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Theoretical and methodological issues of socio-economic  
development in the second half of the 20th century

main findings of the PhD dissertation

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## **Introduction and aims of the research**

The focal points of my dissertation are the explanation of the scientific historical, theoretical and methodological questions of the broadly construed notion of development (including the social, economic and development policy aspects) and the critical analysis of the actual global development policy practices and strategies through the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals. So far, explorations in social geography and regional science in Hungary have been drawn to this topic from an empirical and methodological viewpoint, and used the concepts of the mainstream international discourse (well-being, competitiveness, sustainable development etc.) rephrasing them in the European and Hungarian context. These practice-oriented explorations in general lack reflections on the underlying contents of 'development' and also the consideration of its global historical perspective.

By considering the aforementioned respects and by putting the issues of development into a broader theoretical scientific and scientific historical context, this PhD dissertation aims to provide additional contributions and data to the Hungarian geographical discourse on the subject. The dissertation builds on my previous investigations and experience and is primarily theoretical in nature, while the appearance of the methodological-empirical approach is only secondary. My work follows a historical and also a thematic scheme, of which the latter ranges from the unfolding of the development discourse to the current policy issues. During my explorations so far, it became apparent to me that this kind of work calls for an interdisciplinary approach which draws on insights of several different established disciplines and fields of study. Therefore, in the course of my work I used the toolbars and concepts of other closely related disciplines (i.e. economics, sociology, regional science).

During the last decades the scientific and political discourse on the substance, aims, results and also the measurement of development became more and more intensive, orienting me toward topics lesser known in Hungarian geography. My work aims to tackle these topics. Firstly, my dissertation looks for answers to questions such as the manner of scientific thoughts providing the basis of the development theories dominating the discourse in the second half of the 20th century (mostly modernization and dependency theories). By this I wish to put the dissertation into a scientific historical context. This theoretical summary concerns the following questions: How did the evolutionary and other social theories of sociology translated into the development ideologies of the 20th century and how dominant were they in development theories? Do they have a role in the formation of spatial categories and metaphors frequently used to describe global inequalities? How did development geography evolve as a new discipline and what kind of approaches characterize the way of thinking about development nowadays? What are the contradictions and the legacy of the dominant and rival development theories in the second half of the 20th century? How can we connect theories

to development measurement methods? Does the complex measurement of development still have a justification? Is the World being united or is it splitting apart in terms of the inner dimensions of development? What continuities and discontinuities can be identified in the current practice of global development policy compared to the ones flourishing in the previous decades?

### **Theoretical approach and methodology**

Taking the above questions into account, the dissertation is a rather theoretical one, dealing with issues of science history and theory, mainly focusing on the paradigmatic shifts, theoretical and methodological issues of development discourse. These are presented in the concerning chapters of the dissertation with the object of deconstructing and historically contextualizing those texts, on which the given theories were based. Therefore my study and its chapters cannot exist on its own without the discussed texts and their context. Consequently, in the dissertation I did not separate a whole chapter on literature review; discourses that are the object of my review are being considered as antecedents of my research. Beside analysing the texts and clarifying the theoretical issues I also confront opposing approaches, with which I aim to strengthen and emphasize the necessity of critical thinking, and to highlight the problems of overly one-sided and simplistic arguments.

When examining the theoretical issues, emphasis is placed on those topics that in my opinion could be closely linked to the basic assumptions of current development thinking: for instance, extending in detail the evolutionary theories of 19th century sociology and their main findings and also reflecting on the critics of the evolutionist paradigm. This approach, however, is not a matter of purpose; paraphrasing the thoughts of Jorge LARRAIN I'm also arguing that the historically determined character of development must be taken into account in a thesis on this subject. By bringing the sociological and economic theories closer to my main focal point, I'd like to satisfy my scientific curiosity that is intended to answer how these ideas should (or could) be translated into social geographical and regional science researches in a topic requiring such broad range of approaches.

While reviewing the Hungarian and foreign literature an attempt has been made to mention the most prominent figures of development theories and development discourse. Some of the above works are also examined in detail (e.g. Walt Whitman Rostow's stages of growth theory in chapters 3.3. and 3.4.), that in my opinion sufficiently represent the dominant approaches.

## Results and conclusions

Hereinafter, the most important research results and conclusions are presented below in accordance with the structure of the dissertation:

- In the theoretical part of the thesis the analogous terms of development (e.g. progress, evolution), and their related evolutionary theories were reviewed *first*, based on the notions of 19th century sociological thought. I consider the arguments of Eszter PÁL (2004) on the role of metaphors and analogies that gives them scientific and historical importance acceptable, due to the fact that transferring them between various scientific fields provides information about the aforementioned fields and the connection between them. Therefore *I thought it necessary to at least mention the social scientific significance of metaphors and analogies, on which the further thoughts of the chapters were built while examining the antecedents of contemporary development thinking.* Considerable effort was made to introduce the social scientific theories of the Enlightenment era and the 19th century, in order to better understand the consequences of development ideologies in the post-World War period. The controversies of evolutionary theories and the progressivist view of history have been framed along various aspects. First of all, based on the regarding literature those critical approaches that *neglect the unilinear character of human history and development, the necessity of development and the persistence of the causes of evolutionary processes* have been deconstructed in detail (cf. NISBET 1969). I also put emphasis on rejecting the often mistakenly used notion that Darwin would have been the predecessor of sociological evolutionary theory. His theory, contrary to the evolutionary paradigm, cannot be considered as unilinear nor teleological; therefore Darwin's role when discussing evolutionary approaches has to be critically viewed. As a closure for the chapter, the importance of making a difference between "specific" and "general" evolution, contrary to the over-simplified notions of progress and evolution has been referred, in addition with neglecting the unilinear and universal development paths. The above reasoning is more acceptable for the author of this thesis as well. To answer one of my first questions, the following theoretical framework can be applied: *development theories of post-World War era were basically built on the notions of evolutionism and as such they tried to explain the (under)development of societies along these evolutionary and unilinear thoughts.*
- The second part of my theoretical discussion is largely based on the history of development geography – a discipline that has not been widely institutionalized. In this part of my thesis the formation and "genealogy" of development geography was discussed along an argument reasoning that the basics of the discipline have evolved from the colonial and tropical geographies as a legacy of colonial era, which were mainly based on the traditional/modern, temperate/tropical, "Us/Them" notions and imaginative geographies.

During the historical review the antecedents were discussed putting heavy emphasis on the transformation of environmental determinist and racist discourses of the “Tropics” into a development geography dealing more likely with the problems of development and underdevelopment under the modernization paradigm. Referring the often-cited and most relevant literature in critical geography, the most common characteristics of modernist approaches - e.g. diffusionist, hierarchical, and growth-oriented notions - were reviewed, creating links to the chapter three of the thesis. *I consider my most important research result in the historical parts of my dissertation, that a conceptual and scientific framework had been created, along with the scientific connections of 20th century development theories and (regional) geography could be analysed.*

- The scientific, political and authoritative efforts to categorize countries and macro regions of the World along a theoretical or economic line – either amongst themselves or to differentiate them from developed, Western countries –, in my opinion, strongly relate to the previously discussed, theoretical and historical issues of development. This notion, along with the examination of the current discussions on the topic, shows a strong reasoning in my thesis that the widely discussed metaphors and spatial categories in my work, when viewed in a highly critical reading, can also be inserted into an orientalist, “Us/Them” way of thinking. These binary opposition-based notions, such as global North or global South, developed or developing countries, First, Second, or Third World often highlight different concepts depending on the context and historical situation in which they became part of the political and scientific discourse, just to develop further often as synonyms of each other and affect the representative practices of geographical space. *In my opinion, thoroughly examining the above is also of significant importance in order to make sure we are not falling into the trap of taking these concepts for granted and as something relatively fixed; but instead, being critical and aware of their historical background.* I think it is necessary to be critical when using these concepts, as they can have a number of different readings and impressions that can't be distanced from time, nor the ideologies of the speaker. After finishing the chapter it has become clear to me that *those societies that are considered Third World tend to define themselves more along political-ideological ideas, while the modernist views rather focused on the context of being developed/underdeveloped, and dealt with global relations based on sociocultural and economic differences.*
- Regarding the opposing notions of modernization and dependency theories – which mainly differ from each other in their ideologies and reasoning of the causes of underdevelopment –, beside analysing their core thoughts *I put emphasis on, that ultimately, both schools' views on development are based on similar assumptions* – a topic which is usually unmentioned by most of the relevant literature. In social and geographical space – regardless of scale – both theories think of “cores” and “peripheries” in the global system

(although with different terms), therefore they use binary oppositions, and see the causes of underdevelopment as economic in character, while considering economic growth and industrialization as solutions for the problems. *While reviewing the modernization theory, Rostow's stages of growth theory were discussed in detail, and the most neuralgic and controversial points, that could be viewed as mostly irrelevant, politically incorrect and heavily questionable, were highlighted.* In these chapters I strongly referred to the importance of historical and political contexts in which the theories have been evolved, and of the role of the “main actors” the basic assumptions were derived from (e.g. in the case of Rostow's theory it is worth mentioning the American cold-war geopolitical context and Rostow's role in the American diplomacy and foreign policy). Reflecting on some elements of the postcolonial readings of these theories I placed emphasis on some of their main deficiencies (disregard of cultures, lack of representation, fixed notions of differences, consolidating the “subaltern” in their inferior position etc.) which makes their legitimacy highly questionable.

- In the final parts of the theoretical overview the post-development school and frame of thoughts were characterized in order to point out the main directions and theoretical approaches to the issue of development. I strongly believe that radical critics from the post-development school are too dismissive when it comes to the generic ideas of development and reject the positive effects of development policies in an overly simplistic manner. However, the opinion closest to my beliefs is the one shown in the chapter in detail: *recommending new ways and methods in development thinking while deconstructing thoughts and truths that seem to have been fixed for a long time. I consider the adoption of post-development way of thought in Hungarian geography highly relevant – although in the discourse of local economic development it has implicitly been the part of the literature (see e.g. the latest publications of the faculty of economics in Szeged) –, which can contribute to the re-positioning the views of Hungarian social geography and regional science regarding the issues of development.*
- The methodological and empirical part of the thesis (chapter four) is basically related to the theoretical issues and analyzes the various measuring methods of development in a historical context since World War II. Aside from the dictionary definition of the term development, *I contributed to the establishment of the methodological part by highlighting the “good” and “bad” notions of development from different aspects; thus new meanings were given to the concept, which go far beyond the definitions often quoted in regional science, while considering them from a critical point of view.* In addition, creating cohesion and continuity between the chapters, the statements discussed in previous theoretical parts have been linked to the methodological issues in several parts of chapter four. In this chapter I highlighted the modernist roots of GDP-based measurement concepts and argued

for the use of composite indicators, while of course, taking into account some limiting factors. As proof, for my empirical research the Human Development Index were used, which *showed the significance of further analysis of the inner structure of development*. My results clearly underpinned the assumptions, that argue for the examination of all underlying factors of development and their interrelated characteristics, otherwise we face the problem of excessive simplification and generalization. *The results of my research showed a general homogenizing process of the dimensions of development* in a global scale, but due to different partial results, I think that *such studies are still needed and relevant, especially in order to quantify a rather complex phenomenon*, such as development. With relatively simple and understandable methodology, substantive conclusions could be deduced from the relationship between the internal structure of development and other multidimensional phenomena.

- My thesis deals with the actual global development policies in its last chapter, where the concept of development and its related issues were put into the policy discourse of Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals. I was wondering how current development practices (through their discursive elements and representations) reproduce (if at all reproduce) the main characteristics of post-World War development discourse, and what similarities and differences can be observed in these two frameworks soon after the millennium. By analyzing the content of the official documents and texts targeting the objectives, I came to the conclusion and results that besides the emergence of “innovations” and new elements in the documents, focusing on broader aspects of development, putting the issue of inequalities (existing in multiple scales) into the policy discourse, *international aid and economic growth (although in a sustainable and inclusive way) are the two main factors being considered as the main driving forces for development*. As it is also apparent from the interpretation and examination of the texts, there has been no change in the fact, that *international organizations still continue to perceive development as a universal and unilinear process* all over the world, thus rejecting the possibility of alternative development paths for certain parts of the world. *I primarily consider analyzing and evaluating the underlying content of development policies as a new result in this chapter*. Using a critical tone at some parts of my thesis I argued against the aforementioned approach; as in my opinion, building on new epistemologies and questioning the fixed knowledges and “general truths”, broader and more interesting directions of viewing development could emerge.

As a whole I consider my dissertation as a work that can contribute to the Hungarian regional science and social geography with a rather theoretical framework and as a certain way of thought. Opposing the Hungarian practice based largely on empirical experience, I focused on

topics whose familiarity and adopting their approaches can contribute to the deeper and more established knowledge of the history and underlying contents of development.

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1 Complete list of publications: <https://vm.mtmt.hu//search/slist.php?lang=0&AuthorID=10034863>