1. INTRODUCTION: THE WORLD, THE WEST, AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

In the history of development studies, the early 1950s were the age of innocence. To suit the mood of the period, the word ‘development’ should have been a neologism. As it was, an old word acquired a new meaning. This met the requirements of the occasion well enough. The new wine poured into the old bottle was as yet of unknown quality. To many it has since proven rather headier than they had first expected.

Inevitably, an effort was made to fill the definitional vacuum; equally inevitably, competition arose between schools of thought. One held, initially, that those things we had been good at during the days of enlightened colonial policy should, duly restyled, be made available to all newly independent nations. The other, more academic perhaps, said that there was occasion to rethink and perhaps retool in order to first identify and then meet the needs of development. In retrospect, the latter was largely right and the former could deliver some goods. As the debate unfolded, the positions changed somewhat and those desirous to ‘offer what we are good at’ confronted those eager ‘to meet actual needs’.

What initially remained obscure was that the two standpoints shared a common feature: the tacit presupposition that it was our Western knowhow that was to be diffused and applied in meeting development needs identified, ‘of course’, by ourselves or our disciples. If any trace of that early debate still remains, it relates to this assumption, or rather to its aftermath. Its true significance became clear only as it was challenged. This challenge has emerged gradually, in a curiously diffuse manner. In my opinion it constitutes the signal issue of twenty-five years of development studies. It is this issue, therefore, to which I propose to devote the bulk of this paper. If Third World development is a challenge to Western intellectuals, what should be their appropriate response?

Up to a point, it symbolizes decolonization as an episode of abolition and demolition. In asking whether Third World development is the business of
Western intellectuals, it rejects their tacit or open claim, dating back to the
days of enlightened colonial policy, that this was their privileged domain. In
enquiring further into the appropriateness of the response that they might
offer in the affirmative case — i.e. if Third World development were recognized
as their concern — the novel issue is raised of conditions or criteria for their in-
volvement. In short, they are shown their place.

At the same time the question is symptomatic of that which decolonization
is supposed to herald, namely, the constructive process of building One World
according to a new pattern, replacing the obsolete colonial-imperial one.1
Third World development is a recognized tributary of this process. The ques-
tion as it is phrased, implies that the involvement of Western intellectuals in
Third World development is not excluded in principle. In addition it seeks the
identification of a pertinent frame of reference. In short, its ultimate thrust is
positive, not negative.

Development — relevancy — intellectual effort — Western scholarship: these
are the four salient elements of this paper. Before we can see how they have
worked together, we need to see how they were thrown together in the first
place. This is the subject matter of the next section.

2. SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES — RELEVANCY

From the outset, development studies within the realm of the social sciences
have had to meet two requirements in addition to the customary academic
ones. Both follow from the particularities of the development situation. One is
that they be geared not mainly to theory but to policy making. This follows
from the rejection of the ivory tower idea of academic work and the demand
that at least part of academic effort be amenable to entirely practical use. The
other is the need to account, quite explicitly, for the specificity of any col-
lectivity, whether state, society or economy, with regard to which work is
done. This corresponds to the recognition that if the world be one, its com-
ponents are yet very much entities in their own right.

These two requirements may appear different and unrelated; but this is
deceptive. They share a basic trait in common: both are instances of the quest
for relevancy. At issue is the link between scholarly effort and the conduct of
public affairs — under circumstances that are experienced as critical.

In academia, the quest for relevancy could but appear as a battle cry. It is at
loggerheads with the accepted academic ideal, indeed claim, of universal
validity of knowledge. No knowledge is deemed worth having if its validity is
demonstrably restricted. Future historians are likely to agree with those now
advocating it, that the upsurge of the quest for relevancy was necessary. At the
present time, however, it is first and foremost problematic, both as a funda-
mental issue and as an acute impasse.