

An Argument Against Esteva and the Anti-Development Position

The secular rise in agricultural productivity that began along with “development” in the 18th century, complemented by exponential growth in the transformative power of industry, have expanded human capabilities to a degree that would have seemed completely magical and super-natural if described to those who lived before it began. As a result of development, our earth, which was only able to support 750 million people in 1750 now supports over 6 billion. Regardless of the relative preponderance of misery and oppression then and now, the fact that the globe can entertain the joys, dreams and strivings of 5 billion additional human souls is a profound achievement. Moreover, on average today’s 6 billion suffer substantially less from the basic pain of morbidity and premature death than their 750 million forbearers. Looking only at the century just past, the Average citizen of today’s poor countries can expect to live 10 years longer than the average citizen of the world’s richest countries could expect to live a hundred years ago.¹ In addition, of course, the more privileged of today’s citizens enjoy possibilities for exercising their human capabilities undreamed of by even the grandest emperors in the past. No one wants wholesale abandonment of the changes wrought by 300 years of development.

The slate cannot simply be wiped clean back to 1750, or 1400 and, even if it could, only the most romantic adventurers would buy a ticket to the past. For most, “pre-modern” peasant life was a life filled with disease, drudgery, arbitrary and capricious oppression and early death...Critics can’t afford to forget that the extraordinary expansion of humankind’s capacity to transform the material world and its own circumstances of life has had positive consequences for ordinary people and that these effects have continued during the last half of the current century. The vast bulk of the benefits have, of course, accrued to the privileged, while the costs have been borne primarily by ordinary citizens (and future generations). Nonetheless, the mass of ordinary citizens have also seen benefits. Believing otherwise is not just romantic; it involves an arrogant assumption of “knowing what is best for others” no less monumental than that of the IMF.

The fruits of the conventional paradigm still extend beyond the simple accumulation of wealth. Even in the poor countries where the bulk of the world’s citizens live, the tripling of global GNP per capita in the last half of the 20th century (UNDP, 1999:25) has had positive effects for ordinary people. They can expect longer lives than their parents. Their children are less likely to die as babies than they were 50 or even 30 years ago. Ordinary citizens are more likely to have access to clean water and health care. While some may disparage the value of these gains, their beneficiaries will be loath to risk losing them.

¹ Roughly 55 vs 64 years; see Hertzman, 1999:22; HDR, 2000:160.