The study of institutions and the paradoxical situation of contemporary development theory

Preben Kaarsholm

Contemporary attempts at theorizing about social development generally and Third World development more specifically face the following paradox: On the one hand, a sense of epochal change seems overwhelming - the great narratives and processes of global progess have come to an unheroic end, the project of modernity concluded neither triumphantly nor diastrously - we are entering a state of "post-history" in which notions of progress and development figure only as meaningless and confusing ideologies. The universalizing project of modernization is replaced by a seething pluralism of culturally defined differences, myriads of developments, retrogressions or petrifications, which point in all directions and have no causal or otherwise naturally meaningful relationship between them which would call for communication and interaction.

Any ambition to formulate an over-all theory of development and underdevelopment is frustrated by the obvious increase in the differentiation and disintegration of the Third World into prospering NIC countries and steadily deterioraring states of African impoverishment, into fortified systems of authoritarianism and new democracies, into a profusion of new nationalisms and sub-nationalisms, or into new divisions between modern and anti-modern, fundamentalist cultural sectors.

On the other hand, a sense of standing in the middle of an extraordinarily intense period of historical development and global change is equally inevitable. Spectacular instances are the speedy decline of the U. S. A. as the leading power within the capitalist world hegemony and the shifting of the centre of global economic energy from West to East, from Europe and North America to Japan and South East Asia. But perhaps even more so the abrupt disappearance of the "Second World", the continent of "actually existing" socialisms in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the triumph of capitalism and the world market over attempts at regulation and planification, and in its wake an obviously increasing homogenization of global relations and conditions for communication and exchange.

As far as the Third World is concerned, the implications of this process of dramatic historical change are ambivalent: Firstly, the new universalism is shared inasmuch as the democracy movements of Eastern Europe have their replicas from China to Zaïre. But secondly, the apparent triumph of world capitalism and neo-liberalism may have as a consequence that the poorest countries in the Third World become drop-outs from the capitalist world order to a higher degree than ever before, and that aid and investment interests are transferred from South to East, into the promising neo-NIC economies of collapsed Eastern European "socialism". This may lead to a more radical gulf between development and underdevelopment than has ever been seen before - to the creation of global "society of the two-thirds", a Thatcherite world order in which the poorest and most needy are left to fend for themselves.

This paradoxical situation calls for a re-evaluation of the two great traditional paradigms of development theory - dependency and delinking theory on the one side, modernization theory on the other. To a certain extent, the two poles of the paradox coincide with the contrast between the two traditional paradigms, but at the same time it seems clear that neither of these in their "classical" - liberalist-reformist or Marxist - presentations are capable of providing an adequate framework for the theoretical understanding of ongoing developments.

More than ever before, the need seems to be for the working out of a critical or dialectical theory of modernization whose central focus is on the political and cultural institutions at international, national and local levels which make out the mediating instances between global economic conditions, the structuring of of power interests and the pursuit of popular aspirations. An approach whose central concern is to study the conflict or concurrence between efforts at modernizing and attempts at safekeeping or establishing forms of local autonomy and securing survival and reproduction in different types of Third World societies.

The study of the role institutions in development can be undertaken from two different, mutually supplementary points of departure, from above or from below. One approach would be to look at things from "above", so to speak, and analyze different forms of state and their possibilities of stimulating or impeding social development. The importance of such an approach is obvious if one takes into account, for example, how the crisis of government performance and of state legitimacy in some Third World societies, and most spectacularly in Africa, influences the possibilities of just coping with progressive deterioration of living conditions at all levels of society. African and other Third World states are weak, not only due to inner rot and corruption, but also because of their dependency on foreign agents, their increasing reduction to managers of the policies of international institutions. The pressures for structural adjustment on behalf of the World Bank and the IMF provide one illustration of this, but also more generally Third World states have to struggle desperately to coordinate and balance off the effects of the numerous short-term and unrelated projects with which they are blessed by foreign donors, and which make out an ever-growing porpotion of their econiomic activity. The political organization of states like Bangladesh or Tanzania tends to collapse as they are exposed to a new type of colonization, where nobody accepts over-all and long-term responsibility.

Further, the states of underdeveloped societies are weakened by the dissociation of political power and the interests of politicians from the needs and aspirations of the broader society. Powerholders tend to lose patience with the general speed of income generation in their hinterlands and to go it alone with the result of further inefficiency, private appropriation of public funds, the mushrooming of bureaucracies and gate-keeping positions, the perpetuation of position with the purpose of personal enrichment, and an increasing focus of government on control and domination rather than a maximum mobilization of resources.

To do full justice to this area of investigation within the field of institutions in development, it would be necessary to study the history of state institutions in the context of at least three different types of tradition: 1) One would have to build up a deeper perspective by mapping out what pre-colonial traditions of government and political institutionalization were dominant within the area in question, to understand how these structures were being developed and fought over, and what alternative ideas and visions of political organization were submerged in the process of a particular tradition becoming dominant. 2) Depending on the specific history of conquest and resistance of the particular area, a history of the governing institutions of colonial rule would have to be reconstructed in order to be able to understand transformations of tradition and the forceful innovations of control and administration which were introduced in the period preceding modern independence. 3) It would be necessary to study the history of the emergence of anti-colonial, nationalist and post-colonial political cultures in the societies in question and to trace the development of their ideas of the functions of government, their views on mobilization and on authoritarian rule, their definitions of the scope of democracy.

But it would be of equal importance to understand also the emergence of institutional structures from below, from the point of view, not of the state, but of civil society, of individual citizens, ordinary men and women. What are the institutional forms that take over when the scope and possibilities of state intervention are restricted, when the state "retreats" or collapses, or when it comes to be felt like an enemy or a threat? What are the modes of local organization in which people seek refuge when they are under pressure from outside interference or from the initiatives and policies of foreign agencies? The market in itself would seem to provide one such basic institutional mechanism which people look towards for preservation, the possiblity of running away from control and interference, crossing and disregarding state borders, and trying to establish autonomous networks of uninhibited and "fair" economic interaction. But other types of political counter-institutionalization would be much more cultural and elaborate - movements of ethnic or religious revival would provide one instance of this, and others could be found in the organization in the local, urban or rual, context of self-defending or aspiring groups around gender or generational criteria.

From there, one could move on to pose questions of the broader and longer-term political possibilities of these social movements and popular organizations. What perpectives are there, in a national or otherwise overeaching context, for the forms of institution, organization and participation which emerge in a local, civil-society context as a reaction to the deroute of state politics? We see cultural institutions taking on the functions of political institutions to an extent where the differentation between the two fields becomes or meaningless to uphold. Again it seems that a historically informed point of view is indispensable - what traditions of authoritarianism or democracy can be appealed to in the emergence of a new movement or organization? How are traditions interpreted, manipulated or even invented in the construction of the new modes of political rhetoric and dialogue?

What exactly is it that comes to the fore when that national coordination of politics through state institutions breaks down? There has been a lot of romanticization in recent writings on social movements and civil society, a lot of recourse mythology and naive conceptualizations of political traditions and cultures. As in so many other ways, Africa seems to have suffered most - what is "authentic" in African political culture, apart from "ethnicity", is the principle of "consensus". Political parties and national institutions built around the structuring of disagreement have no place in Africa and would bring about disaster. Africa is ideally suited to the dominance of civil society institutions.

This is, of course, a brutal generalization and at the same time a hopelessly idyllic way of describing the scenario. One look at contemporary Mozambique and at the results of South African destablization in the form of exactly undercutting the scope and influence of the national government and forcing the the state to retreat from the countryside, would provide an instant antidote. In this case, the de-institutionalization of African political organization has brought about the transformation of large sectors of society into a pre-state condition of "tribal" warfare, controlled - if such a word is at all relevant - by roving bands led by warlords, robber barons, South African agents or disaffected and deserted FRELIMO soldiers. The political vision of RENAMO so far seems to be exactly a non-idyllic version of the dominance of civil society institutions.

But also more generally, de-institutionalization and the disintegration of a national sphere of state-oriented political discourse, seems more to be part of the problem facing African politics, rather than to provide any element of solution. This state of affairs, however, can be brought about by intervention from above as well as from below. The regressive dismantling of the differentiation between state and ruling party structures and funding in Zimbabwe, as well as the swamping of any local social movement or organizational intiative by party control contribute to the same effect. All efforts are put into the establishment of undisputed hegemonic domination and not into providing institutional frameworks for the articulation and possible reconciliation of differences in needs and interest. A third variation on the same theme, is the ambition of conservative politicians in the Republic of South Africa, recently given new impetus by the rising tide of local neo-nationalisms in the Soviet Union, to argue the case for a pseudo-federalist constitution, which would divide society into allegedly fundamentally different political cultures. This would establish a "peaceful co-existence" of "European" and "African" institutions and traditions as an alternative to the building of common democratic institutions, for the functioning of which political parties at a national level would be indispensable, no matter whether they be based on ethnicity or more sociogically defined interests.

There is another aspect which seems important in the discussion of the state and civil society in the context of developing countries. It is not enough to look at ruling institutions and the dominant political culture - counter-institutions and traditions for articulating opposition must also be taken into account. This implies further that it would be insufficient to look at relations of power and opposition in purely quantitative terms of measu-

ring force and influence - the cultural aspect of institution analysis is indispensable also because it is necessary to investigate the qualititative dimensions of political debate, legitimation and opposition.

If again we take post-independence Zimbabwe as our example, it is obvious that no matter how the objective distribution of power and powerlessness has been developed since 1980, the quality of political discourse and debate has moved towards higher levels of sophistication and awareness of real issues. Where the debates immediately after independence were focussed on a pseudo-opposition between variations of the uniform, broad nationalism which had been the ideology of the liberation struggle, the central issues have increasingly become those of constitutional reform, one-party rule or multi-party democracy - issues that are felt to be urgent problems in everyday life, not just for a limited urban elite of students and trade unionists, but also - according to a study of the April 1990 election which is currently being undertaken by Jonathan Moyo, Luke Mhlaba and a group of researchers from the University of Zimbabwe - for people in the countryside.

In this way, democracy has begun "to make sense" in a new and different way for the majority of the population which for a long period of settler domination, anti-colonial struggle and post-independence civil war were subdued and later caught in a terrorizing cross-fire and consequently provided a mute and willing base of legitimation for "traditional" consensualism and authoritarian politics. In order to be able to understand such a change in the preconditions for mobilization and participation, it would be necessary to look closely at how the very language of politics has been developing, and to study the emergence of institutional forms which are not necessarily political in an explicit way, but provide opportunities for new types of self-understanding, critical articulation and uninhibited communication.

The disintegration of old patterns of family relationships, changes in the access to education, in curricula and methods of teaching, struggles around the form and contents of mass media, the creation of new types of musical and theatrical expression, the availability of new life styles and role models have all contributed to a new climate, to a change in the cosmology of politics, inside which agendas for mobilization or demobilization must be seen to make sense. The very genres of cultural discourse which are available to people as vehicles for expression and communication are institutions in their own right. The modes of articulation they offer are in themselves indicators of the possible directions for development.

References

Björn Hettne: *Development Theory and the Three Worlds*, Longman, Harlow 1990.

Preben Kaarsholm: 'The Development of Culture and the Contradictions of Modernization in the Third World: The Case of Zimbabwe',*The European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1990.

Preben Kaarsholm: 'Mental Colonisation or Catharsis? Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1990.

Cristobál Kay: *Latin American Development Theory*, Routledge, London 1989.

David Lehmann: *Democracy and Development in Latin America. Economics, Politics and Religion in the Postwar Period*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1990.

Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph: *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1969.