

Review
“Deconstructing Human Development: From the
Washington Consensus to the 2030 Agenda”
by Juan Telleria¹

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In his book, Juan Telleria analyzes the UN human development approach based on 26 Human Development Reports (HDRs) from 1990 until 2019. He proceeds by means of deconstruction, which he bases primarily on the works of Derrida and Laclau. His critical ontological research examines the basic assumptions of the approach and its specific function in maintaining a status quo of post-Cold War development policy. In short, he is concerned with fundamental questions of what is meant by “development” and to which condition should the world society actually develop?

He begins with his analysis well before the Washington Consensus as named in the subtitle of the book. In doing so, Telleria traces the historical roots of the concept of human development back to the 19th and 20th century. His analysis reveals parallels, for example, between the work of Herbert Spencer, Talcott Parsons, Francis Fukuyama and the substantive orientation of the HDRs. These include aspects like an evolutionary global ethic, an identity boundary between the West and the Rest as well as between a liberal West and an archaic West, and a prioritization of universalism over particularism. In addition, the author elaborates a Western thinking of superiority in the UN development reports. He shows how European Enlightenment is glorified and the values of tolerance and liberty are attributed exclusively to this region and era.

Juan Telleria negotiates an understanding of “development” between an unattainable ideal and a supposedly homogeneous West as a real-existing standard. Following Derrida, he describes the main goal of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as transcendental signified, i.e. an unattainable, timeless goal that lies in an indefinite distant future; all other sub-goals are related to this one, from which they get their meaning. The author formulates one of his central theses of the book as follows: “If we do not assume that freedom is the essence of human beings and that it has intrinsic value, the human development framework makes no sense” (p. 93). The basic assumption is that within three decades no fundamental improvement of the human condition has been achieved and, moreover, there has been an increasing polarization of societies. Furthermore, it is up for debate that the fundamental problem with freedom is when it legitimizes the use of violence by the privileged against the marginalized.

His critique points out crucial aspects and, thus, challenges UNDP’s central area of work. First and foremost, he compares the contents of the reports with actual developments in society over the same period. He impressively deconstructs the fact that the politically motivated opening of labor markets and the focus on productivity have in no way led to a change toward more equality. Furthermore, he exposes how poverty was constructed in the 1990s reports as the driving force

for environmental damage and as the greatest threat to humanity. Although Telleria does not directly point to problem-causing actors in the geopolitical North, this blank space is obvious even without explicit mention. Regarding the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), he also highlights a crucial weakness. In these, the actors who cause global problems are largely omitted or negated. Moreover, global power asymmetries and a capitalist world economy are ignored as causes of “inequality, poverty and discrimination” (p. 123). In his critical view, UNDP (1) aims for freedom as the essence of human beings, (2) views development as something linear and primarily individual, (3) formulates so-called Western liberalism as an evolutionary goal, and (4) views current development goals under the premise of an antagonism of humanity/inhumanity. The latter is reflected, in particular, in the negation of problem-causing actors and practices as well as an unattainability of objectives.

Furthermore, his book reveals how the concept of human development was developed as an alternative to the growth paradigm of the Bretton Woods institutions and is particularly characterized by Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach. In this line, Telleria deconstructs human development as a linear evolutionary process, which has quantifying, comparing, and classifying effects, in particular by means of the Human Development Index (HDI). He also elaborates Sen’s critique of the HDI and describes how Sen positioned himself against the introduction of an indexing of human development. Moreover, Telleria recognizes in this approach a particular focus on the individual. The author draws a connection between the HDRs and the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who drew up a stratigraphic schema, i.e. a developmental process through various stages. Here he uses the figure of the Matryoshka dolls and shows for the first time his flair for metaphors, which the reader will encounter several more times in this book. He concludes by calling for a relational approach that identifies actors and achievable goals. This book initially joins the fundamental criticism of the concept of “development”. In the end, however, it remains uncertain if the author considers an alternative to “development” to be possible.

Juan Telleria has succeeded in writing a very readable book. Thus, it is difficult to find major points of criticism in his writing. One of the few points is that despite in-depth analysis, he occasionally lapses into generalizations. The human condition is always changing and, according to UNDP indicators, improvements can very well be named. However, his assumption of increasing inequalities and decreasing social mobility are well documented in various studies over the last three decades. In a similar manner, the stratigraphic schema and the capabilities approach become a purely individualistic foundation for the Human Development approach in his conclusions. In doing so, he neglects the social context, which both approaches also include and which he himself hints at in the book, but which he does not consider further during his analysis. Both Geertz and Sen do not describe purely individualistic approaches so that the reduction on it does not show the whole picture. Another peculiarity in this book is, in few cases, the use of exaggerations which sound more pathetic than precise. For example, this becomes evident in the following sentence:

The relentless and endless Western quest for a better world on earth is [...] the secular version of the worldly human struggle to become one with God – i.e., to purify the corrupted and particular nature of human beings and bring it to the realm of universal perfection and absoluteness (p. 55).

Apart from the fact that this one homogeneous West does not exist in the UN reports (UNDP works with terms like Western Europe, Eastern Europe, etc.), the concrete indicators for achieving human development are set far from perfect and absolute. Moreover, he speaks of an end to the antagonism of development/underdevelopment around the turn of the millennium. However, this cannot be assumed to date when, for example, developing countries or regions are still explicitly

addressed in 180 places in the HDR of 2019. Finally, his analysis tips in parts into a nihilistic critique, for instance when the fight against inequality becomes the insurmountable rock of Sisyphus. With this hopelessness, he expresses a fundamental criticism of “development”.

Overall, Juan Telleria makes a compact, profound, and stimulating contribution to the field of international development policy. In doing so, he also manages the balancing act between the technical terminology of political theory and a fluent reading impression. This book puts its fingers in the wounds of the HDRs. It is especially recommended in a teaching context and for further debate in the field. With this, the author joins the ranks of Stephen Browne, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, and Craig N. Murphy, all of whom have made essential academic contributions to the work of UNDP.

Notes

¹Telleria, Juan. 2020. *Deconstructing Human Development: From the Washington Consensus to the 2030 Agenda*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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