Development of Underdevelopment or Underdevelopment of Development in China

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These comments are not by a China specialist but come from someone who has been concerned with world capitalist development and the development of underdevelopment within it. In the comments that follow, therefore, the evaluation of the content of Lippit's argument about China will largely be left to the China specialists; while here we will concentrate on the construction of the argument about the development of underdevelopment. To begin with, we may question whether the title Mr. Lippit chooses for his essay is even appropriate for the argument he constructs.

Mr. Lippit does well in examining the theses that are "more obscurantist than explanatory" (as he terms one of them, though the same term applies equally to the others), and he does more than well to reject them on grounds of their lack of scientific foundation. In their universal versions (and also their applications to other case studies) the Rostowian stage theory beginning with "traditional" society, the Parsonian (pseudo-Weberian) theory of pattern variables including family structure and culture, the Leibensteinian low- and Schultzian high-level equilibrium trap theory, and the Nurskian-Myrdalian vicious circles have all long since shown to be a-, indeed anti-, historical and therein already scientifically unacceptable as vehicles for the explanation of any social process and development (and non- or under-
development) [Frank, 1967, 1970]. They obscure more than they explain. Moreover, their common antihistorical obscurantism is no historical accident: all of them have been politically motivated to do ideological battle on one side, the right. Rostow subtitled Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (and he might more accurately have said "anti-") before he went on to be the hawkiest architect of escalation, including bombing the dikes, against Vietnam (Frank, 1967). Parsons sought "to expel Marxism from consideration as a sociology" (Gouldner, 1970: 189) and thought he had succeeded: "In sociology today, to be a Marxian . . . is not a tenable position" (Parsons 1967, 135). Through his emphasis on "human capital," Schultz sought to give ideological cover to (in Che Guevara's words) the "latrinization of Latin America" while he was Chairman of the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago, which has become world famous (or notorious) for his like-minded colleague, Milton Friedman, who is responsible for the ultrareactionary "monetarism" theory and "shock treatment" in Chile (Frank, 1974, 1976a). It is not correct and would not be fair to place Myrdal and his vicious circles in the same antiscientific and reactionary category with the other three. Myrdal's still ahistorical intent and function, instead, is more reformist, but still antirevolutionary (Frank, 1970). (One may wonder why Lippit does not also review other important unsatisfactory theories, such as Max Weber's study of world religions, including China, to confirm his thesis on "the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" and Barrington Moore's study of the "Origins of Totalitarianism and Democracy" through the analysis of agrarian systems.)

The application of these theories to the case of China by these theorists' disciples (intentional and explicit or otherwise, which is not meant to deny the historical scholarship of a Fairbank) necessarily carries these theories' universal original unscientific, antihistorical, and politically conservative or reactionary sins into the study of China. And this sinological application in a Western sinological age largely before Kissinger, Nixon and of course Zhou En-lai again opened the door, is not accidental
either, though it is paradoxical. For empirically, and therefore also theoretically, the Chinese Revolution and its historical development itself have disproved these obscurantist theories and have demonstrated that traditional family structure and circular equilibrium traps have not been the obstacles to Chinese development since—that is, because of—the Revolution and therefore still less the causes of Chinese underdevelopment before the Revolution. But precisely because of this Revolution, cold war containment policy long took refuge in obscurantist ostrichlike denials of its existence and significance in vain attempts to combat it by keeping not only the economic and diplomatic but also the scientific door shut. It was thus that the historical materialist political economic King of Denmark was excluded from the scientific study of Hamlet in China both for the past and for the present. Lippit does well to reject this scientific and political obscurantism and to reopen the door to the scientific study of China's past along with so many eminent colleagues in China and elsewhere.

Turning to Lippit's own much more fruitful attempt at analysis, we may question whether "The Development of Underdevelopment in China" is an appropriate title for what he says and intends to do. In Lippit's initial historical sketch and in some of his later analysis, China appears to be stable, with some decline until about 1500 and some recovery thereafter, and almost stagnant without significant historical development between about 1300 and 1800 or 1400 and 1900, using per capita agricultural product as an index. This interpretation comes perilously close to the thesis of mythical "traditional" society and stability, which Lippit rightly rejects in his discussion of theory. Indeed, the century-long vagueness or uncertainty at both the beginning and end of the period already render questionable the characterization in which neither development nor underdevelopment supposedly took place. But if there was not much of either, then why the title "development of underdevelopment"—unless it is intended to refer only to the most recent imperial and republican period, on which the analysis indeed concentrates. Moreover, this reading makes development and underdevelopment appear—as in the
obscurantist theories—merely comparative or relative. But as Lippit correctly points out, development and underdevelopment, and thus all the more so one of the other, also imply “a relationship of inequality” between China and other parts of the world. Lippit, however, makes no effort to investigate whether such a relationship existed and much less to examine any possible causes and consequences thereof for this half millennium before the nineteenth century. Indeed, Lippit hardly considers how China developed historically, and much less why it did so, before the most recent century and a half. We shall have to return to this question, and particularly to that of China’s relations with the outside world, in our discussion of world development below. But in summary so far, according to Lippit and contrary to his title, there is no development of underdevelopment in China before the nineteenth century.

Is there since, and if so, how and why? According to the reading of Chinese history by Lippit (and those he criticizes!), the internal dynamic—or more precisely the lack of it—of Chinese development and its domestic manifestations continued through the nineteenth century and half of the twentieth substantially as it had during the five centuries before. Indeed, “most decisively, China showed no signs of a vigorous industrial development policy prior to 1949.” In this major respect, then, right up to the final days of the Republic and Revolution, Lippit finds no “development of underdevelopment in China.”

However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lippit does see some unmistakable, important dependent development of underdevelopment of China through its external relations with the Western imperialist powers and Japan and their domestic effects, some far-reaching others supposedly not so much, within China itself. No objective observer, scientific or lay, can deny these causes and consequences from the opium trade, through the treaty ports to the Open Door. Western historians from Tawney to Lattimore have stressed them, and fellow invited commentators, John King Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker, have devoted much of their lives to studying them; so there is no need to recount them here. But, Lippit argues, “to recognize the
importance of this relationship and to assign it primary causal responsibility are two different things." "Primary causal responsibility" for what? "The impact of the West cannot be assigned primary responsibility for the development of underdevelopment in China" (my emphasis); or "Western support for reactionary government . . . was not decisive in inhibiting economic development"? Which is it, inhibiting development from non- or underdevelopment or producing underdevelopment? There is a decisive difference between the two for the "dependence theory" of "development of underdevelopment" according to which, as Lippit himself rightly stresses, development and underdevelopment are not just relatively more or less, but are in a relationship to each other within a single wider system. Therefore, Lippit's easy passage from one to the other is an inadmissible slight of hand within this "theory" on which he draws in part for support and in part to discard it again as unsatisfactory (which it may well be, but not for the reason Lippit claims).

Lippit argues that there was some external development of underdevelopment in China, but that it was not decisive because for internal reasons China would not have developed anyway (so that really there was no decisive development of underdevelopment in China after all—so why the title?). But those of us who have stressed the decisive importance of external dependence and its internal structure and consequences for the development of underdevelopment and thereby preventing the development of development, have never claimed that the absence of such dependence is an ipso facto guarantee of development or even of a will or capacity therefor. Other un- (not under-) developed societies were not dependent and nonetheless did not experience capitalist development due to other—internal—factors during certain periods. In Asia, Thailand and Japan fall in this category, and elsewhere some parts of Africa and Latin America. In the course of world history some of these regions and societies subsequently did become dependent and developed underdevelopment. Thailand after World War II is a notorious case; other regions suffered a similar fate earlier, among them China. None
of the cases of dependent capitalist development of underdevelopment could have—as the theoretical argument went—or have—as the historical record shows—subsequently experienced capitalist development in the Western sense. Japan did develop, once internal conditions changed appropriately from the Tokugawa period through the Meiji Restoration, not because of Levy’s supposed difference of family structure or other Parsonian pattern variables, not even because of differences in commercialization between Tokugawa Japan and Qing China (except insofar as this difference helped determine the course of internal change itself). Instead, as Norman (1940) has magisterially shown, Japan was not—and did not subsequently become—dependent, and therefore was able to launch such capitalist development; while in China dependent development of underdevelopment decisively prevented such capitalist development, no matter what internal conditions might or might not have become, for instance through the Taiping Revolution, the Boxer Rebellion, or the Sun Yat-sen Republic. Their initial programs say little about what they might or might not have developed into, so that Western help in crushing the former was decisive, when at the time of the first capitalist development it might still have been possible in the absence of dependence, while the success of the last was no longer relevant in the face of the by then insuperable obstacle of dependence, insuperable that is except through anticapitalist socialist revolution and noncapitalist development.

External dependence, and all it implies, therefore did not cause the internal conditions in China that inhibited development or caused the underdevelopment of development in China for centuries. The class structure and the bureaucratic economy that Lippit, in part following Balazs, analyzes were no doubt substantially responsible, though much of what Lippit says and we know about China in this regard is rather reminiscent of mercantilist Europe and even of the neoimperialist United States and the contemporary world; so that the decisive differences still remain unclear. But to the extent to which these internal differences were not decisive for inhibiting development or might have ceased to be so, external dependence and its internal implications
in China became decisive in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in generating the development of underdevelopment in China, irrespective of internal attempts at change, some of which it prevented. Thus, China was confronted with the real alternative of continued capitalist underdevelopment at the hands of world imperialism allied with the Chinese “comprador” bourgeoisie and increasing misery for its people following the Indian example, or socialist revolution and development, setting an example for the world (which is belatedly now admired even by some erstwhile obscurantist ostriches).

Lippit’s comparative class and political economic analysis and the alternatives he poses to the development of underdevelopment are a decisive step forward compared to his justly criticized predecessors’s erring in the woods. But all of this analysis, including that of the development of underdevelopment by the present author on which Lippit draws, are still unsatisfactorily handicapped in at least two important ways.

(1) They (have to) suppose a hypothetical never never land in which development and underdevelopment would be or might have been different—“independent” development?—if the world were square instead of round, in which we try to explain what happened to China in terms of what might have happened if things had been different there and/or compared with elsewhere. This procedure departs from reality “Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” in the nonderogatory realistic sense of that phrase. Among those Lippit cites, Fairbank has made a magisterial contribution to clarifying “how it really was,” even though “to its author [it] is a mere antechamber to a whole unwritten library, bursting with problems awaiting exploration” (Fairbank, 1969: xii), and although his political commitment seems to have excluded posing himself the real theoretical implications for Lippit’s analytical problem of Fairbank’s own historical research. We can only ask for more of both.

(2) Second, this approach is partially unsatisfactory precisely because it is partial, and analyzes only China and the effects on it from the outside and/or in comparison with other parts of the
world. What we need—though the Chinese themselves may be the last to admit it—is historical analysis of the whole world, of its single historical process, and of the place of China and other parts of the world in it—and that over a much longer time span than the part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries effectively analyzed by Lippit (Wallerstein, 1974). How did the world develop, and why did it develop as it did—with China in it? To pose the question this way is not an attempt to elude the question of Chinese development itself, but to pose it differently, more usefully, in terms of “historical research progresses backward, not forward,” as Fairbank (1969: ix) pleads (Frank, 1978a: preface). From a Chinese point of view “during the last thousand years, in short the Chinese people have been almost half the time under alien domination. Barbarian rule has been an integral part of their life” (Fairbank, 1969: 8). On the other hand, Lippit introduces his study with a brief account of the then unrivalled advances of Chinese development—and contributions to humanity—until the fourteenth century and cites the Chinese emperor’s much later oft-quoted letter to King George III saying we have everything we need. In the meantime, Chinese had crossed the Indian Ocean with vast fleets (exceeding European ones in size four centuries later) and traded into Africa earlier and more effectively than the Europeans or even the Ottomans and Arabs. Then they withdrew and left the field open to others, except in Southeast Asia where they were subsequently also replaced, in part voluntarily, in part by economic and military force. Why—in terms of internal Chinese imperial-landlord-merchant interests and relations of power—and how did this happen? (To engage in a bit more “if the world were square” speculation, what would have happened if the Chinese, like Longfellow’s Arabs, had not folded their tents and silently slipped away; what if they had colonialized us?) Then, while particular parts of the West developed and expanded at different times and into specific places, including some in the East, Japan closed itself off from abroad almost entirely after 1636, while China permitted only limited contact under specified conditions. Since then and until our days, China has not
been at the center of world economic, political, and cultural development and has occupied a singular intermediary role between the Western powers on the one side and their Asian colonies and junior partners on the other, beginning with the Spanish Manila Galleon, Portuguese and Dutch Far Eastern intra-Asian trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then escalating in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the British opium trade between India and China, which was initially designed to help defray their balance of trade deficit with both (Frank, 1978a). Even in the classical imperialist period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries China's semicolonial economic position in the world was peculiar and almost unique among those then suffering the development of underdevelopment, in that unlike other such “Third World” countries (which had a consistent merchandise export surplus) China had a merchandise import surplus with the developed countries of Europe derived from her entrepot trade position between the colonial powers and their colonies elsewhere in Asia (Frank, 1976b). The suggestion is not that these “external” relations of China should weigh more heavily in our study of China's or the world's history than China's changing “internal” conditions, but that any adequate analysis of Chinese and world history, let alone any theory of development, must analyze these historical changes in relation to each other within the compass of the single and temporally simultaneous but multiform historical process of which they were and are all related parts. Like Marx, we must stand Hegel on his head, and not only with regard to the development of China.

REFERENCES

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