a mode of production *and appropriation*. The economy, similarly, is always a political economy. It is always contained within, and dependent upon, a matrix of structured social relations, of which the institutions governing property are the most important. There is no real-life "economy-in-itself" (Worsley 1984: 35).

The work of Althusser and Balibar (1970) and the "new" economic anthropology of the French Marxist school (e.g. Terray 1972, Godelier 1977, Dupre and Rey 1978, Meillassoux 1972, 1981) were responsible for the keen theoretical debate on the validity of the notion of articulation and the central concept of the mode of production (e.g. Clammer 1978; Forster-Carter 1978). Apart from being able to provide a persuasive critique of the liberal tradition in Anglo-American economic anthropology<sup>3</sup> and the assumed universality of neo-classical economics, the articulation theorists were also better placed, conceptually, to explain the observed resistance of non-capitalist mode of production from being totally subsumed by capital.

Conceptualized both as an implicit stable coexistence between modes and as a transitional process of contradiction between two modes and social classes, the articulation model made it unnecessary to assume that capital must absorb all other modes before being transformed by its internal contradictions. Thus, in certain instances, it would be in the

interest of capital to subordinate or conserve the non-capitalist mode rather than destroy or dissolve it. For instance, Rey (1973) and Meillassoux (1981) argue that by conserving the means of agricultural subsistence in the traditional sector, the labour power so extracted from it can be kept at a low wage. Thus, articulation in this instance is structured so as to maintain non-capitalist modes of production, which act as "reservoirs" of cheap "seasonal" or "migrant" labour for capitalist sectors of the economy. The wage paid by capital can be lower than normal since part of the long-term costs of their biological reproduction is borne by the non-capitalist sector or domestic community.

The other "needs" of capital also explain the necessity for "articulation" and the maintenance of non-capitalist modes. For instance, Luxemburg (1971) argues that articulation is necessary to secure "external markets" whereas Lenin (1972) contends that it is to counteract the declining rate of profit through "capital export". The need to secure raw materials is another reason which is advanced for articulation.

Bradby (1975), however, cautions that articulation to secure "internal" markets, raw materials or labour supply does not constitute "permanent and universally necessary conditions" of the expanded reproduction of capitalism. In reality, articulation occurs under certain conditions and relates to individual capitals in different historical situations. Bradby (1975: 129) also asserts that there is no general or universal necessity for capitalism either to destroy or to maintain pre-capitalist modes in order to ensure its expanded reproduction.

Despite what has been said about the nature of analysis, formulations of the articulation model have tended to focus on commodity production as a *form* of production rather than on the relations of production through which it is constituted. In these formulations, the pre-capitalist mode and the capitalist mode "meet" essentially at the level of exchange. In an attempt to rectify the inconsistencies, Bernstein (1979) proposes a "penetration" model in which capital comes to control the processes of production without fully expropriating the direct producers from the means of production, and is free in certain conditions from the necessity to develop the productive forces. This suggests that commodity relations can be intensified in a particular social formation without any sustained development of the productive forces nor improvement in any living conditions of large segments of society. That this was so can be illustrated in the case of the Semai of Pahang.

#### COMMODITY RELATIONS AND THE DEGRADATION OF SEMAI SOCIETY: AN ATTEMPT AT ANALYSIS

For a long time, the economy of the Semai had been one where self-subsistence, autonomy, democracy and egalitarianism prevailed. Trade

with the wider economy, though never absent, was nevertheless infrequent and confined to satisfying the Semai's basic needs.

After the 1950s, however, two parties — namely the State and merchant capital — came to be interested in the Semai although for different reasons. For the state, control over the Semai's movements and activities was deemed essential in curbing the activities of the communist insurgents and, consequently, in ensuring the security of the nation. Merchant capital, on the other hand, was interested in the Semai largely because of the prospect of gains to be made from engaging in unequal exchange.

As it was, the natural economy of the Semai, which was based on the production of use values for subsistence, did not meet the preconditions needed by the state and merchant capital for their needs be met. In particular, the large subsistence base required in such a form of production, presented tactical difficulties for the state in its efforts to contain the insurgency. Merchant capital, on the other hand, required the production and free exchange of commodities in order for it to benefit from the Semai. As a result, measures were taken by both the state and merchant capital to transform the natural economy of the Semai into one which came to be increasingly characterized by the production of exchange values. That is, Semai production now took on the form of simple commodity production.

The process by which this change in the form of production was effected involved, to a large extent, the increasing monetization of many of the elements in the Semai's cycle of reproduction. This was brought about by the involvement of the Semai in cash-cropping and animal husbandry (a consequence of the JHEOA's policy of integration), and the need to find alternative means of subsistence in view of the decreasing subsistence base (a consequence of the policy of sedentarization).

Merchant capital, on the other hand, was also able to determine the form of production of the Semai by employing methods which were both subtle (e.g. exposure of the Semai to the modern consumerist culture) and not so subtle (e.g. the provision of "soft" loans). The effect of the efforts of both parties, nevertheless, was to have the Semai become increasingly involved in production for exchange.<sup>4</sup>

Semai society and economy then came to be constituted around commodity relations. This meant that Semai social relations have also changed. In particular, while it was solely between Semai individuals in the traditional economy, it is now between the Semai and the agents of the State and merchant capital.

Power relations too change with this shift in the relations of production. And because Semai production is no longer defined or controlled by them, a situation arises where Semai society is no longer autonomous but rather dependent on other actors. This, in fact, has been shown to result in Semai society being characterized by features of dependency and under-



development (Nicholas 1985). Briefly, this degradation in Semai society can be seen in:

1. The control and use of their land now being effectively under the jurisdiction of the state; and Semai displacement from resource-rich lands to marginal lands. The Semai, in fact, do not hold title to any land and at best are regarded as tenants-at-will, even in aboriginal reserves and official regroupment schemes.

2. The decline in the traditional means of livelihood (as a result of the reduction of their subsistence base) which led to increased dependence on the JHEOA for welfare support.

3. The inability of the Semai to withstand the impact of the encroachment of the materially more dominant and expansive society, thereby resulting in the deterioration of the indigenous religious and cultural values — as manifested in the decline of communal cooperation and economic redistribution.

4. The inability of the Semai to free themselves from the clutches of the agents of capital — particularly merchant capital; and their inability to circumvent existing marketing structures which result in the value of goods being determined by outsiders.

5. Discrimination in the access to facilities as are given to the other communities. Thus, the Semai are not provided with as much credit and marketing assistance as are, for example, the Malay smallholders — resulting in them being unable to participate aggressively in the exchange economy.

6. Isolation of the Semai from the rest of Malaysian society as promoted by the JHEOA in its capacity as the sole government agency responsible for all matters concerning the Semai, including those of education, health and agricultural development. The JHEOA, in fact, also influences the leadership of the Semai and is empowered to restrict interaction between the Semai and other Malaysians.

It is perhaps pertinent to note here that, despite overtly expressed objectives of “development” and “integration”, the JHEOA’s policy statements and their actual implementation are often contradictory. Essentially, as Rohini (1984: 29) notes, JHEOA policy places an independent subsistence-oriented, non-capitalist and non-competitive, culturally distinct group of people into a milieu of market dependency, competition, consumerism and alien values. The underlining assumption, it seems, is that the development of the Semai could be brought about by outside intervention limited only in its scope to education and technical aid.

There is therefore an urgent need, as far as the genuine progress of the Semai is concerned, to reject all attempts to quantify their development in narrow techno-economic terms. Instead, a holistic conception of development, one which places people at the focal point, needs to be introduced. Such development must ensure the promotion of human

dignity and the constant improvement of the well-being of the *entire* population. The basis for this should be the full participation of the population in the process of development and a fair distribution of the benefits (ICJ/CAP 1982:7). It should also be endogenous, need-oriented, and ecologically sound — with self-reliance and the collective responsibility of men and women emphasized.

In the context of such a framework, the aim for any development effort towards the Orang Asli should particularly be:

1. To secure the livelihood of the Orang Asli.
2. To renew the tradition of self-reliance.
3. To reduce dependency on the dominant economic system.
4. To provide a basis for development from within.
5. To expedite access to social power.

Towards this end, the following steps should be seen as necessary prerequisites if the Orang Asli are to achieve total development:

1. Reject the assumption that Western development models are universal.
2. Recognize that inappropriate programmes, even when well-intentioned, tend to reinforce rather than remedy patterns of dependency and underdevelopment.
3. Effect a shift from an outward-oriented dependent status to a self-centred and self-reliant process of decision-making — particularly in the nature and form of production.
4. Establish true co-operatives where capital can be centralized without expropriating the Orang Asli. The objective is to get to the level of production as in a capitalist society without creating a class of capitalists.
5. There must be an evolving conscientization — the process in which people, not as recipients but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform reality (Freire 1970; 1972). The Semai, as such, must be organized and made conscious of their rights, and must participate fully in determining their own destiny.

As such, it must be realized that genuine human development involves the total and full mobilization of a society. The task of changing the situations in which the thinking of individuals find expression cannot undertaken in an *ad hoc* piecemeal fashion. It has to be comprehensive and must invoke total political commitment. Short of a genuine political will to bring about the necessary social reforms for the restructuring of society, it is inconceivable that the Orang Asli, as a community, are likely to achieve development of a humanizing and holistic nature.

The model of development, or the branch of theory that it is part of, is of secondary importance. The development process must be seen as a continuing process of total change of people and society. It should be one of movement towards total structural change in areas of economic, social,

political and cultural structure. More importantly, development must be seen as essentially a human issue, a concern with the capacity of individuals to realize their inherent potential and to effectively to cope with the changing circumstances of their lives. The growth of goods and services or of the diffusion of the material products of other cultures cannot be regarded as development itself; at best, they are no more than necessary aspects of development. In this context, perhaps it would be fitting to conclude with a perceptive comment by Polanyi (1944: 157) made long before the study of development theory came into vogue:

Not economic exploitation, as often assumed, but the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim is the cause of the degradation. The economic process may, naturally, supply the vehicle for destruction, and almost invariably economic inferiority will make the weaker yield, but the immediate cause of his undoing is not for that reason economic; it lies in the lethal injury it embodied. The result is loss of self-respect and standards, whether the unit is a people or a class, whether the process springs from so-called "culture conflict" or from a change in the position of a class within the confines of a society (Polanyi 1944:157).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Where the form of production is that of simple commodity production, the needs of simple reproduction are satisfied, at least in part, through commodity relations: on the one side, production of commodities as means of exchange to acquire elements of necessary consumption; on the other side, the incorporation of commodities in the cycle of reproduction as items of productive consumption (e.g. tools, seeds) and individual consumption (e.g. food, clothing). While it appears that commodity relations are between things - as implied in the characteristic of exchangeability - they actually connect the labour of one individual with that of another (Bernstein 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Mode of production refers to those elements, activities and social relationships which are necessary to produce and reproduce real (material) life. The elements comprise the raw materials existing in nature, productive equipment and infrastructure, and human labour. Activities relate to the process of bringing these elements together in the production of goods and services and in the context of available technology, social division of labour and social tastes and patterns of demand. Social relationships on the other hand, define the social basis for co-ordinating the productive activities of the numerous individuals involved in the process. They determine the nature of the social structure and are maintained through political, legal and other means. These means are, in turn, related to the prevailing objectives of the society or at least of the leaders of the society at a particular historical epoch. Such objectives may not always be written out or consciously proclaimed and professed but can be gleaned from the nature of production and distribution in organizations and the social relations that require their functioning (Mabogunje 1980:42).

<sup>3</sup>For many years, most work in the field of economic anthropology centred around a single debate whose participants were labelled formalists and substantivists. Formalists, following the precepts of micro-economics, explained behaviour in terms of maximization of utility through the allocation of scarce resources to a set of ranked alternative ends. The response to technological innovation, for instance, was a field of interest. Substantivists, on the other hand, drew inspiration from institutional economics and viewed economics as means for societies to meet their material needs. They described the institutions that carried out this endeavour, placing emphasis on patterns of exchange and the use of money (Orlove 1986:85).

<sup>4</sup>The changes in Semai society, briefly outlined here, have been demonstrated and supported empirically in a study of two Semai settlements in Pahang (Nicholas 1985).

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