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Controversies around a Universal Model

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Since Magellan's round-the-world voyage (1521) international issues have been embroiled in universalist claims whose basis and paradigms have been changed three times. In the 16th century the worldwide empires of Spain and Portugal were established in the name of 'Christ and Eternal Salvation'.[1] In the 19th century the colonial network of Britain and France was created in the name of 'Progress and Science', presented as the quintessence of civilization. In the mid 20th century new aspirations emerged with the prospect of the attainment of Happiness, which Jean-Baptiste Say measured by the quantity of goods consumed.[2] This consumerist quest was expressed in two successive variants: the first decreed that it should come about through state voluntarism, the later one used the market as the non-partisan arbitrating force. But whether it was the state's power to stimulate or the market's guiding forces, this was a debate that related to the method but not the basis of a consumerist happiness taken as a universalist model. Today the debate is about the basis, in the light of the model's social deficiencies and the technical limits of the resources available to continue it long-term. After Religion, Science and Consumerism, what might the new universalism be?

I. Consumerist universalism's shift in methodology

When the question of development was tackled by economists just after the Second World War, it was thought that the comfort of the most developed countries simply prefigured the future of the whole of humanity. The analysis adopted the perspective of a falling behind that had accumulated. But if falling behind was the diagnosis, the state's voluntarism was the prescribed cure.[3] However, the *international issue* immediately appeared as a decisive factor. Should integration into the world system be seen as an advantage favouring catching-up, or rather as a defect disturbing the process that it was intended to carry through?

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a) A universalism suspicious of the international realm

From the 1940s to the 1970s the dominant idea started from the principle that international trade had a negative effect on the development process. Naturally this was not the view of the industrialized countries, which were trying to reduce customs and tariff barriers within GATT, but that strengthened the conviction that trade only favoured the powerful. The newly independent countries absolutely had to protect themselves against these negative effects. The scientific foundation was based on the analysis of the Brazilian Raúl Prebisch: a trend towards deterioration of the terms of trade acted to the disadvantage of the poor countries producing raw materials and energy (Prebisch, 1964, 1984; Singer, 1984). Transactions were thought to take back with one hand (economic independence) what had been granted with the other (political independence).[4] In order to build a defence against this, economic strategies required inward-looking policies with customs and regulatory protections (Amin, 1986, 1988).

Implementing voluntarism relied on Keynesian schemas which made investment the basis for the growth mechanism with a multiplier effect. It is expressed in the famous Harrod-Domar model (Harrod, 1939; Domar, 1946). Catch-up could occur with investment provided there was protection against the negative effects of international trade. The theoretical debate was centred on two peripheral but crucial questions: how should the choice be made between the different types of investment to maximize the catch-up effect? How should the financial resources be found to match the level of projected investment?

The investment issue gave rise to many controversies. An array of options was on offer to governments: import substitution, winning foreign markets, industrializing industries, balanced investment, 'big push' . . . (Furtado, 1954; Hirschman, 1958; Hoselitz, 1965; Lewis, 1955; Meier and Seers, 1984; Meier and Stiglitz, 2001; Myrdal, 1957; Perroux, 1964; Rosenstein-Rodan, 1964). The – very heterodox – option of winning foreign markets was set aside in favour of experimenting with the other options. The issue of finance brought up a considerable problem. Growth rate had to be high for three reasons: 1) to exceed a demographic increase triggered by medical advance; 2) to encourage new behaviour more favourable to development; 3) to get the catch-up going. But a sustained growth rate implied large investments, and so considerable finance. This was contrary to the financial possibilities of poor countries, which were unable to create a strong trend to saving because their consumption consisted of essential needs. The issue could not be resolved simply by using their own resources (Nurkse, 1953). Government taxes on rural producers by squeezing farm-gate prices, or on mining or energy concerns by recovering royalties, were not enough.[5] Foreign help became essential in the form of direct investment or loans and grants. The former departed from an orthodox analysis, since it involved the intervention of foreign operators. The latter made it possible to retain control of choices by imposing the state's oversight.

The oil crises raised a question over this intellectual architecture. They revealed that raw material prices were not fated to deteriorate. The rise in the oil price triggered financial euphoria, with huge quantities of liquidity available on the international market. Large companies were able to win import substitution markets; poor countries had money at their disposal with the prospect of being solvent regardless of the strictly accounted result of a project, since the 'foreseeable' rise in commodity prices became the guarantee of subsequent repayments; the oil-producing countries holding this capital found investment opportunities via the Western financial system.[6] The three partners found their interests satisfied, but this analytical consensus led to unwise financial commitments. The collapse in raw material prices in the early 1980s suddenly left states insolvent and at the mercy of their creditors. Governments that lost their economic independence had to submit to structural adjustment plans. Deterioration of the terms of trade had no more long-term consistency than a revaluation. Back to square one.

b) An unchanged universalism with an international basis

The limits of previous policies, the financial crash resulting from the debt crisis and the dazzling success of the south-east Asian 'tigers' led to a revised analysis.[7] It was no longer the voluntarism of an all-knowing state that dominated but the laws of the market, freedom for initiative and international openness. These factors became the mode of access to an unchanged consumerist universalism. Combined with advances in transport (widespread use of containers), technological changes in communications (NTIC) and the unexpected event of the collapse of the Soviet system, the market moved to globalization and brushed over the Third World's analytical specificities.[8] It was the 'end of History', as Francis Fukuyama announced (1992), or the definition of a 'flat earth', as Thomas Friedman told us (2006).

Henceforth analytical theories rested on a new basis inspired by Solow's analyses (1957). Investment was no longer the central element of growth and development but technical progress. It was necessary to encourage everything that could facilitate its spread (education, research, infrastructure . . .) and stop concentrating simply on committing productive investment. These prescriptions were combined with an apparatus that encouraged operators' mobility within an open market where the elimination of customs barriers and regulatory obstacles facilitated the accompanying dissemination of technical advances (Baumol, 1986). The whole idea had an undeniable intellectual coherence and resulted in globalization.

However, a controversy quickly[9] erupted as to the advantages and limits of this spatial reorganization. It was no longer about switching method but radically rethinking the consumerist paradigm and its universalist basis.

II. The search for a new universal paradigm

The challenge started from a realization: the market could not absorb the social consequences of the economic changes. The analysis covered four areas: ethics, equity, governance and identity. There was a total mismatch between objectives and consideration of resources available and the impact of production technologies on the environment.

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a) A social maladjustment in four domains

In the early years of the new century the results of globalization were winning fulsome praise whereas other aspects were exposing it to public condemnation (Negreponti-Delivanis, 2002). In fact hundreds of millions of people in poor countries were all of a sudden reaching a Western-style standard of living. In a single generation whole strata of the Chinese, Indian or South East Asian population were propelled into that category. But at the same time another, significant section of the world's population is unable to satisfy its most basic needs. It remains enclosed, trapped inside that iron polygon consisting of malnutrition, unavailability of drinking water, insecurity for both people and belongings, a deplorable level of health care, almost non-existent access to education and a disposable income of under a dollar a day. These handicaps are more often than not cumulative and affect around 900–1200 million hapless people, a worldwide proportion of one person in six. And this scandal is especially intolerable because, thanks to the media, those people are no longer ignorant of the difference in the share of wealth and the gulf between ways of life.

Despite those brilliant successes the new system has genuine limits. It is true that the market produces unbiased prices that cause actors to adjust their behaviour and preferences.[10] This price mechanism is thought to be more objective than the one determined by the state. But in abstracting itself from the social context the virtues of the system as projected over the whole planet also reveal a mismatch in terms of *values*, *justice*, *management* and *identity*.

The first of these refers to the *ethical* context of international trade. It proposes moral standards which the market is not presumed to supply, since its sole parameters remain solvent demand and supply capacity. Its content can be illustrated by children working and corruption.

Children's work is part of the productive force of some emerging countries in order to satisfy supply of consumer goods to wealthy countries. Used by the latter in the 19th century, the arrangement now contravened the social norms they had achieved. Pressured by public opinion, northern hemisphere customers had to take care that their sub-contractors no longer included children working. In addition this was an obstacle to the spread of technical progress by depriving those young workers of education. This moral requirement gained the active and effective support of consumer groups accompanied by threats of boycott for products from businesses that did not comply with these demands. The businesses affected tried to protect themselves against any hostile campaigning by selecting partners carefully and advertising compliance with the ethical principle (dealers in carpets are an example).

Another illustrative instance relates to corruption. It is criticized from the point of view of both its moral effects and the market distortion it causes. Corruption involves executives of public and private companies when contracts are negotiated. Market transparency rules are no longer in place and price indicators do not reflect the real relationship between supply and demand. Contracts are no longer guaranteed by impartial bodies. Ethical requirements contribute to the proper working of the market, but this needs to be reinforced by a state regulation that had been thought to be ruled out.

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The second criterion refers to *equity*. This is not about promoting a Babeuf or Gracchus style equality, but introducing into trade a more balanced share-out of wealth. The working of international commerce contains blatant inequalities, particularly with regard to agricultural and craft workers (Stiglitz and Charlton, 2005; Díaz Pedregal, 2007). An attempt is therefore being made to correct the distribution produced by the market by improving the payment made to producers with the help of a bonus paid by the end consumer. Fair trade's actual share in international exchanges is still very marginal, but it is a reference point which enjoys a quite favourable opinion among consumers. Labels and official approvals have been introduced following the Havelaar example (Havelaar Report, 2003; European Report on Fair Trade, 2003). These correctives have less effect on the overall division between southern and northern hemispheres than on producers' effective resources for export goods.

The third point has to do with the management of public goods and deals with their *governance*. The laws of the market impose an objectivity rule on public decision-makers, a rule that gives priority in decisions to cost-effectiveness. This growing marketization of public goods gives rise to a first controversy, because public authorities justify their decisions by the market and not by social policy factors. They are now subject to rules that previously they were simply charged with operating. A section of public opinion does not wish the question of opening hospital beds or closing classes to be subject solely to considerations of economic cost-effectiveness.

But there is a second level of controversy. Issues can no longer be resolved within the context of national sovereignty, they require international cooperation. With globalization the list of topics has lengthened: bird flu, mad cow disease, pollution problems, management of fish stocks, food security, shortage of drinking water, climate change. Nation states are no longer in a position to regulate these issues independently.

The question of the legitimacy of this governance is a complex one. For a long time Power was personified by the Prince, as Machiavelli called him. Since the 16th century it has tended to dissociate itself from a person and be embodied in a principle and a territory. But the basis of that legitimacy remained divine. As Jean Bodin explained, the Prince enjoyed transcendence and, according to Michel Foucault (1994), benefited from a position of exteriority. The agricultural revolution in the 18th century in Europe overturned that legitimacy. By triggering a sudden rise in production it caused an unprecedented surplus which producers and Prince fought over, the former in order to consume, the latter in order to increase his customary cut (Albagli, 2001). The producers' victory gave their representatives control over the taxes and expenditure the Prince could enjoy, and established de facto a new power legitimacy: it now stemmed from the People gathered together in the Nation. The People set themselves up as the inalienable repository of national sovereignty. But the management of certain public goods raised a question-mark over the discretionary legitimacy of the People on an established territory. The demands of organized groups destroyed the principle of the state's absolute pre-eminence in favour of setting norms.

National representation by delegation was contested in two ways: internationally,

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which became the appropriate level for regulating some questions, and by the citizens, who demanded direct involvement in decision-making (Sen, 1998). This led to a weakening of the state, but we have seen that new needs for the state appeared too. The quest for a new legitimacy is an ongoing issue. Zaki Laïdi writes (2004, p. 43) that it depends on three key factors: mobilization of widely shared knowledge, individualistic values and communication techniques that make it possible to connect and network. He adds (p. 68): 'Thus operational sovereignty relies on the prior recognition that the state gives up its authority over society. It implies that the individual should become a direct contributor to defining that sovereignty, and so should no longer submit to it but begin to co-produce it. Sovereignty is no longer an authority principle that can be opposed to individuals.'

Finally the fourth question relates to the issue of *identity*. This has to do with the cultural aspects of the switch from a traditional society to a westernized way of life. Taking a consumerist approach tends to iron out any cultural specificities and standardize behaviour, tastes and fashions in relation to the same framework. This trend to worldwide uniformity is a much-coveted clash but also one that is feared. Societies that are too fragile to digest what modernity brings are fated to disappear. And that disappearance may feed the causes of a violent rejection, one of whose forms is terrorism. However, though new techniques serve to disseminate new behaviours, they are not over-determined in their functions (Mumford, 1963). This flat earth we are promised is not the only prospect (Friedman, 2006). The tools of globalization can be used precisely to enhance peculiarities of identity. Today it would seem possible to reappropriate modernity's techniques in order to give new strength to threatened cultures and so promote affirmation of diverse identity. This issue has become a fundamental one when we look at globalization.

This fourfold area of ethics, equity, governance and identity defines the major directions that are aiming to take control of an internationalization whose parameters seemed to be overly determined by economic factors alone. Nevertheless, and without going so far as to say that these correctives have a cosmetic role for the moment, they have till now had a limited influence on the world economy's strategic directions, but at the same time point up the break points in acceptance of the system.

b) Inevitable technical deadlock

But in addition to this critical approach, which is already affecting the basis of the consumerist paradigm, there is also an inevitable and radical technical deadlock. The considerations outlined above were attempting to give a social and moral dimension to the consumerism which could not come to pass for all groups of people. The criteria identified stressed the frustrations that could cause all kinds of disasters and conflicts. But the long-term existence of that consumerism is jeopardized by its particular technical characteristics, with the dual effect of 1) insufficient availability of natural resources to satisfy the spread of the model and 2) the fatal threat of repercussions in terms of natural biological balance.

Returning to the first point, there had already been warnings in the Club of

Rome's 1972 report indicating that the production model required to satisfy the consumerist model was not tenable. We would soon hit a depletion of resources. Though the report was widely discussed, once the debates died down the consumerist model continued even more enthusiastically to take over the planet. A few years later René Passet (1979) was putting economics back within the constraints of daily life. But now, with a population that has grown more than six-fold in two centuries, access to consumption affects an unprecedented number of individuals possessing quantities of goods that have never been equalled. If we restrict ourselves to the results over the last decades and project them forward to future years, the model comes to grief on a shortage of natural resources with which to perpetuate itself, even if a large section of the population were for ever excluded.

The shortage of energy resources alone is likely to raise a question-mark over the international structure of corporations, which disperse their various products over different sites throughout the globe. That can have come about only by taking advantage of low energy prices that made transport costs very marginal. It is becoming inevitable that fossil energy resources will run out. The corollary – rising prices of oil, gas and coal – is a future event our societies will be unable to avoid. Peaks in oil and gas production will be reached before the mid-century[11] and the peak in coal is likely to have a margin of a few decades given a constant level of consumption. It is true that exploiting oil shale gives some room for manoeuvre but it will shoot up in price. Rising transport costs are becoming an unavoidable fact of life. The cost of moving goods around, which today is almost negligible, will become deterrent for far-flung production units. Local trading relationships will regain their advantages, making smaller regions more coherent and probably offering the prospect of economic cost-effectiveness within the cultural blocs stigmatized by Samuel Huntington (2002). In the end globalization in its current form will have been merely a passing phase in the chain of economic history, with a life-span likely to be shorter than its first form (1860–1913), begun under Napoleon III and wrecked by the First World War.

The second point concerns technology's ability to modify the natural environment and the harm it does to it. This directly interferes with the principle that was adopted at the dawn of the industrial era: to dominate nature understood as an inexhaustible whole. Not only does the world reveal more immediate limits than we anticipated, but technological power and its impact on nature lead to irreparable damage and in the long term block the development scenario. Worse still, it is likely to endanger the very survival of the human race.

Hitherto the method of economic calculation had concentrated on production costs covered by factors of land, capital and labour. It was only late on that those three elements were integrated into the market (land ownership was still associated with the privilege of noble titles, trading in money was forbidden for theological reasons, and work depended on a social status generally acquired by birth). Once they were in the market and stripped of their social contingencies and religious taboos, economic calculation became possible. This occurred in the 18th century, so bringing forth modern economic science. But by reducing calculation to those elements alone, harmful effects on the environment were being ignored. No one was calculating deteriorating ecological balances or exhaustion of resources. Since techniques were getting increasingly powerful over larger and larger areas, a potentially dangerous bias was being introduced into the development model.[12] Today disturbances and damage are forcing us to rethink the economic system and the way it is evaluated in accounting terms.

How should we evaluate the cost of this damage and integrate it into operators' behaviour? Beyond the regulatory aspect, which penalizes those who break the law (merchant ships flushing out their tanks into the open sea, for example), a start has been made on a market solution with the creation of a pollution licence that companies can trade depending on their performance and standards gradually being introduced. The marketization of this fourth factor appears likely to revolutionize economic calculation. It would confirm the finite nature of the world and unlimited consumption, and would be part of a sustainable process.

Does wishing for 'sustainable' development mean than till now it has been seen only as precarious and provisional? Does the concept not contain a pointless redundancy? In fact it assumes a change of model rather than a restriction (Bourg & Rayssac 2006). This awareness gives rise to three types of positioning:

a) the first falls within a renunciation of the consumption model and an adoption of the down-sizing saviour (Latouche, 2001; Georgescu-Roegen, 2006). This radical trend stresses as a corollary the need to break with globalization;
b) the second suggests a change in habits aiming at an economical management of resources and promoting a new consumption model together with a more extensive relational and social component. This overturns the universalist paradigm based on an individualistic Happiness evaluated in consumer goods;
c) the third sees technical solutions meeting these new challenges. Use of new technologies will launch a fresh wave of growth, as was the case in the past when other technological break-points occurred.[13]

Rich countries seem reluctant to rethink their model radically, while the underprivileged countries are hardly inclined to give up on hopes that appeared bound to pull them out of poverty. So awareness does not yet lead to a clear strategy. What kinds of consumption and production will be able to let countries of both the southern and northern hemisphere continue their growth and spread it among their population? What fresh paradigm will form the new universalism? If these issues are not resolved, the questions raised by Jared Diamond (2006) – *How do Societies Decide whether They Disappear or Survive?* – would become searingly and tragically topical.

Conclusion

Development came to the fore first of all by opposing integration into international trade, which was deemed deceptive. Faced with mediocre results and stagnation of the countries that had rigorously applied the recommendations, governments changed their approach. Opening up to the outside world as a method of access to technical progress won out and was thought to promise much. From a context of national regulation overseen by the state there was a move to deregulation and the triumph of the market in globalization. But the prevailing model still prized Californian consumerism as the basic universal social quest.

That goal now turns out to be inaccessible for millions of poor people. The market conceals a social dimension which ethics, equity, governance and identity are attempting to reintroduce. It is no longer about rhetoric on the mode of access to the yearned for standard of living but the legitimacy of perpetuating the model. Downsizing? Recasting the paradigm? New technical advance? Consumerist universalism is faltering. Development is definitely not any more that projection the poor saw through the consumerism of the better-off. It can no longer keep its promises for three reasons. A significant section of the population has no chance of reaching the standard of living the media and politicians project as a common norm. That unlikely access is combined with a technical impossibility associated with inadequate resources. But let us assume the whole population finds the organizational means for an equitable division, that energy and mining resources satisfy consumerist needs: that result would in all likelihood be apocalyptic because it would lead to such ecological damage that it would jeopardize biological chains and threaten the very survival of the human race. The generalization of the Californian model to the whole of the planet's population seems not only socially unlikely and technically unrealistic, but furthermore ecologically undesirable. The search for an alternative development model is crucial. It will need to be technically sustainable, socially more equitable, culturally more diverse and politically more participative.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. See the division of the world overseen by Pope Alexander VI in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494).
2. See Jean-Baptiste Say's syllogism: 1) An individual's Happiness is proportional to the quantity of needs it can satisfy; 2) but the quantity of needs an individual can satisfy is itself proportional to the quantity of products they can have; 3) therefore an individual's Happiness is proportional to the quantity of products they can have (Platteau, 1978: 57).
3. Some Marxist-inspired analyses did not explain the gap by lagging behind but by the very process of development, which was assumed to suck the living strengths from the weakest nations while nourishing their own dynamism. This theory led to a questioning of development.
4. This negative approach to the effects of international trade diverged from David Ricardo's approach (2002) to the mutual interest of trade when its comparative advantages were made a speciality. It adopted the radically opposed viewpoint of John Stuart Mill (1994), who analysed the demand for raw materials and energy as a growing demand of development, and so with the effect of price hikes, whereas manufactured goods produced in increasing quantities would see their prices slashed by competition.
5. The high tax on the incomes of rural populations through minimization of their return from what was collected meant depriving them of any opportunity to consume and so leaving without an outlet production units that had been financed with great difficulty. Companies' under-production and the resulting deficit stalled the development process.
6. The grouping together of producers in a similar way to the OPEC countries was now to lead to control of markets by supply and no longer by demand.
7. Part of the success of the four Asian countries (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) is

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also explained by the fact that they were the only ones to have gone out to win Western and Japanese markets. If all the southern hemisphere countries had adopted that strategy this would certainly have meant saturation of Western markets.

8. This was illustrated especially by two statements: the first being that there was a market with its laws and that all countries, whether industrialized or poor, had to cope with the same reality; the second was the disappearance of the distinction between growth and development. There was no longer a Third World economy (Arrous 1999). Gilbert Rist (1996) reports the following anecdote: when he told an internationally known economics professor that he was interested in the economics of developing countries, the professor began commiserating with him and replied that he did not understand what he was talking about, since in his view all countries in the world, including his Swiss homeland, were developing countries.
9. The start of globalization has been set in 1990 just before the collapse of the Soviet system.
10. For Friedrich von Hayek (1982) the market is a system where information is exchanged which allows constant adjustments to be made in the flow of goods and services, adjustments which no entity can make based on the number of indicators in circulation. Globalization has accelerated the circulation of that information as well as increasing its volume.
11. There is debate among specialists. Some say we have already reached that peak in production as far as oil is concerned, that is, we are now consuming more oil than we are finding new reserves.
12. The accounting system even tends to show still higher growth because anti-pollution companies are busy combating the effects of the deterioration caused by industrial activity.
13. See the 50-year Kondratiev cycles, each of them connected with a technology.

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