

POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF «DEVELOPED»
AND «DEVELOPING» COUNTRIES

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Annotation. *This article critically reconsiders the conventional distinction between developed and developing countries. It argues that this binary classification is no longer analytically adequate, as it obscures historical responsibility, ignores colonial legacies, and presents hierarchical global relations as natural and neutral. The article draws on a postcolonial approach, which makes it possible to view development not as a universal and linear model, but as a historically and politically conditioned discourse. It emphasizes the need to construct new conceptual frameworks based on historical justice, epistemic plurality, and economic sovereignty.*

The article concludes that only a reconsideration of the underlying assumptions of development can open the way to imagining a more just global order that does not reproduce the logic of colonial domination under the guise of development.

Keywords: *postcolonialism, development, developed and developing countries, colonial legacy, historical responsibility, historical justice, epistemic plurality, economic sovereignty, global order, colonial domination.*

Аннотация. *Статья посвящена критическому переосмыслению традиционного разделения стран на «развитые» и «развивающиеся». Обосновывается, что данная бинарная классификация утратила аналитическую продуктивность, поскольку скрывает историческую ответственность, игнорирует колониальное наследие и представляет иерархические глобальные отношения как естественные и нейтральные. В центре внимания находится постколониальный подход, позволяющий рассматривать развитие не как универсальную и линейную модель, а как политически и исторически обусловленный дискурс. Подчеркивается необходимость формирования новых концептуальных рамок, основанных на принципах исторической справедливости, эпистемического плюрализма и экономического суверенитета. Делается вывод о том, что только пересмотр базовых предпосылок самого понятия развития открывает возможность для воображения более справедливого мирового порядка, не воспроизводящего логику колониального доминирования.*

Ключевые слова: *постколониализм, развитие, развитые и развивающиеся страны, колониальное наследие, историческая ответственность, историческая справедливость, эпистемический плюрализм, экономический суверенитет, глобальный порядок, колониальное доминирование.*

When I first started studying how countries are labeled as developed or developing, I was struck by how carelessly these terms are used in global discourse. At first glance, they seem neutral technical classifications, tools for organizing data, or guiding policy. And yet, the more I looked, the more I realized that these labels have great historical and cultural weight.

They are not just descriptive, they are based on the same mindset that once defined on the Orient as exotic, retarded or in need of guidance. In other words, the language of development itself reflects patterns of power, hierarchy, and perception that echo colonial thinking.

Various theories of international relations could suggest ways to interpret this phenomenon. Realism, for example, could explain these classifications as instruments of strategic power in which dominant states identify others in order to justify influence or intervention. The feminist perspective critiques the portrayal of developed countries as «masculine» and developing countries as «feminine» revealing the gendered stereotypes embedded in global politics.

Constructivism draws attention to the social processes and discourses that reinforce these categories, emphasizing how repetitive representations term a collective understanding that, with the advent of the new era, supposedly had to shift to new concepts such as a democratic society where everyone is equal, however, as can be seen in practice, the idea of colonialism did not disappear, but only transformed. Marxism, meanwhile, focuses on material and economic structures, showing how wealth and resources flow from peripheral states to central ones and how such flows increase global inequality.

Although these points of view shed light on some aspects of the problem, they do not fully reflect the stable and multifaceted nature of orientalism in the discourse of global development.

Postcolonial theory, on the contrary, allows me to consider the classification of *developing countries* as an economic and discursive tool that reproduces historical hierarchies and shapes modern international relations. Through this lens, I can explore how the colonial legacy continues to influence politics, perceptions, and opportunities in the Global South, while combining insights gained from other approaches.

Thus, this essay will address the following research question: «To what extent can international classifications of *developing countries* be understood as a continuation of colonial legacy?»

Postcolonial theory provides the most comprehensive framework for understanding these classifications, while recognizing that realism, feminism, constructivism, and marxism describe elements of Orientalism, but cannot fully explain its structural and long-term impact.

Theoretical Framework. Marxism vs Postcolonialism

In exploring the classification of countries into *developed and developing*, I found it necessary to compare different theoretical perspectives in order to understand both the economic and ideological aspects of global inequality. Marxism immediately comes to mind, as it explains these categories as part of a systemic flow of wealth and exploitation. From a Marxist point of view, the Global South functions as a periphery, generating surplus value through labor, resources, and production, which is then extracted by the central states of the Global North.

This is evident in several Eastern countries such as China, Vietnam, and Indonesia, where labor costs are significantly lower than in Western economies, making these states attractive sites for manufacturing and export-oriented industries. These countries occupy a peripheral position in the global capitalist system, supplying cheap labor and raw materials while importing high-value goods, technology, and capital from the industrialized core. One can also speculate that if the former Soviet Union had not collapsed, it might have assumed a similar position to China today, leveraging its industrial base and regional influence to integrate peripheral economies under its

control. In such a scenario, Central Asian countries already dependent on the Soviet economic system would likely have remained peripheral, providing raw materials and labor without achieving significant autonomy. Even now, after independence, many of these states continue to play a limited role on the global stage, as their economies remain structured around resource extraction and export-oriented labor, while their integration into global markets is constrained by historical legacies and existing power hierarchies. In this sense, class struggle is not only internal to states but also transcends borders: nations are positioned in a global hierarchy based on their economic role, with developing countries structurally dependent on richer and more industrialized states. Marxist analysis therefore provides a compelling explanation for why many states remain economically marginalized, highlighting how material exploitation sustains global inequality.

However, Marxism alone cannot fully account for the discursive and cultural mechanisms embedded in these classifications. This is where postcolonial theory becomes indispensable.

Postcolonial analysis draws attention to how language, discourse, and historical legacies shape perceptions of the Global South, creating a hierarchy that is not only economic but also symbolic. Through the lens of Orientalism, the developing world is often portrayed as backward, passive, or in need of guidance a narrative that legitimizes intervention and reinforces inequality.

Unlike Marxism, postcolonial theory emphasizes that these labels are not neutral: they carry an ideological and cultural burden, reproducing colonial ways of seeing and structuring the world even in the XXIst century.

By combining these perspectives in my own analysis, I recognize that Marxism explains the material realities of dependency, while postcolonial theory accounts for the ideological and discursive processes that justify and perpetuate them. Nevertheless, in my study of international classifications, I argue that postcolonial theory provides the most comprehensive framework. It allows me to explore not only the economic dimensions highlighted by Marxism, but also how the colonial legacy continues to shape perceptions, policies, and global hierarchies today. In other words, postcolonial theory captures both the structural and symbolic aspects of Orientalism inherent in development discourse, making it the most suitable lens for understanding the classification of developing countries.

Historical Legacies of Colonial Exploitation and the Misclassification of Developing Countries

The classification of countries into *developed* and *developing* cannot be understood without considering the deep historical roots of global inequality. During the colonial period, European powers systematically extracted not only material wealth - gold, minerals, cotton, spices, but also human labor and institutional capacity from territories across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These extractions were accompanied by deliberate strategies to weaken local governance, intellectual life, and education, ensuring that colonized populations could not independently manage or benefit from their own resources. In many regions, thriving centers of knowledge, science, and philosophy were deliberately undermined. Scholars, religious leaders, and local administrators were often killed, exiled, or co-opted to serve colonial agendas.

Educational systems were reoriented to produce compliant laborers rather than independent thinkers or engineers capable of fostering local industry and innovation.

For example, South Asia, which had historically produced prominent mathematicians, astronomers, and philosophers, saw its intellectual infrastructure systematically dismantled under British rule. Similarly, in West Africa, institutions of learning and local administration were subordinated to extractive economic priorities. As a consequence, the starting positions of these countries were artificially suppressed. When global institutions and frameworks began classifying countries in the XXth century, metrics such as GDP, literacy rates, and industrial output were treated as neutral indicators of development. Yet these measurements ignored centuries of systematic resource extraction, labor exploitation, and educational suppression that had left formerly colonized states disadvantaged from the outset. In other words, the playing field was never level: countries that had been deliberately weakened were being compared to nations that had built their wealth by exploiting those very same territories.

Additionally, the global landscape after major wars demonstrates how structural advantages can accelerate recovery for some nations while leaving others behind. After World War II, Western European countries and Japan, despite experiencing massive destruction, were able to rebuild rapidly thanks to initiatives such as the *Marshall Plan*, which provided financial aid, infrastructure support, and technological resources. Simultaneously, the sale of military equipment and industrial investments further boosted their economies, giving them several years of accelerated growth. In contrast, countries that had suffered under colonial exploitation or lacked access to such international support systems were left to reconstruct from near zero without comparable external assistance. This post-war divergence illustrates that global inequality is not only rooted in colonial histories but is also perpetuated by differential access to recovery mechanisms and international economic networks.

This historical imbalance continues to shape modern global hierarchies. The label *developing country* obscures the fact that many of these nations had once been centers of wealth, learning, and innovation, and that their present economic and social marginalization is structurally rooted in colonial policies. Postcolonial theory highlights that this is not merely a material problem but also a discursive one: the ideology of development and the language of progress normalize and reproduce global inequalities, framing formerly colonized nations as inherently backward or dependent. Moreover, this historical lens clarifies the structural dependence of the Global North on the Global South. While Western economies present themselves as technologically advanced and economically dominant, their prosperity has long relied on the resources, labor, and production capacities of peripheral countries.

Cheap labor in countries such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Indonesia sustains major industries from textiles to electronics, while Western nations retain control over high-value technologies, financial markets, and global trade rules. This dependence is both material and ideological: the flow of wealth benefits core economies, while narratives about backwardness or dependency legitimize the continuation of structural hierarchies.

A clear contemporary example of this dynamic is Bangladesh's textile industry, which has become one of the largest exporters of garments to Western markets. Millions of workers, predominantly women, produce clothing for global brands at wages far below living costs, often in hazardous conditions. The industry exemplifies how historical legacies of resource extraction, labor exploitation, and institutional underdevelopment continue to shape the global economy:

Bangladesh provides the material and labor foundations that support Western wealth, while receiving minimal structural support to develop higher-value industries or equitable labor protections. Here, Marxist analysis highlights the material exploitation, while postcolonial theory exposes how discourses of *development* and *emerging markets* obscure the structural inequities underpinning these economic relationships.

By examining the historical and contemporary intersections of material exploitation and discursive power, it becomes evident that global classifications of *developing* and *developed* countries are far from neutral. They reproduce colonial hierarchies and obscure the ways in which wealth, labor, and knowledge were systematically appropriated, ensuring that formerly colonized nations remain structurally disadvantaged even in the XXIst century.

Case Studies: Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Peripheral Market Control

Bangladesh provides a clear example of how historical exploitation, structural dependence, and discursive power converge to maintain global inequality. The country's textile industry, which employs approximately 4.5 million workers the majority of whom are women accounts for nearly 84% of national exports and generates over \$50 billion annually in revenue¹. Western brands such as **H&M**, **Zara**, and **Gap** rely heavily on Bangladesh labor to produce low-cost garments for global markets. Despite the scale of production and contribution to the global economy, wages remain extremely low, averaging around \$140 per month, well below the cost of living, and labor conditions are often unsafe, as evidenced by industrial accidents like the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013². From a Marxist perspective, Bangladesh occupies a peripheral position in the global capitalist system. The country produces surplus value for Western corporations: labor-intensive production creates high-profit margins for brands in the Global North, while local workers receive only a small fraction of the economic value they generate. This reproduces material inequality, as Bangladesh remains dependent on low-wage manufacturing rather than developing higher-value industries or controlling supply chains. The historical roots of this dependence are clear: during British colonial rule, Bengal was an industrial center producing textiles, jute, and other goods. The British systematically deindustrialized the region to favor British manufacturing, extracting wealth and leaving a legacy of economic underdevelopment. The pattern of extraction has continued in new forms under global capitalism, with Bangladesh now serving as a modern «periphery» supplying labor and resources to the industrialized core.

Postcolonial analysis adds a complementary perspective. The discourse surrounding Bangladesh in international development circles often frames the country as *emerging or developing*, implying that poverty and underdevelopment are natural conditions rather than consequences of historical exploitation. This narrative obscures the structural inequalities created by colonialism and reinforced by global trade and financial systems.

Similarly, Western-led development programs often prioritize efficiency, productivity, and export-oriented growth, rather than fostering autonomous industrial capacity or equitable labor

¹ <https://www.cadtm.org/Bangladesh-s-Garment-Boom-Workers-Still-in-Chains>

² https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/2013-rana-plaza-collapse&ved=2ahUKEwjH2fnEpvKRAxXBLBAIHTgHOngQFnoECB0QAQ&usg=AOvVaw1CYDNw3jvXrpVr_8PgD-bq

structures. Gender dynamics further illustrate postcolonial insights: women make up the majority of the textile workforce, yet they face the lowest wages and are subjected to both physical and symbolic exploitation. Their labor is crucial for sustaining Western consumption, yet their social and economic power remains minimal.

Vietnam illustrates another dimension of peripheral exploitation in the global capitalist system. The country has become a major hub for electronics manufacturing, hosting factories for companies such as **Samsung, Intel, and Apple**. Vietnamese workers assemble smartphones, laptops, and other high-tech products at wages significantly lower than in the Global North. While the products generate enormous profits for multinational corporations, local workers receive only a small fraction of the value they create. From a Marxist perspective, Vietnam's labor force functions as part of the global periphery, generating surplus value that is extracted by industrialized nations. Postcolonial analysis reveals that the country's economic dependence is reinforced by discourses framing Vietnam as an *emerging market* rather than as a producer of high-value technology.

Peripheral Autonomy and Market Restrictions

The experiences of Bangladesh and Vietnam reveal an additional layer of structural inequality: when peripheral countries attempt to move beyond raw production and low-wage manufacturing to develop domestic brands or high-value products, they face systemic barriers.

Exports of raw materials or semi-finished goods are tolerated, as they do not threaten the economic dominance of core nations. However, domestic attempts to innovate, industrialize, or sell branded products internationally are often met with sanctions, trade restrictions, extra inspections, or other regulatory hurdles. This asymmetry ensures that peripheral economies remain dependent: they supply essential materials, labor, and production capacity, while high-value goods, branding, and market control remain under the influence of the Global North. For example, Vietnamese electronics companies face strict regulations and intellectual property constraints in Western markets, while the same components used by multinational corporations can freely circulate. Similarly, attempts by Bangladeshi or Indian firms to brand products globally encounter systemic resistance, preserving the economic and symbolic dominance of core countries.

Marxist analysis highlights how surplus value is extracted, while postcolonial theory demonstrates how discourse and policy reinforce dependency. Peripheral countries provide the foundation of global supply chains but are systematically blocked from capturing the full economic and symbolic value of their labor and resources. This structural control is a modern extension of historical exploitation: core nations maintain material and ideological dominance, shaping not only production but also perceptions of which countries are allowed to innovate and compete.

Critical Thinking and Postcolonial Theory

Understanding the classification of countries through a critical lens requires more than observing material inequalities it demands interrogating the assumptions and discourses that underpin global development. Critical thinking invites us to question why certain metrics GDP, literacy, industrial output are treated as neutral indicators, ignoring centuries of extraction, institutional suppression, and knowledge appropriation.

From a postcolonial perspective, these *objective* measures are ideologically loaded, reproducing hierarchies established during colonial rule.

By applying postcolonial theory alongside critical thinking, we can uncover systemic biases in global economic and political frameworks. For instance, labeling a country as *developing* frames poverty and underdevelopment as intrinsic, rather than historically contingent. This framing encourages passive acceptance of global hierarchies and discourages questioning of structural dependency. It also masks the agency of countries in the Global South, portraying them as incapable of self-determined growth. Moreover, critical thinking helps reveal how knowledge itself is implicated in power. Western theories of economics, development, and governance often claim universality, but they are shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts that favor industrialized nations. By interrogating these assumptions, scholars and policymakers can recognize that terms like *developed and developing* are not neutral, but tools that naturalize inequality.

Combining postcolonial theory and critical thinking allows for a dual lens: Marxism explains material exploitation, while postcolonial analysis exposes the discursive mechanisms that justify and normalize it. This approach encourages a move beyond surface-level indicators to examine the historical, cultural, and ideological forces shaping global inequality. It challenges us to see peripheral countries not as passive recipients of aid or guidance, but as actors with historical wealth, knowledge, and resources, constrained by a system designed to limit their autonomy.

Reassessing the Labels: *Developed and Developing*

Building on critical thinking and postcolonial insights, it becomes evident that the very categories of *developed and developing* are problematic in the contemporary context. These labels do not merely describe economic performance they encode historical hierarchies and ideological assumptions, signaling which countries are positioned as normative and which are considered subordinate. By continuing to use these terms uncritically, global discourse perpetuates a subtle form of intellectual colonialism, implying that Western ways of organizing economies, governance, and knowledge are universal benchmarks.

Postcolonial theory reminds us that non-Western societies were historically rich in resources, knowledge, and innovation. They were not inherently underdeveloped rather, they were systematically dispossessed and marginalized through colonial and neocolonial practices.

Therefore, calling a country *developing* obscures its historical agency and structural richness, framing its current position as natural or inevitable. Critical thinking enables us to interrogate these assumptions and challenge the normalized view of progress. It prompts questions such as: *Why are certain economic models treated as the gold standard? How do historical legacies of exploitation shape current inequalities? Who benefits from the continued use of hierarchical labels, and who is silenced?* Addressing these questions uncovers the ongoing influence of coloniality in modern development discourse and highlights the ideological power embedded in seemingly neutral terminology.

In essence, the terms *developed and developing* are not merely inaccurate they are tools of continued symbolic and structural domination, signaling that Western countries retain a conceptual authority over the rest of the world.

Recognizing this allows scholars, policymakers, and global citizens to move toward more nuanced and historically informed frameworks, which account for agency, historical wealth, and systemic inequality rather than perpetuating a binary hierarchy.

Postcolonial Transformation and the Problem of *Developed vs Developing*

The analysis of Bangladesh and Vietnam reveals that postcolonial dynamics are not relics of the past but continue to shape contemporary global relations albeit in transformed ways. While overt colonial rule has ended, the structures of dependency, extraction, and symbolic hierarchy persist. Peripheral countries remain resource-rich, labor-supplying, and innovation-constrained, not due to inherent deficiencies, but because global systems economic, political, and discursive maintain their subordinate position. The terminology of *developed and developing* itself is emblematic of this transformed postcolonial power. These labels encode historical hierarchies and reinforce the notion that Western nations are the benchmark of progress, while non-Western nations are incomplete or lacking. This language shapes policies, trade agreements, and international perceptions, limiting the ability of peripheral countries to exercise full economic and symbolic autonomy. Moreover, such classifications mask the precolonial wealth and intellectual achievements of these societies, implying that their current marginalization is natural rather than a product of historical exploitation.

From a critical thinking perspective, this insight challenges us to question taken-for-granted categories. We must ask:

1. *Are these labels neutral, or do they carry ideological weight?*
2. *Whose interests are served by maintaining these classifications?*
3. *How do they shape global policy, investment, and local opportunities?*

By combining Marxist and postcolonial perspectives, we see that global inequality is simultaneously material and discursive: the extraction of labor and resources is inseparable from the narratives that justify and normalize it. Critical reflection reveals that solutions cannot rely solely on economic growth metrics or market integration. Instead, they must address the structural and symbolic mechanisms that perpetuate dependency. This includes rethinking trade rules, intellectual property norms, and global narratives of development, while centering local knowledge, labor rights, and industrial autonomy. Moreover, examining historical trajectories highlights another dimension. After the devastation of World War II, countries in Europe had to rebuild from near-zero infrastructure and economic collapse. In this context, Western powers implemented the Marshall Plan, injecting massive financial aid and creating a market for surplus military equipment. This strategy accelerated economic recovery for Western Europe, allowing industrialized nations to regain economic dominance within just a few years. Meanwhile, formerly colonized countries, lacking access to such structural support and historical capital, were left in positions of dependency, reinforcing global hierarchies under new postwar conditions.

In sum, the persistence of postcolonial structures demonstrates that global inequalities are systemic and historically rooted, not merely accidental or technical. The terms *developed and developing* are therefore inadequate and misleading in the contemporary context. They reflect the continuing influence of Western-centric ideas, which have evolved rather than disappeared, and underscore the need for more nuanced, historically informed, and critically reflective approaches to understanding global economic hierarchies.

Conclusion

In light of the analysis above, it is clear that classifications such as *developed and developing* persist not because they neutrally describe economic differences, but because they reproduce deeply rooted narratives formed during the colonial era. Critical thinking allows us to see that these narratives survive precisely because they are embedded in education systems, international institutions, and everyday language. They shape how people imagine the world: who is seen as advanced, who requires assistance, and who has the authority to define progress itself.

By questioning the epistemological basis of these terms, we uncover that knowledge about development has historically been written from the perspective of the Global North, while other perspectives were marginalized or silenced.

Postcolonial theory shows that genuine transformation requires a rethinking of who produces knowledge, whose experience counts as valid, and whose models of progress are considered universal. This involves recognizing indigenous knowledge systems, local economic models, and alternative understandings of well-being that do not automatically mirror Western capitalist frameworks. Furthermore, critical engagement with development highlights that inequality exists not only between states but within them. Elites in both *developed and developing* countries may benefit from global capitalism, while marginalized communities continue to experience exploitation. This perspective complicates the binary division of the world and demonstrates that development discourse simplifies complex realities to maintain political convenience.

In addition, historical examples such as post-World War II reconstruction illustrate the structural advantages Western countries had in accelerating their economic recovery, while formerly colonized countries lacked similar mechanisms to overcome systemic underdevelopment.

Programs like the Marshall Plan and military-industrial sales enabled Western economies to regain and consolidate power rapidly, a privilege not extended to nations in the Global South, further reinforcing global inequalities.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the distinction between *developed and developing* countries is no longer analytically adequate. It obscures historical responsibility, ignores colonial legacies, and presents hierarchical relationships as natural facts. A critically informed, postcolonial approach invites us to move beyond such binaries and construct new frameworks that emphasize historical justice, epistemic plurality, and economic sovereignty. Only by rethinking these underlying assumptions can we imagine a global order that does not continue to reproduce the logic of colonial domination under the guise of development.

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