



Indigenizing Development

Much work has been done in this book so far to describe both indigenous and “non-indigenous” ideas of development. Since the vital element of indigenous development is a recognition of cultural difference, culture was centralized in development ideas. Using a transmodern perspective allowed us to admit that, although marginalized, the influence of indigenous peoples must have exerted some formational pressure on both enlightenment and development thought. We can expect, therefore, that there will be some congruencies between indigenous ideas of sustainable development and other streams of development thinking.

To my knowledge, there has not been any major attempt to search the annals of historical text to show the influence that the peoples marginalized by colonialism had on enlightenment thought. Although I have not begun that work here, my goal is to go some distance towards finishing it. Towards that end, I will examine the extent to which traditional development theories can be incorporated into contemporaneous indigenous thought. I am not attempting to do the opposite—to integrate bits of indigenous knowledge into mainstream theories. I will privilege the indigenous here. If mainstream development theory is incommensurate with indigenous ideas of sustainable development, the former will not be considered useful. In this chapter, I will use “indigenous thought” and “indigenous development” to describe the Andean, Maya, and Garifuna case studies discussed in this book. It is understood that these are just three of many different indigenous groups in Latin America and

the world. This language is used for descriptive expedience and is not intended to suggest that all indigenous groups share the same cosmology as those treated here.

CLASSICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMICS

The thinking of the classical political economists of late eighteenth-century Europe had striking similarities to current indigenous thought. This assertion holds especially true regarding the work of Adam Smith and J.S. Mill. Importantly, both of these political economists considered human tastes, values, and propensities—including those to engage in self-regarding individualistic market transactions—to be cultural constructions. These tendencies, especially for Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, were products of the social institution of capitalism and forced upon human actors by abject poverty and inequality. Out of poverty came a desperate need to attain the primal elements of life. Out of inequality came the need to show status through emulation. Similarly, Andean, Maya, and Garifuna thoughts often contain a fear that the global capitalist system is creating competitive consumers out of indigenous subjects. They also insist that it is in their relationships with others that human subjects gain their tastes and values.

In this sense, a primal compulsion of the human in both traditions is to build a system of beliefs through communication. The prime impulse, in other words, is not narrow personal gain, but communicative world-building and other-regarding behaviour. This is abundantly apparent in the Maya, Andean indigenous, and Garifuna assertion that the division between community and individual is a false one, and repeated descriptions of the ways in which human wants and needs are cultural products. Similarly, Smith makes a clear assertion in *The Wealth of Nations* that the apparently natural self-interested action of humans in a market society is likely the result of being embedded in such a society and not a natural propensity at all. Mill similarly suggests that a time may come that systemic change will lead to more communitarian behaviour in formerly competitive societies. Smith went even further in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759/1790) to suggest that it was the ethical other-regarding “inhabitant of the breast” that was the final arbiter of human action as opposed to hedonistic greed (III.I.46).

Classical political economists and indigenous thinkers share scepticism about the fairness of a capitalist system of production and distribution as well. This is obvious in the case of the latter. It is often overlooked, however, that classical political economists shared this scepticism due to the inclusion of the labour theory of value in their theoretical framework. Smith's warnings regarding class divisions in capitalist societies were much more extreme than those found in the work of Mill or Ricardo, but an inherent tension between landed, capitalist, and labouring classes is common to all, as are warnings about tendencies of capitalist classes to accumulate disproportionate economic and political power. For Smith, this tendency was enough to threaten the continuance of democracy itself, as the capitalist class may attempt to force its favoured policies through government at the expense of the well-being of society at large.

Important differences do exist between Latin American indigenous thinking and that of the classical political economists, however. First, the scepticism of the capitalist system is much more profound amongst the Maya, Andean indigenous, and Garifuna. This is not to diminish the substantial distrust Smith had of free markets, but the indigenous ideas discussed here treat the free market with fear and occasionally with cautious acceptance—but the acceptance appears only where the institution is to be governed substantially by democratic processes to ensure the market operates in the interest of social and environmental well-being.

A more fundamental difference exists regarding the propensity of the classical political economists to circumscribe the economy for the purpose of analysis. The classical political economists were guilty of the enlightenment habit of separating the knowable world into distinct parts. The most fundamental of these was the distinction of humans and nature. The latter was consistently characterized as a resource by the classical political economists, while nature is conceived as part of community in indigenous thought. The classical habit of demarcating the economy from culture is just as problematic. If there is a fundamental character to Andean indigenous, Maya, and Garifuna thought, it is that all aspects of humanity, nature, and culture constitute a single system and cannot be abstractly separated.

The nature/human/culture distinction is not the only problematic classical demarcation in relation to indigenous thought. Although Smith and Mill, for example, insisted that moral philosophy must be considered in addition to economic analysis—and Smith even believed that the economic analysis of *The Wealth* was to be subordinate to his more

encompassing work in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—classical political economists tended to hold these spheres separate in their analyses. This led, for example, to *The Wealth* being read at the expense of *Moral Sentiments* by the social scientists that would follow Smith. This, if we are to take Karl Polanyi at his word, contributed very much to the creation of an economic society.

This economic society is very different from the society that is con-
 doned by the Maya, for example—one in which production, consump-
 tion, and exchange of goods are integrated into a cultural system typified
 by *Maya cosmovision*. The most basic premise of *Maya cosmovision* is that
 nature, culture, and the material world are one. This implies that a sphere
 of material production, distribution, and consumption cannot be artifi-
 cially severed from the other aspects of human existence. It also suggests
 that nature be viewed as more than simply a resource for production.
 Cultural sustainability is thus tied to environmental sustainability. An eco-
 nomic science that holds human wants as stable and refuses to situate
 them historically or culturally—let alone one which refuses the reciprocal
 relation between human and nature—cannot be thought to be consistent
 with indigenous development.

The neoclassical economics that was born of the marginalist revolution
 continued the trend of severing the economic from the cultural. In this
 move, economics was defined only as the study of exchange in markets
 and was therefore effectively disconnected from the political, the cultural,
 or the ethical considerations. Humans were considered to be atomistic
 and stable in their preferences—only interacting with one another through
 prices. Neoclassical policy implied that the more liberal markets are, the
 more efficient transactions will be, the more aggregate economic product
 will be produced. Development was taken to mean increased gross national
 product, and free markets were the means to achieve this.

It would be difficult to imagine a theory of development that is further
 from the indigenous—with its insistence on the cultural and natural
 embeddedness of all action, the centrality of politics, the malleability of
 preferences, the broad definition of development to include non-economic
 factors, and scepticism of the efficacy of markets. The Keynesian turn in
 neoclassical economics reduced the economists' blind faith in the perfect
 functioning of markets, and even introduced cultural considerations into
 conversations regarding policy. It did little to address the other issues that
 are central to indigenous thought, however, and, in Smithian fashion, held
 cultural considerations largely apart from economic ones.

The circumscription of an economic field of analysis from the social, cultural, and political milieu had another important implication for development thinking that was to follow. Development itself came to be characterized in terms of material and economic gain at the expense of interwoven social, ecological, political, and cultural considerations. This form of economic reductionism in development thought would remain a dominating characteristic in much of the thinking that followed classical political economy—from Marxism, to neoclassical economics, and modernization theory. It would not be until later cultural approaches to development—such as postcolonialism and post-development—emerged that this econocentric approach would be contested.

MARXIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

The relation between early Marxian political economy and indigenous thought is difficult to establish with perfect clarity. Given the vastness of Marxian interpretation and debate, it is difficult to make any claim regarding Marxian theory without being challenged by varying contradicting exceptions and alternative readings. It is clear, however, that indigenous thought finds it useful to recognize inherent tendencies towards labour exploitation and material inequality in a capitalist system. Those who control the means of production are assumed to be able to benefit unfairly in such a system and may use this power to produce ideology, which can change the values and beliefs of dominated classes and peoples. Furthermore, indigenous thought resembles that of Marxian/Leninist theories of imperialism, which note that wealthy capitalists in industrial nations have the means and incentives to manipulate government in less economically powerful areas of the world. This neocolonialism at the hands of oligopolistic transnational capital is one of the main concerns that has provoked a focus on political decentralization and relative autonomy for the Garifuna, Andean indigenous, and Maya.

We may, however, interpret early Marxian thought (arguably) to be materially reductionist, overly concerned with aggregate economic output at least at early stages of development, teleological in that it presumes society to advance in a number of predetermined steps to an ultimate state of modern development, and addicted to the enlightenment concepts of “real” human propensities that may be obscured by an ideology or a fetish and a natural world that exists only as a resource for production. Where (or rather if) Marxism ebbs towards these tendencies, it distances itself from indigenous thought.

Later iterations of the Marxian tradition are not so easily characterized in these terms, and therefore fall more in line with indigenous ideas and politics. Gramsci presented an early challenge to the Marxian assertion that the nature of ideas, of consciousness, of culture, is determined solely by the economic base. His assertion that the naturalized ideas which uphold an exploitative system can be challenged is similar to the core ideal that indigenous culture can challenge neoliberal development. Certainly, indigenous peoples' work to valorize indigenous thought vis-à-vis Western capitalist hegemony is reminiscent of a Gramscian battle of ideational position.

Gramscian thought, however, maintains the Marxian presumption that consciousness can be somehow "false." Correspondingly, members of a society are presumed to be misled by capitalist-produced propaganda which prevents them from seeing the true nature of their exploitation. The goal of a Gramscian countermovement would be to expose that the relations of production are working in the interest of a capitalist class at the expense of others and to thereby prompt revolutionary change. Indigenous activists, however, are careful to depict consumer culture, for example, not so much as a false belief system, but as a system of beliefs that has been adopted amidst profound material, political, and cultural power imbalances. As much as there is a large distaste for capitalism and consumer culture among Maya activists, for example, the main problem is not seen to be the nature of this cultural form, but the material and discursive inequality out of which it has been constructed.

The goal of indigenous development is more to institute a thorough discursive democracy than to expose the "true nature" of exploitation through challenging ideas. This distinction is actually quite important in that it disallows the imposition of a new "revolutionary" system that has been designed by radical intelligentsia in the "interest" of the common people. Instead, it promotes the creation of a decentralized sphere of politics and discursive production in which the culturally formed "interest" of the people is constantly, and democratically, renegotiated. There is no "true" economic plan, be it capitalist, socialist, or communist, to be designed by left-leaning technocrats and imposed with the goal of ending exploitation. There is only democracy and participation. Any system, plan, or policy devised as a result of such a thoroughly decentralized democratic process would be thought to be good in an ethical sense, not because of its technical, productive, or even redistributive merits, but because of the extent of the democratic processes from which it emerged.

We might carefully infer here a similarity with the work of Habermas (1989) regarding communicative ethics within discursive democracy. Indeed, one Maya field technician at *El Centro* mentioned an affinity with the European theorist's work to me in correspondence. Although Habermasian ideas stem from Marxian political economy, their focus on intersubjectivity and the socially constructed nature of human identity situate them more closely with the tradition of cultural political economy, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

SOCIOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS

Just as with the Marxian tradition, indigenous thought can only be precariously aligned with that of the early sociologists. Neoclassical economists tend to assume that humans have a natural need to increase consumption. Marx argued that this need was not natural, but the result of the materiality of the capitalist social relations of production in which the human subject is embedded. The early sociologists (excluding Marx himself) challenged both of these presumptions by questioning if humans are endowed with any pre-social propensities at all, while arguing that wants and values were produced in the cultural realm and that this had force independent of the material.

This brings early sociologists close to indigenous alternative theories in many respects. Even when arguments of indigenous groups verge on an essentialism which claims indigenous peoples to be closer to nature, for example, this depiction is based on cultural traits, not biological ones. This mirrors Durkheim's claims of human nature being formed from "without," and that the fundamental tendency in humans is not to search for personal gain, but to build communicative relationships with other humans in order to order and make sense of the world.

Cultures are presumed to change in both modes of thought. However, Durkheimian cultural change is prompted by increased population density, as humans engage with an ever more successful "struggle against nature" (1893/1997, p. 38). There is an inevitable directionality in Durkheim's cultural change—towards the individualism and division of labour inherent to *organic society*. This type of depiction remained current through Weberian sociology where Western-style development was presumed to represent the highest yet achieved state of human social evolution and individualistic, entrepreneurial, forward-thinking cultural subjects—the necessary constituents of this social system. As opposed to

valorizing indigenous culture, this type of thought tended to demean it and even blame it for underdevelopment. Cultural change towards indigenous values, on the other hand, is seen as positive for Andean, Maya, and Garifuna thinkers. Otherwise stated, indigenous “rationality” is a culturally situated characteristic, but one that necessitates the freedom of subjects from being dominated materially or culturally. The imposition of European-style “rational” thought would be seen as one such domination. Therefore, the imposition of development programmes and thought based in modernization theory would be perceived as a form of domination, and not rational from an indigenous perspective, and therefore as the opposite of development.

This is not necessarily the case for the early economic sociology (or old institutional economics) of Veblen, Commons, Duesenberry, and Polanyi. What seemed to economists as an insatiable appetite for goods and services inherent to human life was argued by the institutionalists to be the result of an innate cultural need to demonstrate belonging. The trajectory of this thinking is that in an unequal society, humans will act as if they are insatiable regarding consumption. In a situation of greater equality, however, this seeming natural propensity to consume will wane. If humans have an insatiable desire, it is for belonging, and perhaps status, within a social group. What this suggests is that beyond a minimal level of health and nutrition (and even this is arguable), there is no one state of human existence that can be called “developed” in the sense that total individual utility, or well-being, has transcended a predefined level. Economic growth amidst inequalities may, in fact, reduce aggregate sense of well-being. Economic growth in an environment of generalized equality may be unnecessary and irrelevant.

The similarity between this form of economic sociology and Latin American indigenous thought is notable. In both traditions, the goals of development policy should be a basic level of health and nutrition and generalized equality. This equality is thought to be symbolic and material in nature (since material commodities are taken to be symbolically valued in any case). Culturally, a developed society could take many forms. In both traditions, ideas have the power to shape society. Liberal economic theory, Polanyi (1944/2001) argued, worked to create market society, for example. Similarly, influxes of Western consumer culture, argue indigenous activists, are changing indigenous society fundamentally in Latin America. The (often inequitable) propagation of ideology and culture is linked with material power in both cases. But culture cannot be read

directly from the material relations of production in either. In fact, the latter can be challenged by culture and ideas in the conception of indigenous activists. Indigenous sustainable development thought, in this respect, resembles a Marxian–Gramscian tinged form of economic sociology.

The assertion of these similarities must not be taken as a claim that indigenous development thought is an unwitting form of old institutional economics, however. All human desire, it seems, was not thought to be culturally rooted for the institutionalists. Nurkse (1957) suggests that some Western products are “superior” in a non-social sense, for example, and that knowledge of these would provoke want due to a non-ideological evaluation of the merits of the good. Veblen insisted that human wants were, in fact, insatiable, but that competitive symbolic consumption simply amplified these wants. Similarly, Polanyi argues that humans have a natural inclination to protect themselves from the ravages of the market. This implies a pre-social, biologically imbued state of acceptable existence. The indigenous groups studied in this book tend to shy away from such biological depictions of human nature and centralize the cultural.

A more fundamental break exists regarding the relation between humans and nature. Perhaps victims of their times, the early institutional economists never really challenged the modern cultural disposition to depict human existence in terms of a struggle against nature. The incorporation of indigenous cosmology into development theory, however, lends itself naturally to the challenging of this presumption. There is no reason that such a challenge could not be mounted within an institutionalist framework, however, and Polanyi, for example, notes the environmental destruction that market society tends to cause. The transcendence of the human–nature divide, however, was never as clearly achieved by the institutionalists as it is by indigenous traditions. Thus, indigenous development is necessarily ecologically sustainable development in that it is bio-centric, containing an explicit goal to achieve balance within an extended community that includes nature.

MODERNIZATION THEORY

Unsurprisingly, indigenous thought often stands in direct opposition to post-WWII modernizationist theories of development. The modernizationist assertion that “traditional” cultures are to blame for underdevelopment clashes fundamentally with attempts to valorize indigenous culture. The groups studied in this book all insist that both democracy and

development require the continuity of a plurality of cultural forms as opposed to the institution of a singular form. The modernizationist insistence that any cultural form that fails to promote egoism and insatiability is somehow “not rational” is insulting to Maya, Andean, and Garifuna activists who seek to promote respect of indigenous and communitarian cultural forms. The *homo economicus*, that is the cultural goal of modernization theory, does not resonate with most indigenous cosmovisions.

Indigenous leaders tend also to be much more pessimistic about the ability of capitalism to be conducive to development than are modernization theorists. Maya organizers, for example, argue that capitalism requires self-interested consumers in order to exist, and they see this as a direct threat to their culture and well-being. Moreover, they argue, markets bring profound inequality and exploitation. Maya thinkers often hold equality as *the* end of development. Obviously, this makes unfettered markets more of a threat than an institutional necessity. It is important to note, however, that Maya development thinkers do not reject market-based transactions outright, but do advocate more extreme regulation that modernization theorists tend to endorse.

It must not be overlooked that indigenous theories of sustainable development do not reject the concept of development or progress. There is a sense within indigenous thought, as with modernization theory, that history involves continual cultural, technological, political, and social change. The difference lies in the fact that modernization posited an end point to such change—generally a stage of high mass consumption which is to occur within an institutional structure of Western liberal democracy and capitalism. Indigenous thought implies something quite different, however. It implies, *first*, that there is no predetermined economic, social, political, or cultural endpoint to the development process and, *second*, that historical change can only truly be labeled “development” where it occurs in an environment of material and discursive equality.

CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

The indigenous development ideas studied in this book share much with the critical political economy. With the early structuralists of this tradition, members of indigenous movements share a profound mistrust of free markets. In both traditions, unfettered markets are seen to work in the interest of the industrially powerful nations which can use their capital and established market power to benefit inordinately from trade, resulting in the

exploitation of labour of peripheral people and natural resources in peripheral areas for the benefit of consumers and capitalists in industrialized ones. But similarities end at this point. Many of the structuralists, particularly Myrdal (1968), shared with modernizationists the condemnation of traditional culture. Furthermore, the policy recommendation that emerged from structuralist theory was to centralize power in the hands of a strong developmentalist state which would design top-down programmes based in import substitution industrialization. Development is defined as a technical exercise in central management that has the ultimate goal of industrial economic growth and increasingly effective exploitation of natural and human resources. This is entirely incongruent with indigenous assertions, that there is more to development than industrial output, that nature is centrally important, and that political and economic decentralization are both means and ends of development processes.

Dependency theory provides a partial corrective for some of the shortcomings of structuralist vis-à-vis indigenous thought. The most important advancement in this regard was the dependency assertion that the persistent poverty of ethnic minorities was not the result of cultural pathologies but of structural marginalization and racism. The recognition that elites *within* less developed countries tended to benefit disproportionately from economic development and that they often monopolize political control is congruent with indigenous thought as well. There is a divergence as dependency theorists characterize underdevelopment as exclusion from the benefits of industrial modernity and economic growth, while environmental issues are rarely addressed.

Cultural analysis is relatively impoverished in dependency and world-systems approaches when compared with indigenous thought. First, alternative conceptions of the ends and means of development are not considered. And second, alternative cultural identities and practices tend to be simply read off of economic structures in dependency and world-systems theory—thought of as cultural responses to economic marginalization. To begin analysis from a position that is embedded in indigenous cosmivision would be illogical in the often materially reductionist tradition of dependency theory. Indigenous and dependency/world-systems theory do share a lamentation of loss of cultural diversity due to the homogenization that is wrought by Western consumer culture. It is not so much that cultural difference is valued in and of itself for dependency theorists, but rather that homogenization represents a forced incorporation into a consumer culture that impoverished peoples lack resources to

participate in properly—it is an invitation to exclusion. This dynamic is noted in indigenous thought as well, but the loss of cultural identity itself is accorded as more severe. According to indigenous ideas of development, a transformation to consumer culture is not simply a fetish that obscures the true nature of capitalist exploitation, but it represents a real loss in and of itself, and one that threatens environmental sustainability as well. Furthermore, to challenge this system of domination is largely thought to be a material process according to dependency theory and much world-systems theory, but indigenous theory contends that cultural alterity and resistance are at least of equal importance in this regard.

There is also a break between critical political economy approaches and indigenous thought regarding the materiality of culture. Much is presumed in dependency theory, for example, regarding the hard reality of material needs and the corresponding necessity of industrial production for development. Indigenous ideas of development, however, tend to privilege the cultural embeddedness of wants, values, and necessities. Beyond a minimal level of health, food, and shelter provided by material production, Maya, Andean, and Garifuna development thought questions that well-being is increased by economic output. This is especially true where increased material production may have adverse environmental or cultural impacts. Related to this, indigenous thought proceeds from an assumption that the separation of material and cultural realms is a false abstraction. Accordingly, the penchant in critical political economy to favour the material in analysis sits rather uncomfortably with indigenous thinkers.

POSTCOLONIALISM AND POST-DEVELOPMENT

It is difficult to deny the similarities between indigenous thought and that of early postcolonial theorists such as Fanon and Freire. Both traditions contain a presumption that human wants, values, and understandings about the world (cosmovisions) are produced communicatively via language. Culture, for both, creates what is to be defined as the “good life” as well as the means for attaining it. Modernity and Westernization are seen as forms of imperialism for indigenous activists and post-development thinkers alike. Both traditions note an associated culture of racism and ethnocentrism that underwrites discourses of development. This racism and cultural devaluation is not thought simply to be an ill because it limits opportunity, but because this symbolic violence is harmful in its own right.

The programmatic response at of Maya and Andean organizers has been similar to a Frierean pedagogy of liberation in that culture and ideas are accorded emancipatory power. Participatory learning is undertaken in which indigenous Guatemalans or Ecuadorians become aware of the legal support that exists to help them realize the promise of equality. Indigenous culture and institutions are valorized as well—in order to combat racism and to also disrupt the hegemony which holds Western lifestyle as the endpoint of human social development. Much of this work involves examination of indigenous cosmivision as it relates to nature in a way that is posed as superior to the way it is conceived in the Western tradition. This is undertaken with the purposeful intent of diminishing the superiority attributed to Western culture.

CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

To the extent that post-structural thought in its postcolonial and post-development varieties tends to privilege cultural difference to the point of succumbing to a relativist trap, indigenous ideas often differ from these traditions. Indigenous thought also recognizes the centrality of the material world to a greater degree than does much post-structural theory. Maya activists' assertions that a development plan that is formulated from *Maya cosmivision* is not possible at this time due to extreme material deprivation is telling in this regard. Garifuna leaders have made similar observations, and the politics around the *Yasuni-ITT* initiative underline the importance of economic resources to indigenous initiatives. One cannot imagine away malnutrition and hunger, and one will have little chance of formulating an alternative development imaginary while stricken by disease. Furthermore, access to land, capital, and resources is important to indigenous development not only because of the cultural relation to the land that is inherent indigenous cosmivision, but because it is a productive resource that provides for material sustenance and political power.

These considerations place indigenous thought within the ambit of cultural political economy (CPE). In both formulations, social subjects are formed through discourse, and the social and material world is only made intelligible through such discourse. This implies that human desires, cosmivisions, and related utility functions are cultural constructs. This does not imply, however, that a re-imagination of all things is possible at any time. Discourses, ideas, understandings, and desires have histories, and other discourses, ideas, understandings, and desires are built around these

histories. This understanding inserts a theory of cultural path-dependency into indigenous thought and CPE which serves to avoid the whimsical nature of more fickle forms of postmodern thought.

Cultures are not depicted as being stagnant or insular either in indigenous thought or in CPE, however. The groups studied in this book make no claims that indigenous culture today is identical to its pre-Columbian form. In the case of the Garifuna, there was no pre-Columbian form. Nor do they make an attempt to conceptually amputate indigeneity cleanly from modernity. Indigenous sustainable development ideals incorporate the concepts such as human rights, democracy, and development—ideas which more radical early post-development or anti-development theorists would have rejected as modernizationist imperialism. This is congruent with Dussel's (1980) understanding of "transmodernity" which suggests that such concepts were developed not only in European ivory towers but also with input from postcolonial struggles including indigenous movements. The fact that indigenous leaders were involved in the negotiation and design of international human rights instruments bolsters this claim, as does the continued work of Garifuna, Andean, and Maya leaders who utilize and attempt to reinforce the power of national and international human rights instruments.

There is some tension between CPE and indigenous thought regarding their respective understandings of the relationship between the material and the cultural. Dussel and Escobar, for example, imply that there is a material world which exists but that this is only made intelligible through culture. This maintains a nature–culture divide which does not resonate perfectly with indigenous cosmovision.

NEW CLASSICAL ECONOMICS

Just as was the case with the neoclassical forbearers of new classical economics, a more substantial divergence from indigenous thought would be difficult to imagine. Where new classical economists equate the free market with freedom and efficiency, indigenous development thinkers view it as an instrument of exploitation and domination as well as material and cultural imperialism. New classicalists believe markets to work for aggregate well-being, whereas indigenous ideas argue that markets tend only to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor and the environment.

In both indigenous thought and new classical economics, however, we do see a profound distrust of large-scale government bureaucracy and

central planning. In the case of Maya sustainable development, this mistrust comes from structuralist and dependency analyses that characterize central governments as being compromised by internal and external economic and political power. New classical economists tend to share this fear of co-optation but tend to root it a generalized animosity towards any system that seeks to interfere with the freedom of market transactions. As a result, respective solutions to this problem diverge significantly. Informed by involvement in the global indigenous rights movement and in congruence with CPE approaches, indigenous Maya, Andean, and Garifuna leaders prescribe radical decentralized pluricultural democracy which would direct economic activity—largely displacing central government control. New classical economists, however, tend to shun any non-market control of economic activity, favouring the complete institution of free and unfettered markets.

On a more basic level, the difference between indigenous thought and new classical economics is ontological. As a form of neoclassical economics, the new classical school begins analysis with *homo economicus*—a naturalized asocial economic actor with stable and insatiable wants, which is inhibited in its consumption only by resource-based constraints. In the indigenous thought addressed in this book, however, these wants are considered to be largely mutable and communicatively produced. Human beings, that is to say, are social beings, not atomistic individuals. This presumption renders the entirety of neoclassical analysis and related market advocacy illogical. To use a quantitative example, if people truly seek to increase their sense of social belonging and ability to manoeuvre in a socially constructed world, it is their relative income compared to other social actors that would determine individual well-being in terms of utility gains. This is the case, since social beings, as is argued by old institutional economists, tend to evaluate their own well-being in relative terms. Inequality could be therefore inefficient, despite generalized gains in material output. To the extent that markets produce inequality, then, they could be inefficient in the production of generalized social welfare. The culturally situated actors that are central to indigenous cosmology violate market principles because choices become based on non-price communication—people actually see and compare themselves with others, encouraging values to change.

A more qualitative example can be provided through a paraphrasing of cultural homogenization fears articulated by Maya members of *El Centro*. In a society that increasingly values Western clothing due to the simple

fact that it is increasingly normalized as a result of more common use, it does not matter to your individual well-being how many indigenous garments you can afford to purchase or produce. The increased adoption of Western clothing leads to the increased normalization of such practices, and, in turn, tastes change from indigenous clothing to Western clothing. Such taste changes occur, it should be noticed, because the good that is desired is not simply clothing, but social inclusion as well. Where Western garments are more expensive, a welfare loss will be felt due to indigenous inability to afford socially desirable garments. Indigenous peoples, in this scenario, would also feel a welfare loss due to the devaluation of their own path-dependent identities—which cannot be changed “from night until morning.” A programme that seeks to revalorize indigenous practices and counter Western cultural imperialism would be welfare increasing in this case. Such a programme of taste-changing does not make sense in a strict new classical framework.

NEW INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS

Although the examples given earlier were meant as interpretations of the logic being used by Maya members of *El Centro*, they are obviously closely aligned to old institutional economics. It is also possible that the new institutional economics (NIE) that has emerged out of the neoclassical school is resonant with indigenous thought. NIE does, after all, incorporate concepts such as market failure and social interaction into analysis. It seems, then, that there could be a resonance between indigenous thought and NIE in that they are both sceptical about markets and that they both base their theories, at least in part, on social, non-price, interactions between humans. NEI is a tricky beast to understand, however, and with a closer look, a significant rift appears between the two modes of thinking about development.

Gary Becker's (1976) four premises of economic method provide a good starting point for questioning the relationship between indigenous development thought and NIE. The first premise is that human agents always engage in utility maximizing behaviour. To a proponent of indigenous thought, this may be problematic first because of language which seems to describe human nature as inherently selfish. Exception might also be taken to this premise on the grounds that according to much indigenous cosmology, humans only exist as part of a universal whole which transcends the physical, cultural, and spiritual. This would make the separation of a “human” with an “interest” from the rest of the quotidian nonsensical.

However, this first premise translates roughly into *humans always do what they want to do unless otherwise coerced*. This may well be tautological, but without any delineation of wants or constraints, it seems a fairly benign, albeit liberal-tinged conceptual tool. Other than the noted invention of the individual as a physically separate entity, there is no necessary reason that this premise must clash with indigenous thought or old institutional economics for that matter. Furthermore, despite the basic indigenous belief that all things come from, and remain part of, an unnamable incomprehensible something, it is repeatedly asserted by indigenous leaders that the resultant human subjects have a degree of agency. The human agents described in this NIE premise, I believe, are therefore incorporable within an indigenous theoretical framework.

The second premise of NIE is that human agents are rational in that they choose one action over another by calculating, consciously or subconsciously, costs of each option and weighing them against benefits. In reality, this is not all that different from the first premise. It again implies that humans do what they would prefer to do within given economic constraints. It does not necessarily suggest that humans know for sure which actions will make them feel better, or that they understand all associated material or immaterial costs. Again, this premise does not address the question of where costs or constraints come from. There is no reason to assume that all of these could not be culturally generated. There is no necessary reason that this premise clashes with indigenous development theory.

The third premise of NIE is that markets are ubiquitous in all facets of human life. This is provocative in that it may be interpreted as a move to extend neoliberal hegemony by naturalizing the concept of markets. This alone would be enough to put an ill-taste in the mouths of many social scientists and likely members of indigenous movements as well. Even if we agree, however, that the discourse employed here may be problematic and then move to a closer analysis of the concept, we can see that this premise is again nothing more than a reassertion of the previous two. A market, after all, is nothing more than a metaphor used to characterize an act of exchange in which an agent seeks to get what it wants to get in the face of constraints. NEI asserts that people do what they want, but that every action has its costs. Markets are little more than the conceptual space in which this occurs.

Economists, to be sure, tend to depict markets as something real. But they are fundamentally nothing more than a way of describing price-based

interactions between humans, other humans, and their environment. For example, if I choose to pick you a flower, I am fulfilling my desire to do something nice for you in order to gain your appreciation. There are costs involved in this, however. I must exert energy in order to find a flower, pick it, and bring it to you. I have engaged in a cost–benefit analysis and engaged in a transaction in the market for your love. Costs are changed for others as well since I have just simultaneously increased demand for flowers and for your love in a market in which supplies might be presumed to be fixed. But really there is no market—markets are simply abstractions that are used to describe human behaviour and relationships in NIE. And the type of behaviour that is presumed is one in which people do the things that they would like to do, given economic constraints. Premises one, two, and three of NIE are conceptually identical.

The fourth and final premise of NIE is a claim that all human agents have a stable set of tastes (preferences), which are, in Becker’s (1976) words, “assumed not to change substantially over time, nor to be very different between wealthy and poor persons, or even between persons in different societies and cultures” (p. 5). This premise is not the same as the first three. And this premise, it would seem, is also entirely incommensurate with indigenous thought which presumes tastes beyond minimal needs for physical nutrients (or maybe for all needs) to be mutable cultural constructs.

Premise four is not necessarily incommensurable with indigenous thought, however. Its agreement depends, I would suggest, on the contents of the utility function—the set of unchangeable core wants that human agents prefer. To evaluate this commensurability, we are compelled to question if the indigenous thought examined in this book contains a presumption that there is a stable set of natural wants that are the same in every human. We see evidence in the testimony of Maya organizers of presumed wants for televisions, stereos, and a close-felt relationship with the natural environment, for example. But these things are also claimed to change—for better or for worse. We might think that a minimal level of health and nutrients would be desired universally. Indeed, it is suggested by some Maya thinkers at *El Centro* that for development to be actualized in accordance with indigenous culture, a minimal level of health and education is required.

But these same indigenous thinkers also lamented occasions when they noted that people were buying “equipment for their houses” such as televisions and stereos at times when they did not have enough to provide for

their basic health. It seems, then, that there is an observation that even health can be a mutable want, the satiation of which can be undermined by a desire for consumer durables, at least to a degree. Also related to this is the common assertion in literature about indigenous cosmovisions, that any division of material elements such as human bodies and natural resources from the cultural and spiritual leads to a false distinction. This again would make any claim that there exists a universal set of basic pre-cultural needs highly questionable, and the arbitrary designation of such needs correspondingly problematic.

We enter into a tricky area here in indigenous development theory, but tensions between claims of false distinction between cultural and material, and those that imply basic human needs to satiate things such as hunger and thirst, must be reconciled theoretically if we are to explore the commensurability of indigenous thought to the neoclassical method. There is a distinct danger of interpretive colonialism in the theorizing and exploration of this area of thought, however. Any attempt to understand and represent this tension must be undertaken with a degree of careful humility.

It would be prudent to start with the core claim of the indigenous cosmovision. If Heart of Heaven (in Maya cosmovision) is an unconceivable something out of which everything is constructed, then human consciousness, bodies, culture, and desires—physical and otherwise—are therefore part of this construction. There is no prefigured reason why this construction—our social and physical reality—must be of any particular form. This would imply that there is no reason why humans need to experience hunger. Or at least this may imply that our perception of health, hunger, and nutrition is relative to social experience.

We may be able to make the jump to insist that since human actors are part of the construction that emerges out of Heart of Heaven and that they presumably have a small bit of agency in its construction—just as they do with the construction of culture. This is congruent with claims of indigenous thinkers that humans have agency, to varying degrees, in the production of cultural schemata. We can then make a larger jump to suggest that physical human need such as hunger may be in some way at least partially imagined into existence by human belief systems and human consciousness. This makes sense when we remember to incorporate the assertion that culture and material existence are part of a single unitary thing. We would inhabit a perfect post-structuralist thought paradise here if we didn't have to admit a final claim that human consciousness is path-dependent—that we become addicted to our beliefs, that we expect to

experience the world as we have experienced it in the past, and so therefore we do. This is an admittedly indulgent interpretation of indigenous cosmovision. But it does serve to illustrate the commonly held refrain that human/nature/culture is one while allowing a space in which hunger, illness, and thirst can exist as well. Such phenomena are simply the physical manifestations of entrenched belief systems.

Put differently, this logic helps us to understand that while hunger, thirst, and ill-health are facts in Guatemala, Ecuador, and Honduras, whether they are physical or cultural facts is not important. When members of *El Centro* claim that most people in indigenous communities do not have enough food, water, health, or basic education to be able to assert their own development at this point, they are suggesting that a certain degree of materiality is required universally. When we incorporate this with the ideas of *Maya cosmovision*, however, we are forced to draw the conclusion that this materiality is, in fact, cultural. But indigenous thinkers argue that cultural belief systems are extremely resilient. We might interpret this as a result of self-reinforcing path-dependence of belief. The more a particular element of a cosmovision—a way of understanding the world—is used, the more real it becomes. The idea that humans are organic material beings which require food and water to survive may be interpreted as a physical fact, or as the oldest cultural assumption. If we conceive of cultural belief systems as path-dependent and if we agree with proponents of *Maya cosmovision* that any division between the cultural and material is only abstraction, then hunger, thirst, and ill-health are facts. What we conceive as hunger or thirst is both cultural and material because the categories of cultural and material seem functionally identical at this extremity of path-dependency.

A metaphysical excursion such as the one mentioned leads us into uncomfortable territory—especially for those such as I whose conceptual schemes are rooted in Western scientism. It is a necessary excursion for those who wish to explore deeply, and hopefully contribute to, a cultural political economy of international development that gives due respect to indigenous cosmovision. It is also necessary if such scholars and policy analysts are to enter into meaningful conversation with neoclassically trained economists regarding culture and its relation to development theory and policy. How do we begin this conversation? First, by mentioning parenthetically that the depiction of the relationship between the cultural and the material that resulted from an interpretation of indigenous cosmovision is commensurable with some of the most recent advancements

in both physical and social-scientific theory. I speak here of quantum physics and the complexity sciences. Second, we could begin this conversation by suggesting a way in which such ideas may be incorporated into neoclassical theory.

I would suggest beginning with Gary Becker's (1976) assertion that there is a universal set of human wants which exist across cultures and time—proposition number four of NIE as stated earlier. In light of the exploration earlier, we would be forced to deduce that the content of this universal preference set would be *cosmovision* according to indigenous development theory. At root, human beings need a way in which they can symbolically order their world in order to make that world comprehensible. This cosmovision is established through non-price communication. Such an assertion suggests a substantial transformation of neoclassical economics. It implies that the base impulse of human nature is to share information with other humans through non-price communication. New institutional economists tend to assume that non-price-based communication only occurs when markets fail, however. The aforementioned assertion turns this presumption on its head by implying that non-price communication is the prerequisite for the existence of markets in that it is how values, preferences, and the presumed natural order of things come into existence. This theoretical incorporation would transform new institutional economists essentially into old institutional economics, since values, beliefs, wants, desires, and ordering systems become socially established.

This need not imply that a cartoonish version of infinitely fickle post-modernity be integrated into economic analysis, however, since the concept of path-dependency must also be included (as, I would suggest, it is with any responsible theorization of post-modernity). This concept of path-dependency, as was discussed in Chap. 3, has two related variants in NIE. First, a human institution such as a cultural belief, law, or social norm may become more resilient with use, thus continuing to mediate human behaviour even at a time when that institution has become inefficient—in that it does not prescribe the most economically efficient behaviour possible. Second, a path-dependency may exist in tastes. The consumption of a good may provide information about it that makes consumption of the same good easier the next time. These two variants of path-dependency collude to suggest that we may rationally develop addictions to institutions and also to consuming certain goods.

The dual assumptions of cultural constructivism of wants and of path-dependency complicate the economic theory of human behaviour substantially. If we allow that the primal human want is for a cultural ordering system with which we may understand the world, it becomes evident that the satiation of this want must necessarily generate a secondary order of wants. Once the idea that humans are organic beings that need food to survive has been established, for example, the need for food would appear as a second-order want. A third order of wants might then appear regarding what objects are preferred as food. Normal Beckerian-style analysis might well be incorporated at this point in order to establish the reasons associated with particular third-order choices.

Due to path-dependency, the more these wants are expressed through markets or otherwise, the more permanent—the more real—they become. There is a feedback loop—or an endogeneity problem in econometric terms—in that the satiation of a want changes the intensity of that want in the future. If second- and third-order wants are based on first-order want, then the satiation of a third-order want could also be presumed to reinforce the stability of the wants that preceded it.

The implications of this for economic theory, empirical research, and policy would obviously be substantial. First, as noted earlier, the relationship between the desires that inhabit the utility function and the satiation of these wants would be presumed to be nonlinear. That is to say there would be feedback loops as the satiation impacts future desire in complex ways. Second, due to path-dependency, some wants may be perceived as more stable than others. Need for food and water would be, as discussed, the most stable of these wants. However, wants for the maintenance of a particular cultural heritage or of a particular type of relationship with the natural world may also be quite intense. One might find that a third order of wants is generated from these second-order ones—perhaps for particular clothing, political institutions, musical expressions, or foods. As we move away from the first order of want for cosmovision, the related desire might be presumed to diminish in its stability. Probabilities may even be attached to such propensities if they can be realistically approximated.

It is not the place of this current work to designate such a theory in its completeness. Such work should be done, I would suggest, through collaboration with new institutional economists, complexity theorists, and communication theorists. It should be noted, however, that extensive empirical work would be required in order to map the nebulous structure of wants and associated stabilities, as well as costs and constraints. The

evolving nature of such wants would suggest a repeated engagement with empirical work amidst constant analysis and policy output on the part of economists. At the very least, this would require a meaningful engagement between anthropologists, sociologists, and economists who are doing empirical work.

Given the volume of ever-changing information required for modeling, analysis, and policy design in such a scenario, it is likely that such levels of data collection and planning would become unwieldy, however. The new classical fallback point would be to not interfere with markets. But new institutional economics—the mainstream of current development economics—presumes that markets at least occasionally fail, resultantly requiring intervention. Furthermore, while indigenous thought suggests that non-price communication is fundamental to human existence, non-price communication is indicative of market failure to new institutional economists, as is path-dependency.

The theoretical implication of this in NIE terms is that markets always fail, although we may be able to assume the existence of a workable approximation of markets at times where utility function seems reasonably stable. This implies that a web of measurements must be made and policy interventions devised in order for an economist to steer the social world to a point at which resources are efficiently utilized in the satiation of wants, or even to discern if it is reasonable to consider utility functions to be fixed for the sake of analyzing the problem at hand. This is indicative of a high degree of central planning and technocratic control.

The extent of design and technocratic intervention that would be implied for an economist to direct development processes under assumptions commensurate with indigenous thought would not be received well in more than one camp. Neoclassical economists of the more liberal persuasion could easily revisit Hayek's (1944) warnings about extreme levels of centralized planning leading society down a "road to serfdom." Most cultural political economists could be expected to be similarly uncomfortable with such top-down management of development processes by Western trained technocrats.

A method of escape from such a quagmire is suggested from within indigenous development theory itself, however. A radical decentralization and democratization of policy and planning processes may ensure that decision-making power rests in the hands of those with most recent and pertinent information regarding their goals and constraints. The incorporation of indigenous cosmovision into new institutional economics, then,

is possible, but it would imply a programmatic response involving either a high—perhaps impossible—degree of central planning, *or* a thorough democratization of planning and political processes similar to that which is advocated by indigenous rights movements. I would suspect that most liberal-minded economists as well as cultural political economists would prefer the latter.

Such a commitment is already emerging from the murky waters of the capability approach. As was discussed in Chap. 3, much of the ambiguity of the approach is due to that fact that the conversation in that sphere is being undertaken as older ideas (ironically associated with new institutional economics) are being confronted by new ideas (ironically associated with old institutional economics). Much of the debate in this expansive field is between those such as Nussbaum (2007) and the older incarnation of Sen (1977), who presume the existence of a stable set of universal core functionings, and those such as Sen (1999, 2004), who don't. This distinction is fundamental since the former implies that development is a technocratic problem of devising plans to achieve predetermined needs, and the latter implies that development is a form of democracy in which both ends and means are continually negotiated. Sen seems to have resigned himself to the latter, and perhaps his prominence can act as a motivator for a move in the capabilities approach from NIE techniques to those that more closely resemble a neoclassical theory of development that is encapsulated within indigenous thought.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, resonances and discords between indigenous thought on sustainable development and numerous other theoretical traditions of development were discussed. Interesting congruencies with classical political economy, Marxian political economy, neoclassical economics, institutionalist economics (economic sociology), modernization theory, critical political economy, new classical economics, postcolonialism, and post-development were discussed. Profound differences between each of these schools and indigenous thought were also located. When the relationship between indigenous thought and cultural political economy was discussed, however, similarities seemed far more evident.

An attempt was then made to explore the possibility of incorporating indigenous cosmovision into new institutional economics—that is, into the newest variant of neoclassical economic approaches to development.

This was done by pushing each approach to its logical extremity and searching for areas of possible commensurability. The most realistic answer to the commensurability question in this case would be that the two theoretical frameworks are incompatible. To morph indigenous thinking to a degree that it becomes compatible with NIE would require the abandonment of the fundamental belief system that undergirds indigenous thought. That is, it would require the abandonment of the assertion that human institutions, desires, even costs and benefits are culturally constructed. It would also require the abandonment of a *Maya cosmovision*, which denies the separability of nature and culture, human and resource, actor and constraint. To bend NIE economics to suit indigenous cosmovision, on the other hand, would require the discipline's transformation into a nonlinear social science which ejects the presumption that life begins with markets. Where policy is concerned, such a theoretical incorporation would require either an extreme level of technocratic monitoring of society, or a substantial decentralization of political and economic power. The former would be distasteful to any neoclassical economist. The latter would be less so, I would guess, however, it may involve local decisions to embrace non-capitalist forms of collective economics. This may not sit well with many development economists. Such a conceptual bending of NIE seems unlikely. However, it should be noted that such terrain seems to be explored diligently by neoclassically trained economists who have embraced the capability approach, and also by heterodox behavioural and experimental economists.

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