

# Alternative Conceptions of Development : Review of a review of Global Capitalism

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# Alternative Conceptions of Development : Review of a review of *Global Capitalism*

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Book reviews have a special place in intellectual discourse. Through them a condensed version of a work is transmitted to a wide audience which, to varying degrees, incorporates the result into its knowledge. In reviews, authors find what are often the most thorough criticisms of their efforts from reviewers chosen by editors as leading scholars in the field. Reviews are usually brief, involve intensive summarization, and therefore are particularly vulnerable to misinterpreting the work being reviewed (any summary involves some distortion). And book reviewers occupy a position of particular responsibility for, in book reviews, many of the rules of intellectual exchange are suspended, such as the need to document statements of "fact", the scrutiny of referees and the careful supervision of editors, who cannot conceivably read or even look through all the books reviewed in a journal. This places a heavy burden of responsibility on reviewers to read the work carefully, present its arguments accurately, and provide criticisms which, even in short form, obviously indicate serious problems with the argument of the book.

Iain Wallace's (1992) review of my book *Global Capitalism : Theories of Societal Development* (Peet, 1991a) concludes that I present a Marxian argument that is inconsistent to the point of confusion with the result that I advocate a development strategy, derived from Thomas (1974), which is vacuously idealist. My contention, in reply, is that Wallace's review is the exact reverse to those cannons of good reviewing mentioned above, being an example of a reviewer quickly glancing at a book, reinforcing conclusions already formed, confirming his own political prejudices, and thus doing a disservice to the author of the book, the readers of this journal, and the editors who trusted him to provide an accurate, insightful critique of the work.

At first sight this seems merely to be a case of professional incompetence, in the sense that Wallace's *very* quick perusal of much of the book<sup>1</sup> is incapable of

providing an accurate summarization, leading to mistakes of interpretation. But the real origins of these mistakes are to be found not in carelessness alone but in *political* difference : the reviewer disagrees with my democratic socialist politics, which he already "knows about", doing a quick read through the book to confirm his prejudice. Hence Wallace (1992, pp. 529-530) wrote : "students will gain no clearer sense of Peet's preferred development strategy from his synopsis of Thomas (1974) which better exemplifies a vacuously idealist than a materialist structural Marxism". Clive Thomas was a student of the Marxist dependency theorist Walter Rodney. His central thesis is that Third World countries are characterized by dynamic divergence between resource use and domestic demand — i.e. resources are used to satisfy other peoples' needs. He therefore proposes the reorientation of agriculture away from export crops towards self-sufficiency in food production using peasant cooperatives organized under principles of democracy and mass participation. He also proposes a basic industrial strategy in which Third World countries focus their developmental effort on establishing industries which transform local materials into the inputs required by a broad range of manufactures oriented to satisfying needs for, without this organic linkage, industrial development entails transferring most of the value-added elsewhere. Note that Thomas founds such proposals not on wishful thinking but on a careful analysis of production economics, especially a critique of "economies of scale" and similar categories which supposedly prevent small Third World countries industrializing (Thomas, 1974, ch. 6).

Wallace correctly identifies my opinion — the book advocates a strategy like Thomas' as an alternative to export-oriented industrialization, finding it consistent with democratic socialism and a modified structural Marxism. Contra Wallace, the Thomas strategy is surely materialist, rather than idealist, for it argues for control over the production of the material sources of continued existence by Third World peoples, and it conforms with a structural position in the sense that it accepts the central and determining significance of (local) social relations of production. Wallace's more revealing charge is that the Thomas model is "vacuously" idealist. Wallace may disagree with the way Thomas argues his case, or with his position as a whole, that is his prerogative, but the extremely negative charge that it is "vacuous" (i.e. empty, unintelligent and entirely devoid of worth) extends beyond Thomas (one of the better argued versions) to all similar efforts by dominated peoples to gain control over the basic structures of their existence. Saying that this strategy has *no* content denigrates all efforts by oppressed people who seek to counter foreign domination by proposing local, democratic control over the institution involved in the reproduction of their existence, the economic basis of their cultures, and the material sources of political power in their societies. It is this political position that guides Wallace's careless summarization of arguments he dismisses in advance; conservative politics account for Wallace's intellectually incompetent review.

Politically motivated reviews are perfectly valid. But not when they make up a series of positions, attribute these to an author, and then criticize their own creations, blowing up the mines they have hidden along the way. Two examples of this follow, the first mundane, the second more interesting. First, the issue of the

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supposed inconsistency of the book's argument on dependency theory. Paragraph 3 of Wallace's review opens with the following two sentences :

"The final two chapters and a brief epilogue constitute a fascinating display of intellectual gymnastics! Peet accepts (p. 145) the accuracy of the dependency school thesis of the development of underdevelopment yet, three pages later, he embraces Warren's analysis of the progressive character of capitalism [sic] industrialization, only to dismiss it as an 'optimistic generalization' on p. 158!" (Wallace, 1992, p. 529)

For those unfamiliar with the central positions, the claim is that my book defends dependency theory, which argues that contact with capitalism *underdevelops* peripheral economies, then "embraces" the Warren (1980) thesis, which says that relations with capitalism, in the form of colonialism for example, lead to *progressive* social and economic changes in Third World countries, then returns to a dependency-like position critical of Warren. The conflation of these two basic positions would indeed involve an act of "intellectual gymnastics". Wallace's argument hinges on the assertion that I "embrace" Warren. But my book does *not* "embrace" the Warren thesis, if by that slippery term is meant 'accepting eagerly, with affection', it merely *summarizes* (on p. 148) the Warren argument without comment, a procedure followed throughout the work — hence one could just as well say that I "embrace" environmental determinism, modernization theory, or dozens of other arguments briefly portrayed in what is very much an introductory survey of ideas on development. There is not a word of evaluation or indication that I agree or disagree with Warren in the summary on p. 148, a pattern followed throughout the book — I try to give arguments a chance to show their worth and comment on them later — a pattern which Wallace would have recognized had he read the preceding chapters of the book. Thus my first *evaluation* of Warren is made on p. 158, in my supposed "reversal" of position, and it is the understatement that Warren optimistically generalizes, for as the entire book (especially ch. 8) argues, capitalism has overwhelmingly had an underdeveloping effect on Third World countries. My central point here is that *Wallace* performs a feat of intellectual gymnastics by characterizing my summary of Warren as an "embrace" whereas my book actually criticizes that position as an "optimistic generalization", remaining consistent throughout with a dependency-type position.

Second, a similar but slightly different misrepresentational procedure is followed in the final paragraph of Wallace's (1992, p. 530) review, which argues that my earlier confusion reaches its paradoxical culmination when "the author ends his defense and restatement of the merits of structural Marxism with an epilogue which extols the virtues of a freely chosen altruistic ethic as the true basis for development". Again, for those unfamiliar with the arguments, Wallace claims that on the one hand I support the notion of structural necessity yet on the other extol freedom of choice of ethical standards. But as a careful reading of the epilogue to the book (pp. 184-187) shows, my argument confronts the religious notion that ethics are manifestations in conscience of God's will with the alternative "functional" notion that ethical principles are derived from purely historical

experiences under definite material conditions. It argues that experience does not yield ethics directly, but via analysis, which places a particular burden on the mode of analysis. Different analyses emphasize and value different aspects of experience. My argument is that a Marxist analysis of experience, by emphasizing the collective nature of human reproduction, or a feminist analysis of gender relations by revaluing women's contributions to social life, or an environmentalist critique of the notion of the conquest of nature, can conclude in an alternative socialist ethic of mutual responsibility and human equality which indeed may *guide* new forms of developmental practice. These politicized modes of analysis are not a matter of free choice but result from struggles between competing groups adhering to different ideologies, beliefs, world views, etc. In brief, rather than "freedom of ethical choice" I argue for a complex interplay between the structural conditions of existence, various human experiences, alternative modes of interpreting such experiences, and the emergence, under conditions of social struggle, of competing ethical principles. Wallace (1992, p. 530) "summarizes" this as "an epilogue which extols the virtues of a freely chosen altruistic ethic as the true basis for development". It is perfectly clear that I do *not* believe in the free choice of ethics, nor in natural altruism as the basis of ethics, nor even that ethics alone determine developmental practice. Again, the "inconsistency" of my argument is fabricated by Wallace through a "summary" which simplifies/distorts my argument in a direction the reviewer has previously decided it probably goes (i.e. naive altruism).

This counter-critique could be extended to virtually every sentence in Wallace's review, but these two examples should indicate the overall pattern. Essentially I am complaining that my book is criticized for positions which it does not take, positions indeed which are the reverse of the book's intent. Yet there is much that should be criticized in *Global Capitalism*: its very simple, initial attempt at incorporating socialist feminism into a new version of structural Marxism; its central theoretical innovation, the concept of mode of reproduction, which tries to expand social relations to include gender and environment; its politics of socialist democracy (for a brief summary, see Peet, 1991b, pp. 517-519; 1993, p. 77) which might be confronted directly rather than via antiquated, never believable clichés like "all very laudable, but..." (Wallace, 1992, p. 530). There are lots of positions I *do* take. Criticize these!

## NOTE

- 1 Hence Wallace (1992, p. 529) says that my chapter 5 "provides a terminologically dense yet frequently unconvincingly cryptic treatment" of historical materialism yet the earlier chapters, on environmental determinism, modernization theory and dependency theory, are "clear and crisp reviews". *No-one* could actually read chapter 3 on modernization, especially pp. 22-36 on structural functionalism and modernization, and find the argument "crisp and clear", for it is (unfortunately and regrettably) by far the most terminologically dense, cryptic part of the book, making chapter 5 on historical materialism a piece of cake by comparison. Such a characterization could only be made by someone who had quickly perused the early chapters on their way to the Marxist part of the book. At least the critical *reader* would conclude that *both* ch. 3 and ch. 5 are terminologically dense, cryptic, etc.!

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