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The Modern Origins of Development: The British Civilizing Mission in Ireland

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My paper is a world-historical study of the modern origins of the concept and practice of ‘development’. The first task of my paper is to demonstrate that the conventional understanding and applications of ‘development’ serve to obfuscate the historical mechanisms implicit in it, of capital accumulation. The overall task of my paper is to reconstruct the social-historical origins of ‘development’ *qua* imperial expansion in the name of the English civilizing mission in Ireland. Ireland is both an exception in and a blueprint for the Western expansionist project. The only colony in the western world, and a Christian nation declared “savage” that needed to be civilized, Ireland was *orientalized* before the Orientalism of the Napoleonic conquest was articulated. With the 1570s invasion and occupation of Éire (Gaelic Ireland), ‘development’ was invented to civilize the “wilde Irish”, convert a subsistence of agriculture based on a common-field system to a commercial enterprise based on a new property regime, turn the indigenous pastoral populations into sedentary agricultural workers and transform Ireland into both market for English grains and a site for low cost production of commodities for export. The English civilizing project was underwritten by the invention of new forms of scientific knowledge, of modern mapping, planning and cartography, and modern agronomy.

It is conventionally understood that the Age of Development starts with Truman's 1949 inaugural speech, which introduced the Point Four program for international development to deliver what the speech termed the "underdeveloped" world from its supposed wretched condition and its (very real) fervor for revolutionary politics. The US made an explicit parallel between its continental colonizing project and the mission for international development. In his 1952 United Nations Day speech, the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Vernon Northrop noted that the Interior Department's origins in the continental expansion render the Interior's leadership in international development obvious: "Once it was the undeveloped West of the 1850s which constituted a primary reason for the establishment of this Department and conditioned its development...Now it is the underdeveloped areas of the free world of the 1950s" (Northrop, 1952).

However, the history of development is as long as the history of modernity, emerging during the early modern imperial expansion, and articulating modalities of nascent capitalist political economy, which began to transform the living world under the guise of a civilizing mission. Historically, the impetus for 'development' has been underwritten by the process of primitive accumulation, which is constituted through three ecohistorical moments: 1) transformation of historical land relations, 2) subjugation of the native population to various labor regimes through naturalization of class and racial relations, and 3) biophysical transformation of non-human nature.

The term 'development' itself lacks a clear definition. Raymond Williams noted that from the early modern era, the general meaning of the term 'development' thus pertained to the "certain ideas of the nature of economic change." The term 'development' connoted turning subsistence agriculture into a profitable land operation, and it was often interchanged with 'improvement'. It was usually used to convey a meaning of 'investing' in the land, especially the recently enclosed commons and "unused" land. At some point, it acquired connotations of 'making something better' and from the eighteenth century it came into use referring to the use of land for capitalist agriculture (Williams, 1983:102, 160-1).

'Development' has been an integral part of the mechanisms of modern imperialist expansion and consolidation of the capitalist mode of production. With the invasion of Ireland, successive waves of capitalist expansion were set in motion, revealing an extraordinary cohesion of mechanisms of accumulation across history and across geographical space. In my

paper, the Irish case is paradigmatic and serves to illustrate general trends and patterns of the expansion of the capitalist world-system: 1) the peak of the enclosure movement and dispossession of the native population of England, preceded invasions of Ireland, 2) colony-making through primitive accumulation and transformation of the indigenous relations to the land, making both land and labor into a commodity, 3) the onslaught was justified by the origin myth - the empire *returns* to the place of its origin, 4) the occupation was justified in terms of civilizational supremacy, and an inherent duty of the civilization to bring development to the supposedly barbarous, savage and uncivilized, by ordering society through various labor regimes and racialization, 5) the transformation of human-land relations generates resource frontiers, transforming the biophysical environment into a source of cheap raw materials, fuels and foods, that can be produced for the world market.

The land expropriation, proletarianization of the native population and turning human and non-human nature into profit were co-constituted with the modern forms of knowledge about the physical and social world. New ways of seeing and representing the world, through science, were fundamental to the subjugation of native societies. The imperial drive for exploitation generated notions of 'development', 'improvement' and 'progress' that were built into new forms of knowledge, which helped transform traditional relations of production

Thus, the English ideologically cast as 'development' the historically specific modality of the subjugation of native Irish and converted the subsistence agriculture into a commercial, market-oriented agriculture. Development propelled the invention and growth of modern scientific knowledge, as the term 'development' was co-constituted with the emergence of modern cartography and mapping of Ireland, denoting the imperative for the invading English to invest in military fortifications and other defense-related infrastructure. Cartography was growing as a military discipline and becoming increasingly fundamental to the English supervision of the insubordinate Irish. Hand in hand with mapping, planning and conquest, agricultural science emerged as a part of the imperial project of the subjugation of Ireland. Seventeenth-century English agronomists and intellectual nobility such as Francis Bacon, a member of the Council for the Virginia Company of London, and of the East India Company from 1618, viewed agriculture and commerce as inherently linked and mutually beneficial and central to England's own development and wealth, and urged planting crops as a counterinsurgency measure, a way to 'civilize' and subjugate native populations.

Questioning modernity and the “civilizing mission” of the Western world inevitably raises questions about the origins of seemingly benevolent concepts and practices. As this paper demonstrates, development, its origins and its uses, belong to the *longue durée* of modernity, and while it has been questioned in the late modern and post-modern era (e.g. by dependency theory, post-development school, etc.), there has been little to no insight into its constitutional role in imperialist expansion and its fundamental purpose of transformation of societies around the world into frontiers of capital accumulation.
