Peace, justice, love, and freedom are not private realities; they are not only internal attitudes. They are social realities, implying a historical liberation.

(Gutiérrez, 1988, p. 167)

Development as a preconception

Most Euro-American psychological theories are oriented around values concerning individual development, and most Euro-American economic theories are centered on material development. In these theories, culturally preferred ways of being are stationed as endpoints, with sequential stages of change laid out like stepping-stones on a path toward them. A lattice of implicit and critically unexamined cultural values structures developmental psychology (Kaplan, 1983a, 1983b). Its discourse often colludes with the language of “progress” that we have come to expect from psychology’s roots in the nineteenth century. Economic development planning has assumed that individuals want the same level of material infrastructure that exists in Euro-American urban environments.

Gustavo Esteva (1992), Mexican grassroots activist and self-described “deprofessionalized intellectual,” has traced the fate of the term “development”. The early use of the term “development” was to characterize a plant or animal reaching its natural, complete, or full-fledged form. Its meaning was extended between 1759 and 1859. “Development” began to be used to describe social and economic changes, carrying over the connotations from biology of development as growth, evolution, and maturation. “Development” and “evolution” were used interchangeably, as the former extended its sense from the attainment of the appropriate form to what was considered the perfect or ideal form. Now cultures could be judged and ranked according to the degree to which they met the standards of Euro-American ideals, as though the latter were God-given natural law. This discourse of “development” became foundational to rationalizations for colonialism. It is out of this soil
that Euro-American psychology sprang, with some of its theorists collapsing the so-called “primitive” thinking of indigenous peoples with the thought of children and schizophrenics (Werner, 1940).

Theories of psychological development, presented as biological facts of unfolding natural processes, were often complicit with the colonial agenda. They described the starting point as the kind of participation mystique taken to be common to diverse “primitive” peoples outside of Europe, and the ideal endpoint of development as forms of rationality and individualism lauded in Euro-American thought. The term “participation mystique” suggested that “primitive” peoples mistakenly think that nature is alive and related to them. It inferred they could not draw as clear a line as Europeans between their own bounded individual identity and the objective world around them. The efficient rationalism of scientific and industrial societies was lauded over supposedly inferior qualities used to describe the thought of indigenous societies: “presymbolic,” “affect laden,” “concrete,” and “superstitious.”

**Underdevelopment**

Esteva (1992) describes another use of the term “development” during the Cold War. After World War II the United States and the Soviet Union competed for the allegiance of nonaligned countries. In his inauguration speech in 1949, Truman announced a “program of development” to make “the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the progress of underdeveloped areas” (Truman, in Esteva, 1992, p. 6). This division of the world into those cultures to be admired and emulated, and those found to be inferior was all too familiar from the discourse of colonialism. Now development was promoted as a benign process of granting gifts from the “developed” to the “underdeveloped.” The yardstick was economic—gross national product—leaving out of the equation who might benefit from these transactions as well as all other varied measures of human well-being. Resistance to this “program of development” was often squelched by military action.

Esteva (2006b) remembers the personal impact Truman’s declaration had on him as a Mexican youth with both Spanish colonial and indigenous roots to his family:

I got underdevelopment when I was thirteen years old, when President Truman took office and coined the word “underdevelopment.” I was one of the two billion people who that very day became underdeveloped. We were not. We were a different kind of people and suddenly we all became underdeveloped. If you become underdeveloped, it’s a very humiliating condition. Very undignified condition. You cannot trust your nose. You need to trust the experts that will bring you to development. You cannot dream your dreams because they are already dreamt. That is the model to go.