
Neoliberalism and Developmentalism in Brazil: Can the Twain Ever Meet?

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Résumé

There is a pervasive belief even amongst development theorists that have been critical of the "Washington Consensus" that neoliberalism can be given a human face. The proponents of this neo-developmental consensus agree that the first generation of structural reforms that were imposed on the developing world in the 1980's and 1990's have had disastrous consequences, yet they also strongly believe that a more humane and enlightened form of neoliberalism can be constructed. In the most extreme form the proponents of this view argue that while neoliberalism has constrained the traditional Keynesian style of state intervention, the global integration that has been brought about in the wake of neoliberal reforms has nonetheless allowed economies in the Global South unprecedented access to export markets, foreign finance and advanced technologies. Therefore, if properly managed, global integration can be leveraged to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and meet other major developmental needs of poorer economies.

The neo-developmental view however is at odds with the recent experiences of Brazil. In Brazil, the first decade of the 21st century witnessed a leftist shift in the country's political trajectory. The victory of the Worker's Party in 2002 inaugurated a new and important period in its economy as several key social policies were rolled out and the conditions of the poorest of Brazilians saw significant improvement. The left remained within the confines of the neoliberal "rules of the game" but it sought to make these rules more flexible at the margins and this untowardly combination actually seemed to work out very well during the early days of the left regime. But in recent years, this combination has proved to be too difficult to sustain. The economy has slid into a deep crisis. And despite its "responsible" brand of leftism the decade long rule of the Worker's Party has come to a bitter end. After having won the elections in 2014 the President elect, Dilma Rousseff, was impeached in late 2016. The interim government that took over reversed several progressive social policies of the PT. A strict austerity program the likes of which Brazil has not witnessed since the debt crisis of the 1980's is being implemented and a massive privatization program is currently underway. All this has been topped up by the election of the far-right candidate, Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections. It is in this context that this paper seeks to address certain economic and political limitations of the neo-developmental discourse and in doing so it attempts to provide alternate ways to resuscitate the neo-developmental agenda.

Mots-Clés: Developmentalism, Neoliberalism, Brazil, Crisis

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