LUISS ⵟ

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di Impresa e Management

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Empowerment and the Subversion of Representation: a Critical Analysis of the Development Discourse

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Anno Accademico 2020/2021

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization is said to be the defining paradigm of the new millennium, and, for many aspects, it actually is. However, when it comes to North-South relations, development is the most important concept in the international system because it is development that defines the Global North and South as distinct subjects and locates the *Third World* within the international arena. Whether contrasted or praised, the development discourse shapes the understanding of Non-Western nations, dominates international cooperation and constructs a field of actions in terms of policy making. Development evolved as an incontestable paradigm though which people and nations come to be characterized in sight of their development or lack thereof. While its epistemological foundations can be traced back to colonialism, development appeared in its discursive materiality since the early 1950s. Developmental strategies varied greatly since its advent and moved from economic growth to civil participation, market-led development, empowerment, sustainable development and gender-led development. Precisely its overarching and dynamic nature makes people assuming development to be a self-evident concept. But what people think when they hear speaking of development? What politicians want to achieve when they engage in development projects? And, how development workers frame their activities and operations? The following thesis is concerned with that and with what all this has to do with relations of power between Global North and South. Its main topic is development as a discourse and the structures that inform it. This implies a theoretical approach which recognize the existing relations between knowledge and power and studies the way in which they get sedimented in discourses. In particular, the thesis is interested in the

historical and conjunctural evolution of this discourse and in the lines of continuity and discontinuity that can be spotted along its evolution from the 20th century until the present days. The development paradigm gathered an arrangement of assumptions on different levels: on a philosophical level, the Cartesian rationality and the separation between a knowing subject and a knowledgeable object, the economic rationality and the idea of Homo oeconomicus, and the anthropocentric view of nature as something to be tamed and subdued; on a meta-theoretical level, the colonial dichotomies between a civilized Self and an uncivilized Other, the assumption that a good society is a *developed* society, and the idea that the process of human progress is linear and monological; on the level of methods, the idea that *development* can be measured, and the assumption that the comparative and quantitative methodologies are to be preferred; finally, on the practical level, the certitude that development can be achieved by relying on expert knowledge and implementing planned policy interventions. However, the development discourse and its assumptions did not remain constantly unquestioned. The development discourse offers a specific way of representing realty and social change which – despite being presented as universal, natural and inevitable – remains one among many representations of the order of things. Especially since the crisis of development in the 80s, new concepts have become influential and have challenged the discourse from within constituting fundamental contradictions with its general principles. Among them, the one with the highest radical potential is definitely empowerment, which was presided to be especially suited to stand against global injustice and inequality. The concept entered the development discourse and challenged its Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing assumption. The thesis wants precisely to scrutinize the discursive and material clash between the development discourse and the concept of empowerment in order to understand if it could actually represent a valid means to overcome development's downturns. Globalization discourse is slowly reshaping inter-state relations, the development paradigm is losing its momentum, and the political focus is growingly shifting from states to civil societies. The concept of empowerment is thus extremely useful to rethink North-South relation in a post-development sense, or at least to analyze its internal contradictions and identify novel solutions.

The first part of the thesis is about theory and will lay the conceptual foundation for the rest of the work. Poststructuralism is the theoretical lens that informs the whole study, and the theory of Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe are the pivotal reference for the analysis of discourse and power that is carried out in the following chapters. Chapter two contains the archaeology of the development discourse, the analysis of its objects and rules of formations, and it then investigates the historical change of the discursive formation of development. It first examines

the colonial legacy of the development apparatus, to then analyze its structures on a diachronic and synchronic perspective, and it finally inspects its recent contamination with the Globalization and neoliberal discourses. In the third chapter the crisis of development is confronted, and its main critiques discussed. Particular attention is devoted to the rise of the concept of empowerment within the development system and the ambiguities it engendered. The disturbing and radical challenge that empowerment poses to development is explored and a genealogy of the concept is carried out to better understand its internal contradictions. The distortion that empowerment underwent once integrated in the development discourse are also object of study together with the implications of its depoliticization. Finally in the last chapter a case-study on a Tanzanian NGO is presented. The NGO and its projects, hinged on community empowerment, have been object of a qualitative analysis to understand the material consequence of the depoliticizing implications of the development discourse. The case-study offers useful insights to better understand the main criticalities of empowering projects within the development system and the difficulties of overcoming situations of marginality and misery.

THEORY

1. Epistemological Foundations: Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Social Science

No one, especially social scientists, has direct access to objective reality, and to what we might call the "social truth". All of us are conditioned by our set of values, underlying assumptions, their specific positionality, knowledge interests, etc. It could be said that any gaze to the world is somehow filtered by subjective perspective. By saying this I am not denying the possibility of knowing and explaining reality, but I am suggesting that any quest of objectivity should be aware of its limits and of the subjective filter that express that objectivity. A theory is precisely a deliberately adopted filter which makes sense for us to use to better understand and explain our reality. This chapter is specifically aimed at clarifying and justifying the filter adopted in this work: its theoretical and epistemological foundation. The theoretical foundation of the work derives from poststructuralism, while the central concepts are discourse, power, and hegemony (following Michel Foucault's definitions and Laclau and Mouffe's theory), and the methods is archaeology and genealogy.

1.1. Structuralism

Structuralism followed the meticulous work of Ferdinand de Saussure about linguistics and his pursuit of the general structures that cross languages. He originally distinguished between (a) *langage,* the capability of speaking; (b) *langue*, a specific system of language; and (c) *parole,* an applied language in the sense of the individual act of communication. He also defined the sign, as the smallest unit of the *langue* and as composed of signifier and signified. What is most relevant out of his work is the arbitrariness of the sign, or what we might call its relationality, that is the heart of de Saussure's linguistic.

"A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others" (de Saussure, 1983, p. 113).

No fixed relationships, nor any natural connection, exists between the signifier and the signified. Any meaning is constructed within the language itself and there is no relation of exteriority in place. The structuralist approach marked out the abandonment of the correspondence theory of language or truth which saw them as transparently representing reality (Olssen 2003). Within the structuralist framework, the meaning of the signs is not the true expression of the real. It emerges out of a game of differences, where any words, by differing from others (at the phonetic and sematic levels), can fulfil a designating function. Rather than being any one-to-one correspondence between nature/reality and mind/language, objects and meanings can be found in the structures of the language. According to de Saussure, the sign is social by nature and detached from any individual agency, as the linguistic general structures harvest and explain individuals' meanings. De Saussure proposed a model of language which is envisioned as a closed system of elements and rules, crystallized in general structures, that may be described independently from any individual subjectivity (Radford and Radford 2005). Therefore, an objective analysis of a language system is a nonsense. There is no objective correspondence between names and things, meaning is instead made accessible by patterns. As Al Umma said it, De Saussure believed that a word's meaning is based less on the object it refers to and more on its structure (Al Umma 2015). By a way of example, if Saussure had to analyze this section, he would be concerned with describing the language system that readers and writer must share to make communication possible, instead of focusing on the thoughts and beliefs of the author or on the actual meaning the author wanted to convey. He scrutinized almost exclusively those general norms and codes of the language system that

must be held in common by all users to make communication effective (De Saussure, 1983). Notwithstanding de Saussure's very specific focus on linguistic, his theoretical insights has been universalized far beyond the realm of linguistics. His ideas have been later applied to other aspect of life and culture to explain diverse systems of meaning, up to the point that his theory could be considered at the root of one of the most relevant paradigm's shifts of the 20th century philosophy. Many authors adopted his relational and objective view and engaged in the quest of the laws that emerges out of a differential analysis of systems of meaning. With this philosophical turn the subject disappeared. Meaning is produced by the relational games of the elements of the system; thus, subjects can be utterly explained as an effect of these structures. Questioning this claim became the central project of poststructuralism.

1.2. Poststructuralism

Even if Poststructuralism was born as a critical response to structuralist ideas, it would be erroneous to think of it as an utter refusal to structuralist thought. Poststructuralism not only questioned, but also continued, the project of structuralism. However, while structuralism is founded on the assumption that the language system can be objectively described – investigating its structures and the relation among its elements – poststructuralism posits the contingency of those conceptualizations (Radford and Radford 2005). For de Saussure it was possible to consider language as a closed and orderly system just because he purposedly negated its historicity

> *"The first thing which strikes one on studying linguistics facts is that the language user is unaware of their succession in time: he is dealing with a state. Hence the linguist who wishes to understand this state must rule out of consideration everything which brought that state about, and pay no attention to diachrony. Only by suppressing the past, can he enter into the mind of the language user. The intervention of history can only distort his judgement"* (de Saussure, 1983).

He was forced to study language at one moment, overlooking on its shifting of meaning over time. The shortcoming of this approach led to the development of poststructuralism. It criticized the axiom of closed and rigid system which assign one signified to each signifier, and the claim that they can be scientifically identified. Poststructuralist revealed the fluid nature of the relation between signified and signifier that, far from being rigid and objective, is always contextual and historical (Ziai 2015). The relation between the two does not constitute a rigid structure, but it persists only insofar as it is reproduced constantly. Poststructuralist

problematized also the fact that, by assigning one sole signified to each signifier, structuralism systematically excludes any other possible meaning, thus, resulting in the abnegation of the Other. However, as we noted above, poststructuralism shares many elements of the structuralist theory and radicalizes them. First, both theories start from the assumption that there is no direct correspondence between reality and language, and that the real can only be perceived through representation systems (language) which construct reality. Poststructuralist though, views these systems as multiples, unobjective and changeable. Second, either structuralism and poststructuralism consider signs (made of signifier and signified) as the smallest units of language structures whose meaning is relational and endogenously explainable. However, poststructuralism overcomes structuralism's universality and outlines the contextuality and historicity of signs' meanings. Finally, poststructuralists distance themselves from a completely deterministic interpretation of the subject. Unlike in structuralism, subjects have agency in following one among different competing discourses. To sum up, poststructuralism repudiates the very possibility of existence of enduring truths. Any truth is fully contextual and obtained by virtue of the relationship between signs. Therefore, propositions are nor true nor false; they simply make sense or not depending on their context of formation (Radford and Radford 2005).

1.3. Social Science and Research Informed by Poststructuralism

If language and social reality cannot be explained through universal structures and there is no objective reality to make reference to, it comes naturally to wonder how to apply poststructuralist lens to research. Social science is indeed usually linked with the claim to a truthful and objective description of social reality – something that is refused by poststructuralist philosophy. However, the poststructuralist repudiation of objectivity does not imply that social reality cannot still be described as the results of the complex contingent and contextual relationship of the material signs that informs it. In general, it displays the following traits:

- Social Science informed by poststructuralism is constructivists and anti-essentialist, thus, it interprets reality as socially constructed and refutes any transcendental definition of social actors and phenomena (Ziai 2015).

- It regards the "social" as the results of a system of differences in which identities (of actors and phenomena) emerge out of the opposition to others, and through their position within a structure (what feminists call "positionality") (Deitch, 2021).

- Furthermore, it rejects the idea that reality exists outside any system of representation. Therefore, maximum emphasis is given to the political moment and its role in structuring society. There are no rules determining the relation between elements of society, thus the field of the social is one of contingency and undecidability. In this context. the political moment is crucial as politico-hegemonic articulations retroactively create the interests (and the identities) they claim to represent (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

- Consequently, the subject is not the origin of social relations, but it is constituted by them in a moment that is typically political. Identities are not pre-given but constituted and reconstituted in the public sphere where politics plays a crucial role in shaping subjects through a game of representation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

- Meanings are never stable and fixed, however, certain regularities among elements of society – even if contextual, historical, and changeable – can be observed. These social formations are the strategic results of "hegemonic practices" that give meaning and creates social order. These hegemonic practices are the expression of articulations of power that by creating chains of equivalence between various demands (unifying signifier and signified) establish a social order (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

- Finally, truth cannot be though as the unilateral correspondence between statement and reality, because there is no perception of reality beyond systems of representation. The "humanity" of truth is claimed; truth is socially (and usually strategically) produced (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

Why should we base research, and especially this work, on such a complex and (self)problematic epistemological background?

- First of all, because this theoretical background is able to adequately express the complexity, mutability and historicity of social reality without relying on any reductionist and objective interpretation. Essentialist theories repeatedly reduce the complexity of reality operating a game of exclusion and abnegation of deviations. By a way of example, a central premise of liberal economic theories is the assumption of the *Homo oeconomicus* to refer to the natural inclination of human beings to further their material interests. Any

empirical observation or study on the matter (people acting accordingly to this pattern) is thus explained by reference to a prediscursive and pregiven human nature, instead of analyzing in which societies or in which times this kind of behavior is more or less dominant, and which social conditions supported the behavior. This kind of knowledge about reality stands out of any possible political or theoretical contestation and it just serve as a legitimating ideology for certain types of domination. Standing against this kind of knowledge leads to a poststructuralist attitude (Ziai 2015).

- In addition, poststructuralism – or at least few of its currents – leaves room for the postulation of social change; something that in the current state of affairs is theoretically abnegated. For instance, neoliberalist theories are based on the central assumptions of the *homo oeconomicus* and of the historical necessity of the market economy. Taken as pre-given truths, they made impossible to think about any possible alternative to present economic order which is taken as the only feasible one. The poststructuralist recognition of reality as the expression of specific system of meaning/representation allows to identify the hegemonic relation of signification that informs certain theoretical paradigm (as the neoliberal one). At the same time, it clears the way for the definition of new systems of representation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

Notwithstanding its strengths, the poststructuralist approach has its own weaknesses that need to be faced. These are the exclusion of the referent, the little agency left to subjects, and the neglect of macrostructures and general theories.

The exclusion of the referent alludes to the impossibility, from the post structuralist perspective, to make any statement on reality. This confinement is hardly compatible with social science. However, poststructuralism does not postulate the unfeasibility of speaking about reality but urges to be aware of the system of representation that grants us access to reality and of the perspectivity of any statement.

Concerning the agency of subjects, poststructuralism has been doomed for viewing subject as mere results of structures thus playing little role in society. However, on a closer look, poststructuralism does not neglect individual agency but simply shifts its field of action from reality to the politics of representation.

The last problematic aspect is the primacy given to difference, dispersion and microstructures. The constant fear of excluding the Other makes it hard to use it to propose coherent and general analysis on the macrostructures of society. However, while being aware

of this limit, the opinion of the author is that those analysis are always reductionist and arbitrary to a certain degree. Any representation that aspires to universality is based on the acceptance of some particularities and the exclusion of others, resulting always in a "contaminated" universality. General theory, as representation of reality, makes no exception. Therefore, the focus on microstructures is the most logical solution to analyze a field of research (reality) that is always contingent, contextual and historical.

2. Discourse, Power and Hegemony

Following a poststructuralist perspective on reality and society, representation is inevitable: systems of meaning and representation are our sole access to reality. Therefore, discourse - defined as a specific system of meaning that defines certain relation between signifiers and signified – is one of the central categories of this work. The second one is power intended in its close relationship with knowledge and representation. The final category is that of hegemony and it will be central in the latter part of the work where we will try to define operational political strategy to rethink empowerment and NGO's practices. The first two concepts will be defined in this section based on the work of Michael Foucault, while the third one in light of the precious theory of Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. My view is that an analytics of discourse and power founded on the work of Foucault is able to identify the relations of power and the effects of specific types of knowledge that are inaccessible to other theoretical approaches. The strategic conception of hegemony by Lacalu and Mouffe will be instead of extreme relevance to transform the Foucauldian analysis into a practical plan of action to challenge current relations of power.

2.1. Analysis of Discourse

Proposing the Foucauldian perspective on discourse analysis is somehow tricky because one is confronted with the question which works exactly to follow. There are indeed many differences between his original methodology of discourse analysis exposed in Archaeology of Knowledge and the evolution it underwent in his latter works. In here we will attempt to provide a comprehensive synthesis.

In Archaeology of Knowledge, like the structuralism of de Saussure, Foucault was interested in the rules by which elements can be ordered and organized to produce meaningful patterns (Radford and Radford 2005). Unlike de Saussure though, he wanted to describe the

concrete relationship that can be described between concrete elements. Foucault described arrangement of this kind as discursive formation and defined discourse as "a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation" (Foucault, 2013). According to him, discursive formations are marked by regularities and common rules of formation in the constitution of objects, statements, and concepts. Those rules provide the unity of a discourse and order relations between statements (central units of discursive formations). Archaeology is thus defined as the identification of those regularities within discursive practices. Therefore, its aim is not to find the notions "behind" the discourses – as in the history of ideas – but to scrutinize the conditions of existence of discourse and their internal relations between statements (Foucault, 2013). These discourses give rise to "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak". Therefore, there is no objective reality to be represented by discourses but through discoursed we build our social reality. Discourses constructs the objects of which they speak and, according to Foucault, they should be thus described as material realities.

Few years later in "the Order of Discourse" Foucault described few new concepts like the rules of exclusion and the systems of the control and delimitation of discourse (Ziai 2015). By these expressions he meant that for each discourse certain objects, statements and concepts are considered legitimate while others are doomed as illegitimate. Rules of exclusion may be the opposition between reason and madness as well as that between true and false. By recognizing the game of legitimation operated within discourse, Foucault wanted to acknowledge the social character of discourses and their entanglements with relations of power (Ziai 2015). In the latter works of Foucault, e.g., History of Madness and History of Sexuality, the topic of the intersection between discourse and power is dominant. He focused closely on the relation between knowledge/truth and power, which in his perspective directly implies one another; that there can be no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. Discourse makes possible and support relations of power while power engenders certain discourses and excludes others (Foucault, 1978). Power relations revolves around certain "veridical discourses" - namely, something that is perceived as true and right – and each society has its *régime of truth,* its politics of truth, that is the discourses it regards, accepts and makes function as true. In this relation between truth and power, they constantly produce and sustain one another, truth legitimizing power and power extending truth. Therefore, Foucault is precisely interested in the political, economic and institutional *régime* of the production of truth. Taken for granted the assumption that there is no inner and objective truth, he is aware

of the perspectivity of knowledge that is always in close relationships with power. Within this theoretical framework, subjects are regarded as the effects of these discursive relations between power and knowledge. However, it is important to outline that these discourses are manifold, and they can be deployed in different political strategies having different, and sometimes unexpected, effects on the field of power.

Based on Foucault's theory of discourse, the theoretical/methodological pillars of the analysis carried out in this work will be the following.

- The deliberate abstention from any claims to objectivity and truth, and the recognition that truth can be seen as a powerful rhetorical practice as well as a strategic one (Graham 2005).
- A perspective that gives primary relevance to discourses and their units of analysis, statements. We can roughly defines discourses as: "systems of representation, in which relations between signifiers and signifieds are fixed, certain assumption are considered true, certain mechanism for the production of truth are accepted, certain elements are linked and in which certain rules guide the formation of objects, statements, enunciative modalities and topics" (Ziai 2015).
- The recognition of the social character of discourse and their deep entanglement with power, with which they have a relation of mutual production, support and validation.
- A point of view that interpret subjects and identities as deeply conditioned, if not constituted, by discourses which provide them with certain concepts, truths, ways of thinking, manners of constructing reality and rules to produce statements.

2.2. Analysis of Power

In arena of power, we also have to specify how we intend to apply Foucault's theory on the field of research. For a long time, power was accepted solely as a pure constraint to freedom counterposed to resistance, and politics mirrored this schema. Foucault had the great merit of debunking secular false myths about power, especially its sole conception as something possessed by powerful persons or institutions. Such an interpretation was almost universally shared and is well represented by the definition given by Weber where power is intended as

> *"the chance of a man or a number of men to realise their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action"* (Wallimann, Tatsis, and Zito 1977).

Foucault overcame this dualistic interpretation of power and describes it as relational, ubiquitous, intentional, nonsubjective, and positive (in the sense of productive) (Foucault, 1984). Power is not embodied in states and sovereign entities, but it manifests itself in social relations at the microlevel, and state apparatuses are the institutional crystallizations of these decentralized relations.

"L'analisi in termini di potere non deve postulare, come dati iniziali, la sovranità dello Stato, la forma della legge o l'unità globale di una dominazione, che ne sono le forme ultime. Con il termine potere mi sembra che si debba intendere innanzitutto la molteplicità dei rapporti di forza immanenti al campo in cui si esercitato e costitutivi della loro organizzazione; il gioco che attraverso lotte e scontri incessanti li trasforma, li rafforza, li inverte; gli appoggi che questi rapporti di forza trovano gli uni negli altri, in modo da formare una catena o un sistema, o, al contrario, le differenze, le contraddizioni che li isolano gli uni dagli altri; le strategie infine in cui realizzano i loro effetti, ed il cui disegno generale o la cui cristallizzazione istituzionale prendono corpo negli apparati statali, nella formulazione della legge, nelle egemonie sociali". (Foucault, 1984)

Institutional and sovereign power, made intelligible as Law, is, thus, just the last configuration of a net of forces that are inherently relational and immanent.

The all-pervasiveness and ubiquity of power is the direct consequence of its abovementioned close relation to knowledge. There is no room outside power relations. Foucault described power relations as intentional and nonsubjective implying that it is possible to identify certain logics and rationalities behind them, however, they cannot be traced back to the choice of any individual subject. The clearest examples can be witnessed in the economic relations in capitalism, which take place following a certain rationality, following specific objectives, and obtaining certain results, but without anyone coordinating or planning these relations.

In addition, Foucault defines power as positive and productive. By that, he wants to state that power declinations go beyond the pure repressive function.

"Bisogna essere ben presi in trappola da quest'astuzia […], per assegnare alla censura, al divieto di dire e pensare, un ruolo fondamentale; bisogna farsi un'immagine capovolta del potere per credere che ci parlino di libertà tutte quelle voci che, da tanto tempo, nella nostra civiltà, ripetono senza fine la formidabile ingiunzione di dire ciò che siamo, quel che facciamo, quel che ricordiamo, e quel che abbiamo dimenticato, quel che nascondiamo e quel che si nasconde, quello a cui pensiamo e quel che pensiamo di non pensare. Lavoro immenso al quale l'Occidente ha piegato delle generazioni per produrre – mentre altre forme di lavoro assicuravano l'accumulazione di capitale – l'assoggettamento

Nowadays repression is no longer its privileged instrument, but just one among many elements that have functions of rousing, enhancement, control, surveillance, management, and organization of the forces it dominates. Such a power is more interested in producing forces to organize, manage and let them grow, instead of constraining, seizing and destroying them. People are solicited, induced but not obliged; they willingly participate because these power relations revolve around specific veridical discourses, namely, something that is perceived as true and right both by governors and governed ones. This productive power generates field of knowledge and types of practices: it produces reality, truths, and objects. Power becomes the power to signify, to offer a meaning and a sense. From the power of death to the power over life. The productive force of power unfolds in the construction of the very subjects (subjectification) it intends to control. Power ends up influencing bodies (through demography, health systems, etc.) and constructing identities (through its *régime* of truth). Foucault refers to these techniques as bio-power, thus forces aimed at managing biological processes of life. To better explain this fundamental aspect, we can refer to Foucault's History of Sexualities. In this work, he firstly observes how, far from being consigned to silence and repression, sexuality since the XVII century started to relentlessly appear in every discourse. It became an object of knowledge for medicine (as a pathology), economics (as a technology of demography), and biology (as a parameter of reproduction). Once it has been invested by techniques of knowledge and discursive procedures, power had the chance to manage, organize and control it. Multiple centers of knowledge (economics, biology, medicine, and psychoanalysis) restlessly probed sexuality in the name of the quest of its hidden truth, and started to manage its practices, to cover it with norms and to classify its deviations. Sex was made desirable but most of all, it became a mean of signification, a sign of one's identity, a tool of subjectification.

Finally, in his latest works, Foucault coined the new term of governmentality which reflects a specific technology of power which aims at the "conduct of conduct", hence at structuring the field of possible action of others.

Ogni tecnologia di governo implica una "razionalità politica" che è in qualche modo bifrontale: da una parte l'asse concettuale governo-governamentalità rappresenta e razionalizza tecniche di esercizio del potere, un campo discorsivo che individua oggetti, limiti, argo mentazioni giustificative e legittimazioni, razionalità normative e regole: quindi un discorso di saperi/verità, attorno a cui si struttura il potere;

dall'altro è, ovviamente, una specifica e concreta forma di intervento di governo: e le due facce si condizionano reciprocamen- te in una trasformazione incessante. (Bazzicalupo 2013).

This form of power lets you speak providing you with the words and gets you free just to immediately channels you. The art of governmentality is to guide the usage people can make of their freedom. It is a technology of power that links together the act of governing, the way of thinking and the processes of subjectivation. The governmental apparatus constitutes its object – individuals and populations – (posing them in the reach of its governability), express its problematic nature, and simultaneously displays the strategies to make it better (problem solving) (Bazzicalupo 2013). It manages the naturality of lives through their subjectivation.

To sum up, Foucault throughout his works distinguished between three forms of power: sovereign, disciplinary, and governmental power. Sovereign power is denoted as repressive and prohibitive; it is violent and juridical, and its mechanism aims at excluding from the discourse. Disciplinary power is instead positive, it produces reality, gives rise to truth and knowledge, and construct subjects. It operates at the level of the *bios*, regulating bodies and their summation, organizing lives, and managing human practices. Finally governmental power, which is a radicalization of the previous biopolitical conceptualization of power. It is based on the idea that power is relational and distributed between governors and governed. It manifests itself through the structuration of the field of action of free and powerful subjects. Its purpose is to govern by shaping free will, identities and subjectivities.

The analysis of power following Foucault's theory will thus display the following traits:

- The recognition of the relations of power intertwined with discourses which creates their objects, provide their truths, and constructs their representations.
- The conceptualization of a certain type of power that is productive and positive; it constitutes subjects, shapes identities, and influences their field of action.
- A special focus on those forms of power (disciplinary and governmental) that are less interested in commanding "slaves" and more preoccupied with managing lives of free individuals, by structuring their preferences and representing them.

2.3. Hegemony and the Primacy of the Political

Extremely helpful for the purpose of this work will be the theory of Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose seminal work, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, laid the foundations

for a vibrant field of research. The utility of their theory resides in the fact that they not only offered a social ontology (where the social is conceptualized *in toto* as discursive), but they also developed a general theory of social change (Stengel and Nabers 2019). Their theoretical framework is indeed perfectly suited to define the epistemological and material conditions that allow certain relations of power and knowledge to become hegemonic. Moreover, it offers the possibility of conceiving strategies to challenge the current state of power. Therefore, it will be extremely useful to make this work not only a critical discursive analysis but also a positive proposal of novel horizons.

In Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, discourse must not be reduced to its linguistic features, but "it is embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). Linguistic and material elements of discourse jointly constitute different articulations. As in the poststructuralist view, discursive formations are never completely fixed, and precisely such unfixity of discourse is what makes social change possible. Meanings, that becomes identities once we move to the social arena, are fixed as a result of their political articulation as part of a discourse, while political articulation is a process that embrace the whole sphere of social relations (Stengel and Nabers 2019). To better explain this process, we must introduce Laclau and Mouffe's differentiation between discursivity and discourse. While discursivity is the chaotic, untouched and unintelligible structure of social differences, discourses bind those elements together and transforms them into moments. This process of turning casual elements into moment is what they call articulation. Through this operation identities (meanings) are fixed as the articulation of multiple discursive elements (signifiers, subjects, objects, practices). Identities and meanings could thus be defined as discursive snarls. Any articulation exceeds the sole process of binding, and it has also one of excluding. By fixing the discursive element into a moment and giving it a particular meaning, all other possible meanings are simultaneously excluded (Stengel and Nabers 2019). All those other possible meanings are what makes the articulation unfixed and unstable, but they are also constitutive because by excluding other meanings make specific understanding possible. As a result, the fruits of articulatory processes (discourse, identities or meanings) are always unstable, incomplete and highly contextual.

Starting from these ontological foundations, Laclau and Mouffe aimed at understanding "hegemony", thus the way in which certain discourse establish themselves as universal. Their approach is grounded in privileging the moment of political articulation through the central category of analysis that is hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). To put it simple, hegemony

refers to the process of political articulation where a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality incommensurable with it. At the same time, when successful, it means that a particular *weltanshauung* establishes itself as universally valid. Borrowing few terms from the Lacanian theory, they define this particularity that assumes a "universal" structuring function, a nodal point (or master signifier) (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). These hegemonic process of political articulation by fixing identities retroactively create the interest they claim to represent.

How can we explain the higher effectiveness of certain hegemonic projects that manage to establish themselves as dominant? Following Laclau and Mouffe's theory there are three aspects on which we should focus:

- The construction of multiple social demands/motions as equivalent (chain of equivalence).
- The exploitation of social antagonism to create internal frontiers between the Self and a threatening Other (that simultaneously blocks and constitutes the Self's identity).
- The representation of the universality by a master signifier.

To explain this, we can start by saying that social actors occupy diverse positions within the discourse that constitute society (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). They could be thus defined as multiple particularities. Given their differential positions, there are social antagonisms creating internal frontiers within the social fabric. Facing oppressive forces, a set of particularities establish a chain of equivalence between themselves. We can thus refer to different types of logic: a logic of equivalence, that stresses the common ground of different demands, and a logic of difference, which stresses the contradictory content of these demands. However, the totality of the chain must be represented somehow, beyond the differential particularism of the relations of equivalence and in contrast to the differential and antagonistic particularities. The means of representation is the master signifier, hence one particularity that, without ceasing to be itself, transform its own body in the representation of a universality transcending it (the chain of equivalence). This process of representation is what they defined hegemonic relation. This process relies heavily on antagonism: different demands become equivalent only by virtue of an excluded Other.

To conclude, which ones are the main features of their theoretical approach that are going to be applied in the following work?

- A discursive interpretation of the social and the centrality given to the political moment, as one in which social identities are fixed, constituted, and represented.
- A social ontology that conceptualizes social change (as the redirection of discursive practices) and puts it at the level of the politics of representation.
- The concepts of discursivity, moment, articulation, master signifier and hegemony that ease the processes of recognizing current articulation of power and leave the room to theorize new ones

3. A Brief Remark on the Application of Theory and on Method

So, which methodological consequences follow from the above theoretical foundations? And how will they be applied on the practical research process?

First of all, a poststructuralist analysis is not concerned with reality, nor with its interpretation, but the relations of power and knowledge that make one interpretation or another possible. It focuses on the production of meanings in discourse, and the way in which these meaning opera a representative function and have material consequences. A poststructuralist method will hunt the specific contents attributed to concepts, the words treated as synonymous or counterposed as antonymous, and the general relation between signifiers and signifieds.

The analysis of discourse is the archeological and genealogical study in Foucauldian terms. It scrutinizes the rules of formation that constitute the unity of discourses by constituting their objects, concepts, and statements. It also examines the condition of existence and possibility of the discourse, the truths it supports and the objects it excludes. It analyzes discourses to chase the repressive and productive dimensions of representative power. How are relations of power sustained and supported by certain discourses? What is the strategic purpose that can be identified in their effects?

The development apparatus will be scrutinized through this lens, to identify the rules of formation of this discourse, and see how it shapes its objects, policy statements and subjects. It will be analyzed both synchronically and diachronically to let emerge the relations of power entangled within it. Special attention will be given to the appearance within the discourse of the concept of "empowerment" and to the relation of power that allowed its deformation. In addition, the role of African NGOs within this web of power relation will be analyzed: how are they conditioned? Which position do they occupy? Finally, through a case-study of a Tanzanian NGO (Art in Tanzania), empowerment practices will be problematized in light of

the analysis, and, through the theoretical background of Laclau and Mouffe, its political position will be criticized and refounded.

THE INVENTION OF DEVELOPMENT

Relations between North and South, the West and the rest, center and periphery constitutes a clear example of what we previously defined a system of representation. These representations are imbued with relations of power and sustained by specific discourses which produce knowledge, truth, and identities. During the 20th century the colonial discourse was pushed aside and substituted by the development rhetoric. Many differences can be traced; however, the development discourse holds a relevant epistemological debt with the colonial one that merits to be assessed.

1. Colonial Discourse

To cite Valentin Y. Mudimbe (2007), the meaning of the words colonialism and colonization is essentially that of organization. Both terms etymologically refer to *colere,* thus, planning, and reflect the ambitions of both settlers and colonialists of organizing and transforming non-European areas in European constructs. Those processes unfolded along three key lines: procedures of land acquisition, allocation and exploitation; politics of domestication of locals; and management of pre-existing institutions and introduction of new modes of production (Mudimbe, 2007). Therefore, it is possible to identify three complementary practices: rule over physical spaces; transformation of minds; reinterpretation of local economic structures following a European perspective. Those projects constitute the colonizing structure. Some authors already outlined the existing lines of continuity between the colonial structure of material exploitation with those put in place during the neoliberal era

through the international organization of labor (Novelli and Ferus-Comelo 2009). However, our interest focuses on the huge corpus of knowledge that the colonial apparatus displayed to support and sustain its project. On which epistemological foundations did the colonizing structure and its discourses produce societies, cultures and marginalized subjects?

The foundational structure of colonial discourse is the division of the world into civilized and uncivilized peoples or nations and the whole dichotomizing system that it engenders (Ziai 2015). The colonial discoursed is hinged on paradigmatic oppositions as traditional/modern; agriculture/industry; colonizing/colonized; fit-to-govern/unfit-to-govern; superior/inferior; rational/emotional; reason/instinct; sovereign/dependent; oral/written; and the basic claim is that uncivilized nations are unable to take care of themselves and to self-govern so, civilized ones must help them for their own sake. This system of representation is not solely the epistemological support of an imperial policy. The knowledge it produces serves to construct truth, ways of living, and modes of thinking that bind together in artificial identities. Therefore, the power it exerts is simultaneously representative and productive (subjectivizing) (Ziai 2015).

Non c'è dubbio che il colonialismo diretto o indiretto provoca sempre nei paesi che lo subiscono una costrizione culturale, una contaminazione, tanto più penetrante perché occulta. I modi di vivere e di pensare delle nazioni dominanti tendono ad imporsi alle nazioni dominate: più ancora sono accettati, addirittura ricercati. Sorgono dei modelli, vere servitù per i popoli che li adottano (Bigo, 1974).

These processes paved the way for the formation of the European/Western identity as progressive, liberal and civilized: as the ideal norm of human existence from which any "otherness" is depicted as a deficient deviance. The colonizing structure worked as a technology of meaning for the West, that – by distinguishing itself from a barbarian and backward Other, constituted its own Self. The characteristics attributed to the Self and to the Other are linked by chains of equivalence (superior equals civilized which equals rationality, etc.) and represented by the "western white men" which acts as a "master signifier". It is the benchmark according to which all other possible identities/subjectivities are found deficient and in relation to which differences are organized along lines of race and gender (Ziai 2015). People of the worlds came to be characterized in terms of their "civilization" or lack thereof (Gordon et al. 2004).

Following Mudimbe's works, such a construction of the European Self and the uncivilized Other rests – at least concerning the African continent – on three epistemological foundations: missionary pastorale, travelers' accounts, and anthropology (Mudimbe, 2007). The accounts

of the travelers all show the same interest in describing the Africans as exotic and different. He is not only the Other that is anyone but me; he also represents the key to specify the identity of the Self. With the birth of anthropology this discourse about the "uncivilized men" is made scientific knowledge and – evolving in an explicit system of power and knowledge – made possible the reification of the primitive. Anthropology occupied a primary role in the discourse of colonization by promoting several binary oppositions between the virtues of Europe and the lack thereof in Africa, South America and Asia. The anthropologist contributed to the study of the colonized territory by interpreting them with a methodological grid which was strictly dependent on the historical experience of the West. The discourse of missionaries, especially in Africa, contributed to the formation of the colonial apparatus besides accounts of travelers and theories of anthropologists.

> *I missionari, forse ancora più degli esponenti di altri ambiti dell'impresa coloniale, ambivano alla trasformazione radicale della società indigena [...]. Perseguivano quini, più o meno consapevolmente la distruzione delle società precoloniali e la loro sostituzione con nuove società cristiane a immagine e somiglianza di quelle europee* (Mudimbe, 2007).

As for the previously cited discourses, the missionary one supports a dichotomic and scoffing interpretation of the colonized people's nature. Paganism and any culture differing to Christianism are regarded as inferior, immature and evil. As for the process of civilization, that of Christianization, is posited as a specific path where the final outcome is the Euro-Western model. The civilized (and Christian) life is the final stage, while the primitives (and pagans) occupy the lower step in the human ladder. The difference between the Self (Christian and civilized) and the Other (primitive and pagan) is being constantly denied and affirmed. It is denied because - in the anthropologic, ethnocentric, and Christian evaluation – the indigenous appears merely as an incomplete image of the Western norm of humanity, which if educated and Christianized can be assimilated to the norm. It is being affirmed because despite their education and faith, the colonized will always remain inferior within the order of discourse. Through this mechanism the distinction self-other is not only denied and affirmed but endlessly reproduced. The more the "subaltern subject" get educated and civilized, abnegating their former identities, the more they distance themselves from that identity and still are regarded as Other. Therefore, they lose their chance to self-represent them as autonomous self and still remain outside the representation of the Western Self. Those discourses together (anthropology, travelers' accounts and missionary pastorale) justified the process of the

invention of colonialism and its object, of the definition of primitivity/uncivilization, the conceptualization of its disorder, and the methods to be adopted for its regeneration.

2. From Colonialism to Development

The element of development is already present in the colonial discourse. By a way of example, John Stuart Mill already in the 19th century explained the inferiority of the colonized people in terms of historical instead of racial factors (Spurr, 1993). Following his view, the European were merely more progressed in the history of human improvement. However, in his meaning *development* was still linked to processes of exploitation of resources and civilization of peoples. Only in the latter part of the first half of the 20th century, developing a colony started to imply also the material improvements of the colonized, and thus the social aspect (Ziai 2015). This change of approach happened in the interwar period marked by the League of Nation. This was an intermediate step on the way towards the shift from the colonial to developmental discourses. The mandate system it supported connected the trusteeship over colonies to the well-being of its population. We can identify a transformation of the representation that started assuming increasingly paternalistic features. It is true that these countries were still referred to as unable and deficient; see for example Art. 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations: "countries inhabited by people not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous condition of the modern world" (The Covenant of the League of Nations, 1924). However, any allusion to a natural (racial or biological) inequality of the people is no longer mentioned. We can definitely state that a new order of discourse is in the making, that after WWII will became the ultimate structure to frame North-South relations. By virtue of anticolonial movements, independence movements, the Russian Revolution, American imperialism, European geopolitical interests, and the event of the WWII that discredited racist policies, the colonial discourse transmutated into the discourse of development. Such discourse exhibited fundamental changes in comparison with the colonial one, starting from the fact that colonized people were no longer represented as naturally unable to self-govern. The new order of discourse - that emerged on the epistemological basis of the colonial one but differentiating itself from it – is visible in the UN Charter and in the inaugural discourse of President Truman. This statement is essential to start analyzing the developmental discourse. Indeed, while nowadays the inner meaning of development is given for granted, President Truman had to explain it and introduce it to the world.

"[W]e must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery [...]. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to the more prosperous areas [...]. The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques [...]. I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of ours sum of technical knowledge in order to help them realise their aspirations for a better life. And, in cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development. Our aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more material for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens [...]. The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profits – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program for development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing" (Inaugural Address of Harry S. Truman, 1949).

Out of the statement, we can notice few changes in respect with the colonial discourse:

- There is a fundamental acceptance of the equality of people, even though some of them – due to misfortune or historical contingency (and not biology) – are not as progressed – or developed – as others: they are underdeveloped.
- The subject shifted from peoples to nations/regions. This means that the object of the discourse is represented in terms of economic geography and not biology (Ziai 2015).
- The dichotomic distinction between civilized and uncivilized has definitely been substituted with developed/underdeveloped.
- The master signifier changed; it is no more the "white civilized man". In the post WWII, the nodal point (master signifier) is the developed society, and in comparison with it elements can be found more or less deficient.

Overall, the great novelty of the development discourse was the abandonment of the racial rhetoric. This made the project of development no longer refusable from the colonized peoples. Indeed, postcolonial elites and large part of the population willingly adopted the development discourse and the self-representation as underdeveloped. However, this discourse constructed the identities of the people of the *underdeveloped* countries as inferior or – to cite Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – subaltern (Spivak 1994). Their representation remained stuck to the allusion of backwardness that – in the development discourse - is now linked to an inferior and deficient culture. On the other hand, the Western Self emerges as the *developed*, and its identity is the results of a chain of equivalence between the same attributes that used to conglomerate within the signifier *civilised:* freedom, rationality, democracy, progress and Samaritan attitude.

Finally, Truman admitted that self-interest played a role, describing Southern *underdevelopment* as a handicap for the Northern and *developed* states. There was a strategic interest in first, discovering "the problem of poverty", and second in linking it to noncapitalist values and lack of technologies/development. Contrary to the repressive power put in place in the colonial period, the objective of the development discourse is to produce subaltern subjects that willingly support an international order in line with the Western interests (Ziai 2015). The paradigm shifted from civilization/exploitation to global governance. Given these strategic objectives, once the "primitives" are fully regarded as equal human beings, poverty is made visible and turned into a way of monitoring and managing. To conclude we can say that the development discoursed signed a wider deployment of processes of subjectification and identification.

The development discourse did not break completely with the colonial one and even if we identified numerous changes, we could also observe multiple continuities. Out of Truman's statement the following elements confirm a certain degree of integrity with the colonial discourse:

- A dichotomic distinction between a superior Self and a backward Other persists. This division takes place from the point of view of the North, as the norms that are subjectively adopted to objectively prove the inferiority of the other: life expectancy, GNP, schooling (in the western manner), etc. This system of differences was accepted so easily mainly because it directly derived from same norms of the colonial discourse, and it is buttressed by those dichotomies.
- The idea that the progress of human societies follows a binary path from A to B, that is structured along the line of evolutionism.
- The presence of a certain degree of authoritarianism. While in the colonial discourse the only ones that could legitimately define what a good society is were the colonizers, in the development era it is the development experts (both from the North and the South) that is assigned to the role of knowledge-producer. However, this did not erase the authoritarian features of the apparatus. The relation between violence and development rests on the belief that the Other's truth is false and must be corrected. Such a correction is always justified and resorting to violence is allowed (Ziai 2015).

To conclude, the development apparatus lay its foundation on diverse epistemological assumptions of the colonial discourse, namely: the dichotomic distinction between a progressive Self and a deficient Other; the evolutionary conceptualization of society; and the justification of violence (or sacrifice) to achieve the correction of deviances.

3. The Structure of the Development Discourse

We already identified the lines of continuity and discontinuity between the colonial discourse and the development one, but what is the material articulation of the development discourse? Through the Foucauldian methodology expressed in Archaeology of Knowledge we can attempt to scrutinize how – within the development discourse - the formations of objects is regulated; enunciative modalities are governed; concepts are structured; and strategies get formed.

- What are the objects of the development discourse? Looking at policy statements, international cooperation agreements, etc., the more cited elements are poverty, population growth, poor consideration of women, corruption, weak economy, and so on. Following Foucault insights – in order to grasp the deep structure of the discourse - we must focus on the rules of formations of those objects that, independently on their content/nature, discipline their appearance. Indeed, all those objects adhere to the same rule of formation: they appeared as deficiencies from the norm that can explain *underdevelopment* and that must be corrected through developmental interventions. A peculiar aspect of the rules of formation of the object of the development discourse is therefore that the objects are judged according to what they are supposed to become instead of what they are. Objects are formed as the result of a mechanism that diagnoses the deficits from the norm and implement knowledge-based intervention to compensate it. However - given the complexity of the intervention and the definition of objects as the Other of the norm – the object will never adhere to the norm. As it was for the colonial discourse, the gap between the developed Self and the underdeveloped Other is never going to be filled. The hope of development becomes a technology of control and management: first, development policies are designed; then they failed; consequently, new reasons of underdevelopment are found (and thus new objects are formed); new policies are deigned and so on. The biggest differences

from the colonial discourse is that the objects are no longer constituted as biological/anthropological units but as geo-economic units.

- The question to raise to find the enunciative modalities are: who is legitimized to speak about a certain discourse? From which institutional positions people speak? (Foucault, 2013) As for the formations of objects, enunciative modalities exhibit a field of regularities that explains their formation. Firstly, legitimacy to participate in the discourse is confined to development experts. While the institutional positions from which the discourse is possible are international organizations of development or university departments specified in developmental issues. Truth about development constitutes around these poles. We might notice a slight change from the colonial discourse. The subject position of *development expert* is grounded on "technical knowledge", thus it is achievable by anyone, even Southern people who acquires knowledge.

- Concerning the formation of concepts, it mirrors the objects. Concepts within the development discourse are shaped as deviations from the norm and reproduce an endless cycle of diagnosis/failure/new-diagnosis. In the development discourse, however, the idea of development assumed a transitive form. Countries can develop themselves, while, in the colonial discourse primitive people were unable to self-govern and had to be helped.

- Strategies are the nonsubjective output of the same mechanism of relations, and they could be described as the organization of concepts, topics and theories within discourses (Foucault, 2013). In the development discourse strategies are possible by virtue of the alleged possibility of comparing and evaluating societies according to universal (Eurocentric) standards. This binary conceptualization persisted, however, the focus of the development apparatus shifted from the sole colonial economic exploitation to both economic and social progress.

To sum up, the structure of the development discourse resembles in some aspects the colonial one, however, there has been a clear discursive shift: different formation of objects (countries instead of people); different enunciative modalities (development experts instead of racist anthropologists); different formations of concepts (transitive instead of intransitive verb); different strategies (socio-economic instead than economic exploitation). This was probably due to the racial horrors of the WWII that, together with the anticolonial and independentist movement – reshaped the relations between North and South. We can say though that the

development discourse still supports a system of representation that is evolutionist, mono-perspective, depoliticized and strictly Eurocentric.

4. A Diachronic Perspective on the Development Discourse

In the previous sections the development discourse has been analyzed; either in its germinal stage, as a (dis)continuation of the colonial discourse; and also, as a synchronic discursive unity made of structures and rules of formation. In this section, we will attempt to shed a diachronic perspective of the development discourse to scrutinize its different phases.

Between the 1900 and 1950, the North-South relations changed significantly. While at the beginning of the 20th century people in Africa, Asia, and South America were conceived as uncivilized, racially inferior and unable to self-govern, since the post WWII international politics seems to aim at the improvement of their economies and living conditions though programs of development. As the abovementioned discourse of Truman shows, the way of speaking about the South underwent a significant change: racial rhetoric has been abandoned, nation-centered policies substituted discourses about people and their biology; the focus on economy and strategies of exploitation shifted on strategies for the betterment of socio-economic conditions.

The 1950s can thus be taken – not without any disagreements – as the time when the development discourse emerged. At its germinal stage, it was mainly informed by the modernization theory and development was a linear path on which countries progressed (Furkan Tuzun 2020). Maintaining a certain continuity with the colonial discourse, nations were divided between *developed* and *underdeveloped*, and the latter were judged by virtue of their deficiencies from the *developed* norm (Rapley, 2013). During this decade, poverty was "discovered" and linked – through a chain of equivalence – to many different signifieds (backwardness, tradition, underdevelopment, etc.). This was the beginning of a common process of the development discourse: issues' depoliticization. Poverty was framed as a sad condition that lied upon Southern nation whose root reasons were to be found in their cultural inferiority and historical misfortunes. Power relations had no room in the interpretation of those phenomena, that were interpreted as mere consequences of the lack of development. As underdevelopment was associated with backwardness and backwardness with poverty, economic growth was started to be used almost as a synonym for development in general (Furkan Tuzun 2020).

During the 1960s and the 1970s, the developmental paradigm has established itself and reinforced its epistemological connections with the modernization theory. During this decade the first challenging voices to the mainstream discourse emerged, namely structuralism and dependency theory. On the one hand, Structuralism originated in Latin America and suggested that the Global South's underdevelopment was caused by the structure of the international economy (Furkan Tuzun 2020). Prices of manufactured goods (imported from the developed economies) were increasing faster than those of the raw materials (exported by the underdeveloped economies), therefore, it was a vicious cycle that condemned third World countries to indebtedness (Arndt, 1987). On the other hand, neo-Marxist dependency theory suggested that underdevelopment was a direct consequence of the exploitation of resources and human capital of the periphery. Dependency theorists offered alternatives to mainstream development and suggested Third World countries to delink from the First World and to implement strategies of self-reliance (Furkan Tuzun 2020). Discussion around structuralism and dependency theory led to the grouping of developing countries within the G77 and to the rising demands for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) (Rapley 2004). Ironically this NIEO revolved around asking more power within the same economic system and it did not really question the nature of the whole developmental and economic apparatus. Following a Foucauldian perspective neither the first nor the second really challenged the development discourse. Both respect the same rules of formation of objects, concepts, enunciative modalities and strategies. They criticized the policies implemented by developmental institutions and proposed novel alternatives, however, none of them ever challenged the distinction between a developed North and an underdeveloped South, or the idea that human progress follows a linear path along the lines of the western societal evolution.

Notwithstanding the critiques, M. Rahnema points out that the new discourses of development was also widely adopted by different actors including Southern nations (Rahnema, 1997). Indeed, one of the reasons behind the success of the development discourse is that it proved to be more attractive to the Global South in comparison to the racist colonial discourse and the identities it offered. Rahnema claims that the success of development discourse during the decolonisation period was the result of the convergence between the aspirations of three different groups of actors:

> *The leaders of the independence movements were eager to transform their devastated countries into modern nation-states, while the 'masses' [...] were hoping to liberate themselves from both the old and the new forms of subju gation. As for the former colonial masters, they were seeking a new system of domination, in the*

hope that it would allow them to maintain their presence in the ex-colonies [...]. The myth of development emerged as an ideal construct to meet the hopes of the three categories of actors (Rahnema 1997).

In the 1980s the development theory underwent a harsh crisis that led to the emergence of novel policies. The perception of a theoretical impasse in the development apparatus and its essentialist assumptions, paved the way for the affirmation of the neoliberal paradigm (Booth 1985). The implicit rationale of the neoliberal politics is that the invisible hand of the market is the main driver to economic growth and development (Priewe 2015). Developing countries suffer the interventionism of the state which engender manifold market distortion, while the main drivers of development are free trade, loose financial borders, and privatization. With the neoliberal paradigm, the nexus between liberalization and development is interpreted as good governance. Overall, policies are left out in favor of governance. The previous failures of the developmental apparatus are analyzed, and new governance deigned on the assumption that the presence of the State is standing on the way of development. The policy mechanism are not the only things to change though. Starting from this point, the whole development discourse underwent a relevant transformation and a new discourse – that of globalization – entered the stage. The development discourse did not disappear of course, however, relations between North and South started being represented by a new entanglements of power relations that was no longer sustained by the sole development discourse: globalization stepped in.

5. From Development to Globalization

Knowledge about global relation of power (including North and South relations) has radically changed over the past decades. A shift from a discourse of development to one of globalization has occurred, as McMicheal (2000), claimed when stating that a globalization project was on the run.

As we have already noticed, since the 1980, the popularity of development discourse declined. Those that have been its core ideals have progressively been altered (as we will see in the next chapter) or fully abandoned (Leys, 1996). Moreover, these where the years of the "lost decade of development" that made the promise of development seems a hopeless myth; up to the point that Sachs (1992) claimed: "the idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape". The Post-Development school proclaimed indeed the end of the Era of Development and advanced four reasons for this statement:

- First, the end of the Cold War, which led to a loss of geopolitical relevance for the Southern countries which represented no longer a threat.

- Second, with the ecological instances becoming louder and louder and the concept of Anthropocene entering the scene, the environmental consequences of industrialization had become crystal clear. The western model was losing its brightness and the idea of exporting it to undeveloped regions seemed less appealing. However, despite the recognition of the ecological impossibility of universalizing the Northern model, the attempt to industrialize the South did not stop (Ziai 2015). The developmental project was simply restructured and coupled with the world "sustainable", and the attempts to make it ecologically sounding were usually contested by the global south itself.

- Third, rising discontent emerged against the cultural homogenization linked to the development project (Sachs, 1992).

- Fourth, the results of the development programs were very disappointing, especially in terms of global equality Sachs, (1992). The gap between rich and poor was sharply growing, and disillusionment towards the development project increased consequently. As Warren Magnusson stated, the capitalist social movement has generated a widespread reaction to the socio-economic well-being that it promised but failed to deliver (Magnusson 1994).

Giovanni Arrighi (1999) advanced a more global and comprehensive explanation. He argued that the crisis of development coincided with that of the Fordist capitalist paradigm. The Fordist world system failed to increase the material prosperity of poor countries and the wealth of people in rich countries. Therefore, a new strategy for solving the crisis (neoliberalism) emerged and become more prominent. Obviously, the development project did not disappear, but it was deeply invested by the rise of two interdependent discourses and their different representation of social change: globalization and neoliberalism.

Since the 1990s, globalization established itself as a buzzword in social sciences. To use Laclau's terminology, it became the novel *master signifier*, emptied of any precise content to welcome a variety of signifieds across different contexts. Its main usages revolve around two main conceptions: a) a general increase of global interconnectedness in any sphere of human action; b) a transmutation of the world economic system that is becoming increasingly liberalized. Both variants are strictly connected and mutually reinforce one another. The first one highlights global interconnectedness as the results of free flows of information, capital and

people. It depicts globalization as an overall phenomenon that embrace culture, economy, and ecosystems in every angle of the world, and it stresses particularly the interdependent consequences of any action anywhere: no one can regard itself or be regarded as isolated (Lynch 1998). The second variant describe the world economy as doomed to increasing competitiveness and decentralization as a result of IT and liberalization. Thus, any actor have to align its actions to the global forces: states – defines as increasingly powerless – must adapt their monetary and fiscal policies to financial markets (Ziai 2015); social movements must transform themselves into "transnational" or "global" to ward off erasure (Lynch 1998); and workers must accept quasi-exploitative conditions due to global competition (Ghose 2004).

Briefly analyzing the structure of the globalization discourse, the following insights emerge:

- All the objects of the globalization discourse (interconnectedness, flow of capital, interdependence, etc.) adhere to the same rules of formation: they appeared as natural forces that can be just governed and coordinated. Objects of the discourse are characterized by the alleged allusion to their incommensurable, unintentional, and unstoppable essence. Objects are formed as the result of a mechanism that diagnoses the economic landscape and defines its characteristics, then through a *problem-solving* approach a response is designed. The formation of objects responds to a deterministic logic, where the market-economic order is interpreted as pre-given instead of socio-politically constructed. These features are valid either for the positive and negative accounts on globalization. Flows of goods, capital and people, financial markets, FDI, Internet, and so on, are the divine natural catastrophes of the 21st century.

- Concepts are shaped following a rule of formation that privileges relationality. In respect to the development discourse where the Other is the *underdeveloped*, here it is the *isolated unity*. Therefore, any unit that stands outside the field of relationality and interconnectedness, build by the globalization discourse, is negated and neglected.

- Concerning enunciative modalities, the legitimacy to speak is related to the perspective that is adopted. Any account is welcomed as soon as it embraces an epistemological perspective which is synchronically and spatially relational. Globalization is the history of connections: anyone who is able to construct relations between diverse phenomena – spatially and geographically, gains a place within the discourse. Each sphere of social science

participates in the globalization discourse if, and only if, it engages in a relational assessment.

- The nonsubjective strategies that emerge out of the globalization discourse are the overall tendency at depoliticizing (economy, policies, etc.) – due to the naturalization of "global forces" - and the construction of a common field of responsibilities. There is no action that does not entail profound and generalized consequences; therefore, the withdrawal is never accepted, and any choice is never individual because collective in its effects.

5.1. The Neoliberal Content of Globalization

First of all, we must specify that the globalization discourse is a popular subdiscourse of the neoliberal one linked to the idea of globality. Neoliberal discourse possesses its own materiality which is given life by the proponents of its policies and programs, the advocators of its ideology and the subjects socialised in its ideas. "The ideas of eradicating market obstacles, removing impediments to capital mobility, holding back collective initiative and public expenditure, and advocating competitiveness and self-sufficiency, circulate through the arteries of our social world, and as they are distributed and begin to mix into everyday life, they become performative" (Birch and Springer 2019). As we stated multiple times, discourse is always material in its consequences, and the neoliberal narrative makes no exception. While commonly neoliberalism is conflated with "neoclassical economics", it is a set of ideological and prescriptive theories applied to policy that, since its emergence, followed a trajectory that was overtly purposeful (Birch and Springer 2019). The economic principles of neoliberalism are just one side of a paradigm that, once that was politically deployed, resulted not only in a restructuring of economy but of intents, interests, lives and societies as well. Its roots lie in the rethinking of classical liberalism undertaken by August Von Hayek and Milton Friedman, while its political ascendancy is typically related to the policy reforms and austerity programs that invested both Europe and North America under the Reagan/Thatcher Era. Economically speaking, neoliberalism can be related with the large-scale processes of privatisation and deregulation (that turned out to be a purposeful regulation to ensure the prosperity of the market) that pervaded global capitalism from the 70s. Examples of the policy shifts that are typically labelled as neoliberal are the erosion of welfare state structures of social support, policies of free-marketization, commodification, businesses' decentralization and further internationalisation, and the restructuring of welfare provisioning to increase the attachment to

the workforce (some use the terms workfare). "At the level of ideology, neoliberalism has sought to transform the constitution of persons and the relationships among individuals, the market and the state" (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008), by promoting few basic rules: (a) liberalise trade and finance, (b) let market set demand and supply through the regulation of flexible prices, (c) reduce inflation to ensure macroeconomic stability and (d) privatise. The field of effects of such policies, however, largely overstepped the economic boundaries. They triggered an ongoing process of society restructuration around the market and its "moral" values of competition and individual responsibility. Free markets and free trade were uplifted to the rank of primary (if not solely) practices to achieve human well-being by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and enforcing strong private property rights (Harvey 2020). The hegemonic consensus revolving around the neoliberal project made the "free market" acquire the status of an irrefutable scientific theory. Neoliberalism permeated and transformed everyday life; however, its true nature has gone widely unrecognised by its critiques.

The rise of the neoliberal discourse in the development apparatus happened along the lines of the Washington Consensus through the medium of Structural Adjustment Programmes and the policies of International Institutions (IMF, WB, WTO) and around the doctrines propagated by the Mont Pèlerin Society (Tribe 2020). The neoliberal theory attributed the perceived failures of development policy to flawed Keynesian strategies an promoted its own market-centred solutions.

5.2. The New Rules of Globalization

Clarified the nature of the globalization discourse and its relationship with the neoliberal one, our questions remain: how have been the North-South relations reshaped once the globalization discourse became the dominant narrative of global economy? How is social change being reconceptualized in comparison to the development discourse?

- As we noted in the previous section, the development discourse was grounded on the distinction between developed and underdeveloped countries, and the general opposition between a progressive Self and a backward Other. With the rise of the globalization discourse the developmental dichotomy is substituted by a wider universalism. Global economic forces are depicted as natural events that are inevitable and leaves no society

untouched, independently on their *development stage*. The only possible action is to accommodate these forces and adjust to the new global reality. This is what happened with the structural adjustment programs (SAP), which aimed at *adjusting* national policies to the unstoppable realities of liberal globalization. These processes dis not operate any differentiation between developed and developing countries, and they have been applied with the same tenacity in Europe and North America during the Raegan/Thatcher Era. The underlying assumption is that the economic sphere is a scientific truth that is best left to work on its own.

- Both discourses include the possibility of material improvement of the poorest people. However, while the development discourse always praises for some kind of intervention in the market system to advantage the less developed, globalization discourse argues that any intervention in the market is inherently inefficient and counterproductive. Therefore, both in developed and developing countries the strategy is to free trade and liberalize markets.

- In the globalization discourse, development aid is seen as unnecessary or even damaging and ineffective. In contrast, projects favoring the market or channeling people into the market (as producers or consumers) are praised and pushed.

Of course, there is no clear distinction between a development era and a globalization era. Both discourses flourished in parallel, and they have been stronger or weaker depending on the historical conjunction. Development discourse has been dominant until the 70s, while globalization discourse aggressively stepped in between the 80s and 90s. Since that time, they simultaneously shaped North-South relations giving birth to certain hybridization.

6. The Discard of Development and the Implications of the Globalization Discourse

The pursue of the improvement of human condition and the quest for social change are undoubtedly worthy objectives. The development apparatus constructed a very specific way of representing social change whose worthiness is instead more doubtable, or at least its political implications must be openly displayed and examined. Discursive formations are always material in their consequences, and the way in which we describe reality shapes our field of action. Our perception of social reality will make appear some political action as legitimate and other as illegitimate; and, above all, any construction of reality supports certain relations of power and the status quo they mirror. As the discourse analysis carried out in the above

section displayed, the concept of development has manifold underlying assumptions that, though its technologies, are constantly reproduced. Those hindered assumption filters our access to reality and support specific relations of power, while rendering others unthinkable. Therefore, grounding on the above analysis, the next section is devoted to analyzing the Eurocentric, authoritarian, and above all depoliticizing implications of the development discourse.

The critical analysis of the implications of the development discourse will be mainly informed by the Post-Development school. Therefore, it is appropriate to introduce this school of thought and expose the main critics with which it confronted. While the earliest critics to development (structuralism, dependency theory, alternative development, etc.) focused mainly on its policies and shortcoming, PD was the first to challenge the development paradigm as a whole and addressed it as an "ideology" or "political project". PD urges the supersession of development and call for men and women to autonomously define their needs and ways of living. PD's theorist theorized alternatives to development and reclaimed the relevance of indigenous and traditional lifestyles and practices. Within the development debate it has been invested by the harshest critiques along the following lines.

- Rejection of modernity. The PD theory is often blamed to uncritically reject modernity and development overlooking on its success.

- Romanticization of poverty. Some authors of the PD theory problematized the concept of poverty, outlining that the development apparatus describes as "poor" condition of existence that are based on self-subsistence and informal ties. PD thought advanced the thesis that development "does not necessarily ameliorate represent an amelioration of living standards, but rather the incorporation of previously informal economies into the networks of commodity circulation" (Rapley 2004). They substituted the world poverty with the distinction between frugality, destitution, and scarcity, praising the values of frugal ways of life (Sachs, 1989). In this regards, PD has been harshly criticized because it would ignore the relation of exploitation inherent in these *frugal communities*, and deliberately assume their inhabitants not be interested in westernization, wealth and material goods (Ziai 2017).

- Relativism. PD suggests that the development project is inherently western and grounded on the attempt to export the Eurocentric model of progress outwards. The alleged assumption is that the western values and evolutionary path is universally good and desirable. PD claims instead the right of any people/country to establish its own way of

living and "developing", challenging the idea of a normative western standard. These claims have been criticized because they would reflect a fundamental indifference towards conditions of misery and oppression. Certain authors notice that faced with the actual demands of protestors, it is difficult to deny that they actually seem to want the material goods that are typically associated with "western development" (Matthews and Matthews 2017). Moreover, the equalization between development and westernization is denounced to deny the extent to which the South also owns and informs development with its development perspectives (Pieterse 2000).

- Paternalism. PD has also been criticized to adopt the same paternalistic perspective that it claims to challenge. By saying they know better about the need of the "poor" than they themselves, they would prescribe a certain model of society as the right one. More generally, critical perspective on PD could ask: What if the PD theorists claim of "the otherness of the other" is confronted with "others" who insists on their sameness with "us" and want to live as "we" do? (Matthews and Matthews 2017)

These criticisms are widely legitimate; however, we should carefully distinguish between two different variants of the Post-Development critique of development. Many different authors, commonly differentiate between an anti-, reactionary and populist current, and a post-, skeptical current who embrace radical democracy (Matthews and Matthews 2017). The latter is the one that most enthrall us, and which provided the development debate with the greatest contributions: the Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing implications.

The development apparatus has Eurocentric implications because Western societies are taken as ideal-typica models of "development", while Southern countries are defined in terms of their deviation from this norm. According to Escobar (1992) the problem is that development is external and grounded on the model of the western process of industrialization, while what would be needed are more endogenous discourses. Other societies are instead framed as always lacking and inferior following certain parameters. Nandy (1992) described this process as the translation of geo-cultural differences into historical stages, grounded on the application of evolutionary theories on the study of society. The pivotal failure of this approach is that it neglects the impossibility of reproducing certain historical processes in completely different historical, economic, political and social contexts. Moreover, this approach deliberately decides to ignore the abusive practices and the shortcoming in terms of social justice that characterizes also the Western "Self". The Eurocentric developmental paradigm constructs a

myth of the Western civilizational superiority that rests on the sole fact that the parameter of judgement is economic growth instead of distribution, social justice or equality. The idea is not that to contest the positive sides of the Western societies but to highlight that some peoples (or cultures) could object that highly atomistic societies of consumers based on concurrency, competition and exploitation constitute the best of all possible realities. Indeed, to respond to the above critics, the attractiveness of the Western model still does not prove its superiority.

The concept of development has also authoritarian implications because it prescribed interventions – based on expert knowledge – in people's lives without asking their approval or legitimation. The "truth" of development, and of the misery coming from the lack thereof, justifies any means to reach the fixed objectives. "Development" becomes the passe-partout to say that what is done to people by those more powerful than them is their destiny, their fault, and their only chance of survival.

Finally, the concept of development has huge depoliticizing implications. This is probably its most dangerous feature, given that it sustains its durability and indisputability. Development is depoliticizing because it obscures global inequalities and social conflicts on the national and international level. The development discourse conceptualizes global injustice and inequality in terms of lack of capital, knowledge and technology, and provides also technical solutions: financial assistance, projects, etc. In this way it completely matts a perception of global injustice and inequality in terms of relations of power, exploitation and hierarchies. The development paradigm deliberately neglects the difference between oppressors and oppressed. In addition - by framing situation of oppression, unequal distribution, and abuse of power as technical problems – assumes that social problems may be resolved with solutions unconcerned with politics, power, conflict of interests: technocratic solutions that being rational cannot be objected. Through this mechanism the questions of poverty, misery, unequal distribution, violence, and scarcity, are depoliticized and left almost unanswered. This "technocratic bias" of the discourse is reproduced at any level of the development ladder, from the highest international organization down to the local NGOs. Indeed, almost no institution or NGO ever proposed an analysis which suggests that the root causes of poverty are political instead of technical, that government are highly responsible, and that real change must come through radical social transformation in the South (Ferguson, 1994). To sum up, the very industry that claims to take the sides of the less privileged parts of the population is in reality constantly trying to avoid political conflicts at the national and international level. In a few words, it is just supporting the systemic condition that constituted this unjust spectrum of privileges in the first place.

To conclude, this section wanted to outline that due to its Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing implication, the concept of development should be abandoned. The consequences of the development discourse go far beyond the linguistic realm by producing and reproducing specific relations of power. Many authors attempted to redefine the concept and offer novel alternatives that, however, usually falls in the same tenets of the development paradigm. In the following chapter an alternative will be proposed grounding on the concept of empowerment. This concept will be particularly fruitful given that in its three declinations (ownership, participation, and self-representation), it challenges the Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing assumption. Moreover, the concept of empowerment is able to adhere to the rising discourse of globalization and the different relations of power that it is establishing. Relations of power and oppression, even within the North-South framework, need to be understood and challenged transnationally and intersectionally, and empowerment is the best means to do that.

EMPOWERMENT AND THE SUBVERSION OF REPRESENTATION

1. The Crisis of the Development Paradigm

The previous chapters have examined the development apparatus and highlighted its critical implications. Due to its Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing implications, the concept of development is intrinsically unsuited to radically overcome the links of exploitation, injustice and asymmetry that characterize North-South relation. The relations of power and knowledge, that it constantly produces and reproduces through its discoursers, have material consequences that go far beyond the linguistic realm. Many authors attempted to redefine the concept and offer novel alternatives that, however, usually fall in the same tenets of the development paradigm.

The development paradigm emerged after WWII as a new order of discourse after the period of colonialism. By virtue of anticolonial movements, independence movements, the Russian Revolution, American imperialism, European geopolitical interests, and the event of the WWII that discredited racist policies, the colonial discourse transmogrified into the discourse of development. It definitely rejected the most oppressive and imperialist features of the colonial discourse and abandoned the essentialist distinction between civilized and

uncivilized people. However, the colonial discourse did not disappear completely and still informs the development industry in its epistemological foundations. The distinction between a superior Self and a backward Other persisted in the new dichotomy developed/underdeveloped (or its multiple declinations: developing, less developed, etc.). The conceptualization of progress of human societies as an evolutionary path was also maintained, and Western societies remained the norm that is subjectively adopted to objectively prove the inferiority of the other – who is measured in terms of its deviance from that norm. Finally, *régimes* of exploitation and injustice were perpetuated as well, and legitimated by the development expertise and their urge for *development.* The Post-Development theory had the great merit to analyze these criticalities and their material consequences on relations of power between North and South.

Firstly, PD outlines that the Eurocentricity of the development discourse excludes the chance of emergence of endogenous model of living different from the Western benchmark. Moreover, through this constant comparison between the Western Self and Southern Other, the West enhanced the legitimacy of its model, deliberately ignoring the abusive practices and the shortcoming in terms of social justice that characterizes it. The Eurocentric developmental paradigm constructs a myth of the Western civilizational superiority that rests on the sole fact that the parameter of judgement is economic growth instead of distribution, social justice or equality.

Secondly, the development apparatus builds a system that values development expertise more than beneficiaries' intents and desires. The development industry is imbued with authoritarianism in different forms because "Development" becomes the passe-partout to say that what is done to people by those more powerful than them is their destiny, their fault, and their only chance of survival. Of course, we are not generalizing to every development project and initiative but, overall, the risk of "development" is its misuse to suppress communities' self-determination in the name of the highest good of progress.

Finally, the development concept and the whole system is highly depoliticizing. It established itself as indisputable, and self-represents itself as a natural expression of the order of reality. The development discourse conceptualizes global injustice and inequality in terms of lack of capital, knowledge and technology, and offers technical solutions: financial assistance, projects, etc. In this way it completely matts a perception of global injustice and inequality in terms of relations of power, exploitation and hierarchies. It obscures global inequalities and social conflicts on the national and international level. In addition – by framing situation of oppression, unequal distribution, and abuse of power as technical problems – it

assumes that social problems may be resolved with solutions unconcerned with politics, power, conflict of interests. Through this mechanism the questions of poverty, misery, unequal distribution, violence, and scarcity, are depoliticized and left almost unanswered. In a few words, it is just supporting the systemic conditions that constituted in the first place the unjust spectrum of privileges in the international arena.

It must be acknowledged that since the 1990s, the understanding about global relations of power (including North-South relations) has radically changed. The discourse of Globalization slowly merged with the development discourse and conditioned its features. Globalization became the *master signifier* of the contemporary era: a nodal point at the center of an inedited net of relations of power and knowledge. The discourse revolves around two main conceptions: a) a general increase of global interconnectedness in any sphere of human action; b) a transmutation of the world economic system that is becoming increasingly liberalized. Reality is represented as an interconnected ecosystem crossed by global economic forces, flows of information, streams of capital, and movements of people. These financial and economic occurrences are compared to natural forces to which actors must align and adapt. The market is at the center of the globalized and interconnected world; it makes borders porous and build relations of interdependency among each element of the system. Consequently, free markets and free trade are uplifted to the rank of primary (if not solely) practices to achieve human well-being, and utter reliance to them is the key to prosperity. With the rise of the neoliberal and globalization discourse the developmental dichotomy is substituted by a wider universalism. Global market forces are depicted as natural events that are inevitable and leaves no society untouched, independently on their *development stage*. The only possible action is to accommodate these forces and adjust to the new global reality.

The inevitable consequence has been the radicalization of the inner criticalities of the North-South relation.

- The adoption of the Western development (market-centered) model becomes, now, a natural and universal necessity;
- and the depoliticizing implications of the development concepts are hyper-emphasized.

Global injustice and inequality are not only obscured but framed as direct consequences of command economies and suffocated markets. Development turned to liberalization and the

novel objectives are favoring markets and channeling people into the formal economy (as producers or consumers).

Nowadays, Development is a dangerous concept and usually a deceiving one. If we are referring to urban immigration, process of industrialization, or economic integration we should not talk about process of development, but of political economy. If we are – instead – referring to processes of reallocation, redistribution and balancing on an international level through inter-states cooperation we should not call it development aid, but we may designate it as global social policy. Finally, if we are trying to build a world different from the present one – where tons of people are living in marginality and oppression while others live in wealth and affluence – we should admit that we are striving for global justice and solidarity not development. Fortunately, the development discourse and the more recent global discourse informed by neoliberalism did not remain constantly unquestioned. Especially since the crisis of development in the 1980s, new concepts have become influential and have challenged the discourse from within constituting fundamental contradictions with its general principles. Among them, the one with the highest radical potential is definitely empowerment, which is specifically suited to stand against global injustice and inequality. This concept is transformational given that in its three declinations (ownership, participation, and self-representation), it challenges the Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing assumptions. Moreover, the concept of empowerment is able to adhere to the rising discourse of globalization and the different relations of power that it is establishing. Relations of power and oppression, even within the North-South framework, need to be understood and challenged transnationally and intersectionally, and empowerment, if practically operationalized and integrated within social movements is the best means to social change.

2. The Promises of Empowerment

The concept of development has never been fully contested. Even independentist movements, Third World leaders, and critical approaches (Dependency Theory, Alternative development, Another Development) resisted the development discourse just partially and never really challenged its most critical features:

- The underlying construction of identities (a developed Self and underdeveloped Other).

- The principle that assigns more relevance to development expertise rather than communities self-determination.

- The developmental objective of *developing underdeveloped* nations through economic growth and industrialization.

However, since the 1980s such a contestation appeared and crystallized around the concept of empowerment and the discourse of participation, ownership and self-representation. The notion of empowerment had already appeared since the late 1970s, being applied indiscriminately in multiple spheres of knowledge and fields of action, from social services to psychology, public health, and community development. Empowerment initially referred to the principles - such as the ability of individuals or groups to act and mobilise to ensure (a) their own well-being and (b) the utter control over decision-making that concerns them - that guided research and action among poor, oppressed and marginalised population in the United States (Simon 1994).

Although, it was adopted by the development discourse gradually – the concept of participation appeared in the 1980s while that of ownership in the 1990s, originally it rejected top-down development approaches and praised for re-establishing the primacy of the people. However, the statement has never been taken seriously and it was mostly regarded as a means to legitimize and make more efficient the implementation of projects. The discourse of empowerment is indeed full of ambiguities and contradictions. As decades elapsed, the term has become opaquer and its adoption in multiple fields of international development, that made it the cornerstone of its policies and rhetoric, has been object of divergent opinions. Despite its integration within the vast majority of development policies and its ascension as new credo of international aid, the concept of empowerment lost its original features. The political thickness and the transformational nature that characterised it went lost, and usually it was reduced to its economic declination. If participation is restricted to apical representative and in the obliged manner of project implementation; if ownership is only referred to countries' ownership; and if self-representation is channelled through the medium of foreign workers and volunteers; they will hardly lead to empowerment – at least if it is intended as the self-determination of marginalized people and the transformation of power relations.

- Empowerment as participation. The discourse of participation in its radical form should question the universal primacy of development experts' knowledge and promote the

participation of project-affected people by giving them the chance to express intents, strategies and implementation tactic. However, development projects since the introduction of this new principle never really questioned the role of experts and the assumption that the path towards the progress of human life and its amelioration must be the Western and capitalist one.

- Empowerment as ownership. The principle of ownership should stand against the devolution of decision-making process from the beneficiaries of the projects and reject the influence of international and foreign actors. However, donors and international organization still exerts enormous influence on the national strategies, and nation-states are usually not the most reliable actors to ensure communities active ownership.

- Empowerment as self-representation. This last principle challenges the exogenous imposition of identity and its construction as a deficient variant of the Western norm. It embodies the right of marginal persons and groups to speak by themselves, to define themselves and their necessities, and to decide about their lives and bodies. However, the fundamental foreignness of the whole developmental industry, its workers, NGOs, expertise, volunteers, and so on, drain beneficiaries of their essential right to self-determinate and represent.

To sum up, unfortunately, participation, ownership, and self-representation are often confined to rural elites or professional NGOs, and repeatedly excludes the marginal sections of society.

2.1. Resistance to Empowerment

Since the 1980s the development theory underwent a crisis due to the growing discontent for the inefficiency of its policies, the epistemological contradictions rising from the adoption of novel concepts - empowerment, sustainability, participation, etc. – and the historical experiences that engendered the formation of the Globalization discourse. At the level of policy, neoliberalism took the place of the Keynesian approaches and established itself as new foundational paradigm. In parallel new discursive formations – above all, empowerment – resulted in growing incoherencies and contradictions regarding either the development discourse and the recent neoliberal one. Being essentially incompatible with the rules of formations of the development discourse, empowerment unveiled few paradoxes of the

development apparatus up to the point that it might be considered as the starting point of its overtaking. In parallel, the successful industrialization in South-East Asia, the end of the Cold War, the new neoliberal economic paradigm, and the emergence of the ecological question, reinforced the discourse of Globalisation and led to a revolution of the development system. Development theory abandoned its deterministic and universalist assumptions and rejected the one-size-fits-all approach to focus more on socio-cultural factors and contextual differences. Markets – as self-regulating mechanisms – were discovered as the universal remedy, and the integration within the globalized market became the inevitable goal to pursue. The rise of the ecological question made the category of the Nation-State growingly inadequate to respond to global crisis; while the growing critiques from civil society led to the inclusion of the discourses of participation, ownership, and self-representation. All the above changes led to a transformation of the development discourse and the emergence of a new discursive formation – that sedimented around the concept of empowerment – which created multiple incoherencies and contradictions with the development discourse.

As a reaction to the critiques of development policies – regarded as top-down and neo-colonial imposition of economic and cultural views – new approaches were endorsed based on the promotion of participation and inclusion (namely, empowerment). The idea that people should decide by themselves the society they want to build became theoretically very common. Strictly speaking, endowing people with the right to decide by themselves what *development* is, refrain development experts from imposing their views. However, empowerment became simply a new concept to be dissected, analysed and transformed into objectives to be achieved. A tension emerged in the cooperation with the South: development actors still have their own conception of development and how to achieve it, but on the other hand they preach empowerment and participation and are unwillingly to force their ideas. Moreover, participation becomes ridiculous within a system that imposes from above conditions, agendas, goals, and economic policies. Despite the undoubtable commitment to the ideals of participation and empowerment, there are some structural contradictions which prevent it from succeeding: a) donors did not renounce to the need of monitoring the employment of their resources; b) "development" expertise is embedded in the identities of people working in the development industry (Ziai 2015). Development actors are there to express how a good society looks like, this is their place within the discourse; the application oh his/her knowledge is constitutive of his/her identity. Taking seriously the claims of empowerment would mean renouncing the superior position of development expertise and reducing development actors to the role of assistant and enablers.

To conclude, we may recognize that the concept of empowerment as participation has been adopted in a partial and depoliticized manner that does not question relations of power. However, even in its weakened form, it still interferes with the order of discourse and highlights the authoritarian and exclusive nature of the development discourse. Thus, there is potential for its repoliticization. Therefore, in the next section, the concept of empowerment will be scrutinized in its historical evolution to trace back its original political thickness. The fundamental question is precisely to understand how in the era of Globalization empowerment can be the key to social change.

3. History of Empowerment

Following a steady rise in popularity since the 1980s, empowerment has become a fundamental element of the rhetoric of almost any agency in the development industry. Contrarily to the common belief, the concept of empowerment had already appeared – in the sole sense of "participation" – within the development discourse, long before the 1980s. The current emphasis on empowering communities by the means of participation is not new but may be seen as the radicalization of a trend that started in the 1960s. In fact, the current boost of empowering activities can be categorized as the third wave of participation since the emergence of the development discourse.

The first one has been labelled as the Colonial Development Movement. It is rooted in the pre-war colonial welfare operations of the Western governments while it died out in the 1960s. The French and the British governments developed the model of Community Development in the context of their social policy programs in their African and Asian colonies (White, 1999). Community Development was imbued with democratic ideals and was accomplished through the participation of the people in the planning process at the village level. However, in less than three years, the Community Development lost its momentum, the programs were decreasing in relevance and donor support was drying up.

The second wave started in the 1970s and it was linked to and channeled through the United Nations System. The Declaration on Social Progress and Development by the UN, where the role of participation within the Development System is emphasized, can be considered as the starting point of this second wave. In this period participation was adopted more as a rhetorical tool than a planning principle. Indeed, it appeared in multiple publications of the UN, and it was even placed in the definition adopted in the launching of the Third UN Development Decade: "the ultimate aim of development is the constant improvement of the well-being of

the entire population on the basis of its full participation in the process of development and a fair distribution of the benefits therefrom" (White, 1999).

Finally, the third wave of participation identified with NGOs and hinged on the concept of empowerment. The third wave started in the 1980s and coincided with the broader neoliberal shift of the development discourse and the rise of NGOs. The 1980s represented indeed a shift point: the SAPs and the processes of liberalisation engendered the conditions that sparked the NGO movement. To be more specific, the emergence of NGOs was a response to: a) the privatisation of the parastatal sector; b) the push by international institutions for the formation of civil organisations; c) the necessity to fill the gap left by the State in the delivery of services; and d) rising concerns by different sectors of the population over issue relating to gender, youth, environment, human rights, etc. (Bee 2013). Both as a consequence of the growing civil society and the decreasing role of the State, NGOs were becoming primary means of services' provisions and pivotal channels of injection of aid. Therefore, it is not by chance that the third wave of participation buttressed on the NGO system; during these years, associations and non-governmental organisations were really the centrepiece of development agenda. The main international donors reduced drastically their support to state-based programs, and NGOs came to be the major beneficiaries (Kiondo, 1994). This happened also as a consequence of the growing interests for concept like empowerment, participation and ownership: NGOs as grassroots organization were considered the perfects means of participatory development. However, participation was anything more than a palliative and never really involved any shift in power, as it is intended to. As an example, by analysing the participation praised by the World Bank policies for the case of Zambia, Tanzania, and Zaire, one would be utterly disappointed. At the level of decision-making, the WB was not able to ensure the views of the less powerful were taken into account. While, at the level of the content, most of its policies were solely concerned with communities' participation in the market, devoting thus absolute primacy to the economic empowerment of the people. Participation did not happen at any level of projects' cycle but at the last one, implementation.

Since it first appearance, empowerment has commonly been envisaged solely as participation by beneficiaries in development projects, however, this perspective needs to be amplified in multiple ways:

- Participation should be applied through the whole development system, i.e., policies and guidelines as well as projects.

- Communities should participate not only in the implementation of policies but at any stage of the project: in the planning, design, monitoring and evaluation.
- The communities are stratified rather than homogenous, therefore "community participation" cannot ignore that interests are mostly divided, otherwise such development program will just reinforce existing dominant interests.
- Genuine participatory action requires donors to enter a partnership with the community rather than providing them with aid. Participatory project should imply agreed obligations on both sides, instead of unilateral conditionalities from the donors (White, 1999).
- NGOs should not be mistakenly juxtaposed with civil society: funding NGOs does not equal empowering and developing the marginal communities. Such logic, that to a large extent is still in motion, rests on the belief that the institution and the process coincide, whereas NGOs never really embodied grassroots social movements, they were just its by-product.

4. Genealogy of the Concept

The concept of empowerment has been informed for its larger extent by varied domains such as feminism, Freudian Psychology, theology, and social movements (Calvès 2009). Empowerment refers to the principles - such as the ability of individuals or groups to act and mobilise to ensure (a) their own well-being and (b) the utter control over decision-making that concerns them - that guided research and action among poor, oppressed and marginalised population in the United States (Simon 1994). The concept started being used formally in the context of various social protest movements, of groups such as African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities, to indicate their uplifting from a condition of oppression. Early conceptualisation of empowerment was thus hinged on the right of oppressed people to stand up by themselves, to express themselves and to overcome the domination to which they were subject. Such a right was that of informing the dominant narrative with their perspective, something that could happen solely by speaking up their voices and seizing room. Before being embedded in the development discourse empowerment was thus hinged on the following principles: participation in decision-making; ownership of one's own determination, and self-representation.

To fully understand the original meaning of the concept we shall refer to the work of Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). He was the main inspiration for the vast majority

of the writings on empowerment, thus, it is the best source to develop an analytic framework to assess the adherence of modern forms of empowerment to the original concept. According to Freire (1968), the condition of the oppressed is rooted in a small number of people exerting domination over the masses, resulting in dominated consciousness. Therefore, the process of empowerment of such masses must start from the attainment of critical consciousness. He emphasises throughout its work the role of *conscientizaçao* (conscientization), intended as "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take actions against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 1970). The original meaning was thus inherently political and hinged on what Laclau would define "the moment of political articulation" (Laclau, 2014). *Conscientizaçao* is nothing else but the process of identification, where multiple social particularities - by distancing from the "oppressive" other - establish a chain of equivalence among themselves and get fixed in a certain political articulation. Freire stresses also on the active role of the oppressed in increasing its awareness and taking action. To Freire, overcoming a condition of oppression requires the full agency of the oppressed; it is a process that cannot ever rest on the oppressor good-willing and false generosity. One of the gravest obstacles to liberation is that the oppressive reality absorbs those that are within it, and almost always the oppressed tend to become oppressor instead of striving for liberation. Having internalised the image of the oppressors, they find in the oppressor their model of "manhood" and of humanity. Therefore, "freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (Freire 1970). Freire is suggesting that the process of emancipation must go together with the ejection of the hegemonic representation. Hegemonic representations, as stated by Laclau, are reinforced by specific relation of knowledge and power, and tend to establish themselves because they self-represent as truths. The first step for self-empowerment is hence contestation of such a false representation and the right to speak one's own.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the term gradually gained foot in the international arena and development agenda, and drastically changed in respect with its original meaning. Initially the appearance of the word "empowerment" in the developmental policies was enthusiastically welcomed. The development discourse has been accused for long of avoiding any mention of power and of reducing issues of inequality and justice to tecno-economic problems. Yet, according to some reports, "empowerment meant enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the state institutions that affect their lives, by strengthening their participation in political processes and local decision-making" (World Bank 2001). Therefore, at least rhetorically, the "developmental" meaning was not too far from the original conceptualization

of empowerment based on Freire's work. However, overtime, the term was coopted in mainstream development discourse and lost its original focus on the individual and collective dimension of power. It became synonymous of economic capacity, market presence and status. In the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), within the policy framework empowerment of the poor is usually reduced to simply informing and consulting marginal communities, and it concerns solely few relevant NGOs (Cling, Razafindrakoto, and Roubaud 2002). Since the gradual introduction of empowerment in the development discourse, project development may have varied but policy design processes remained privilege of the development institutional sites. Therefore, it is not surprising that multiple unions and social movements declined the possibility to *participate* by being "consulted". These same actors often harshly criticized the broader process of NGOization brough about neoliberal reforms that slowly substituted grassroots social movements with big foreign-owned organization (Calvès 2009). International donors concentrated their financing on few professionalized NGOs mistakenly regarding them as the best means of participation of civil society. Moreover, in the NGOs empowerment is operationalized in its individualized, de-politicized and economic form, while the psychological, political and social dimension of power are utterly ignored (Calvès 2009).

To conclude, while originally empowerment had been conceptualized as a strategy in opposition to the status quo, to top-down development model, and to fixed relations of power and knowledge, today is mostly viewed as a mechanism to increase the efficiency of project implementation and productivity. It does not promote social transformation, nor it challenges the status quo at all, but it maintains it and reproduce it. The political emptiness of the term is reflected in the instrumental version of empowerment imposed by the WB, where it is envisaged as "building the assets of poor people to enable them to engage effectively in markets" (World Bank 2001). Clearly, the development apparatus shifted its focus more on how the poor can contribute to development by creating propitious market conditions rather than changing power relations. (Calvès 2009).

5. Repolitizing Development through Empowerment

The previous paragraphs highlighted a radical transformation of the concept of empowerment from its emergence in the Social Movement Theory to its adoption in the Development Theory. When it appeared, the notion of empowerment was completely contradictory with the epistemological underlying assumptions of the development discourse. The only respectful application of the principle would have been a gradual withdrawal from

any operation in the *developing* countries and the dismantle of the development apparatus, with the exception of funds if, and only if, conditionalities were pruned away. Of course, this did not happen.

Once applied within developmental policies and programs, the political thickness and the transformational nature that characterised it went lost. "Empowerment" has been undergoing a drastic surgery of reductionism. Participation was restricted to apical representative and in the obliged manner of project implementation; ownership only referred to countries' ownership; and self-representation was channelled through the medium of foreign workers imbued with the developmental ideas about how good societies should look like. The application of the concept never reached the levels of decision making and programs design, while within the policy framework it simply revolved around informing and consulting marginal communities, usually via few relevant NGOs that do not even have any real attachment to these communities. Empowerment turned into a palliative measure to make projects more efficient and legitimate, and never really involved any shift in power, as it was intended to. NGOs, international organizations and development experts coined and practiced a new conception of empowerment which was individualized, de-politicized and economized, while the psychological, political and social dimension of power went utterly ignored. So, while originally empowerment had been conceptualized as a strategy in opposition to the status quo, to top-down development model, and to fixed relations of power and knowledge, today is mostly viewed as a mechanism to increase the efficiency of project implementation and productivity. It does not promote social transformation, nor it challenges the status quo at all, but it maintains and reproduces it.

What did cause the denaturalization of empowerment and the failures of its implementation? Despite the undoubtable commitment to the ideals of participation and empowerment, there were some structural contradictions which prevents it from succeeding:

- Donors never abandoned a humanitarian approach to development, and they do not renounce to the need of monitoring the employment of their resources. Therefore, they never really adopted a participatory approach which would require them to enter into *partnership* with the community instead of aiding it.
- Development expertise is embedded in the identities of people working in the development industry. Development actors are there to express how a good society looks like, this is their place within the discourse and the application of their knowledge is constitutive of

their identity. Therefore, their action is always aimed at applying technical knowledge instead of listening to needs, necessities and demands. Taking seriously the claims of empowerment would mean renouncing the superior position of development expertise and reducing development actors to the role of assistant and enablers.

- Communities are mistakenly regarded as a homogenous corpus, whereas they are the stratified articulation of multiple interests which are mostly divided. Therefore "community empowerment" cannot ignore that interests are mostly antagonistic, thus faded version of empowerment risk just to reinforce existing dominant interests.

- NGOs have been erroneously juxtaposed with civil society. Whereas, funding NGOs does not equal empowering and developing the marginal communities. Such logic, that to a large extent is still in motion, rests on the belief that the institution and the process coincide, while NGOs never really embodied grassroots social movements, they were just its byproduct.

Consequently, the concept of empowerment was unable to challenge the development apparatus in its most basic criticalities. The underlying construction of identities (a developed Self and underdeveloped Other) was maintained and reinforced by the presence of foreign workers and by the humanitarian/aid-approach of international donors. The primacy of development expertise over communities' self-determination, which mirrored the Eurocentric assumptions of the development discourse remained also unquestioned. Finally, the developmental objective of *developing underdeveloped* nations through economic growth and industrialization and its authoritarian implementation permeates the development discourse until now.

Such tenacity and immutability of the foundational relations of power and knowledge in the development discourse is a direct consequence of the fact that it is   highly depoliticizing. It established itself as indisputable and self-represents itself as a natural expression of the order of reality. Even after the adoption of the discourses of participation and empowerment, the development discourse kept on conceptualizing global injustice and inequality in terms of lack of capital, knowledge and technology, rather than in terms of relations of power, exploitation and hierarchies. Through this mechanism the questions of poverty, misery, unequal distribution, violence, and scarcity, are turned into tecno-economic (instead of socio-political) problems. In this way it completely obscures global inequalities and social conflicts on the national and international level. In addition – by framing situation of oppression, unequal

distribution, and abuse of power as technical problems – it assumes that social problems may be resolved with solutions unconcerned with politics, power, or conflict of interests.

Nowadays, the political scenario has changed and has been completely shaken by the globalization discourse, engendering several points of application for the concept of empowerment. The contemporary era is one of multiple antagonisms and hegemonic relations, which are the starting point to develop counterstrategies to the current power relations. The definitive overcoming of fixed conditions of marginality, misery, and oppression must begin with refusal of the transfiguration of the social – and thus inherently political – question into a technical – and consequently apolitical – problem. The development apparatus is made of two souls: development as a transition to modern, industrialized, and capitalist economy, and development as a reduction of inequality and social injustice. Those two meanings are quite often – and usually deliberately – conflated but inherently contradictory. Throughout this work, the development discourse has been unmasked as a hegemonic articulation of specific relations of power and knowledge. Therefore, up to this point it is clear that reducing inequalities and injustice is a process that must pass through politics and mobilization. A new development is thus a process of empowerment that transcends it. It must be grounded on the political process of identification, where multiple social particularities - by distancing from the "oppressive" other - establish a chain of equivalence among themselves and get fixed in a certain political articulation. Strictly speaking an alliance of different demands is essential to begin to construct an alternative to Development. Until marginality, poverty, misery, gender violence, and labour exploitation remain depoliticized and fragmentated moments, there is no chance of transcending the current hegemonic relations hinged on the neoliberal and developmental paradigms. Within this frame, I would like to point out that the relation between empowerment and politics is biunivocal and mutually reinforcing. A politically vibrant field of action is essential to make empowerment unfolds its real potential, and in parallel empowerment can be the key paxis to trigger the repoliticization of situation of injustice and inequality.

Now, it comes naturally to wonder where this process of re-politicization shall begin. It should be able to challenge the relations of power and knowledge exerted by either the development discourse, and the more recent globalizations discourse. The main difference is that while the former concentrates its effect over the North-South relations, the latter have severe consequences – in terms of social justice and equality – that transcend national borders and, thus, require transnational alliances. The process of development re-politicization must thus recognize the political nature of national debts and development and the overall power relations that invest global inequalities.

5.1. Politicizing Debt

The mainstream development apparatus insists on straightforward, technical and apolitical solutions based on aid and "humanitarian" funds. However, growing cynicism is rising against a representation of "aid" and donors as generous and benevolent givers. The mainstream depiction of Western countries as warm-hearted creditors and of debt crisis in the South as the natural outcome of mismanagement and corruption must be confronted. This hegemonic narrative conceals the political nexus between global inequality and the dominant financial regime, overlooking on the unfair repayment conditionalities and the political nuances of measure that are not merely technical. As proclaimed by Tim Jones, "debt is fundamentally an issue of power and change will not come from the benevolence of powerful creditors, but needs to be rooted in the grassroots struggles against injustice across the world" (Fridell 2013). He is not the only one to stress the relations of power embedded in aid program and debt commitments. The biggest paradox is that quite often these unspoken relations of power that promote unjust global dynamics of aid and debt, are the same concerned with contrasting the unequal effects caused by the dominant debt and development paradigm. By a way of example, Molly Kane dooms INGOs which by coming the main enablers of aid policies and donor-driven development are legitimizing those power relations they supposedly are seeking to change (Fridell 2013). Notwithstanding many NGOs seeks to challenge the current situation of oppression and inequality, what is missing is the need of linking debt, development and aid to the broader struggles for democracy, social justice, human rights, environment, and against unequal power structures. Public debt is one of the biggest constraints for Southern governments which are locked in a self-reproducing mechanism of debt-repayment that basically impedes autonomous pollical-economic maneuvering. In the current state of affairs, it became a powerful tool for Western capital to forcefully transplant the political-economic policies on Southern states and to ensure the primacy of the market over the social. Challenging the development debt regime and the way it amplifies uneven global relations requires to emphasize the *politicality* of debt. Nowadays, it is represented as a technical exchange of money between debtor and creditor, along the lines of the neoliberal separation of the economic from the social and the political. The first step towards the politicization of development is recognizing that such a distinction cannot be made and that the dominant economic representation of debt and development must be deconstructed to achieve social change.

5.2. Politicizing Inequalities

Global inequality and injustice are reinforced when their dominant/mainstream representation is taken for granted. As claimed by Alice Evans (2018), inequalities have a strong nexus with self-perceptions, internalized stereotypes, unquestioned acceptance of distribution, and norm perception. Within the development apparatus, we already analyzed that the representational norms – which still persists – present the subaltern identities as underdeveloped and deficient from the Western standard. Such beliefs are developed, reinforced and revised continuously through development expertise's observations, aid policies, international media, development workers knowledge and volunteers ideals. In addition, they exert direct influence on people's behavior and in their actual capacity of change. Once depoliticized, inequalities are normalized and taken for granted, therefore, marginalized groups instead of looking at their condition as the outcome of certain relation of power, interpret it as inevitable and sees no alterative possibilities or discourses.

The fixity of the development discourse and of the development dichotomies relies also on the naturalization of inequality (through its depoliticization) that promotes people's conformation to the status quo, even when such a political articulation goes against one's own well-being. By articulating social injustice in terms of technical problems, state inefficiency or underdeveloped economic structure, the development apparatus inhibits social change. Therefore INGOs, or even "grassroots" organization", which adopts and implements aid policies and donor-driven development operate an unintentional but coordinated change in beliefs and behaviors which sustain path dependency. On the other hand, when alternative narratives are fostered, and inequalities are framed in terms of fiscal distribution and democratization, social movement are incentivized to pursue social change.

Inequalities are sustained and reproduced when marginalized groups of society internalize stigmatized and subaltern identities. But, through association, mobilization and exposure to egalitarian and politicized discourses, people come to review their identities, strive for dignity and struggle for social change. Currently, NGOs often focus on projects providing services or trainings for poor beneficiaries, rather than collectively pushing for change. Whereas the collective dimension of participation against conditions of inequalities is essential. It is important to stress that inequality and injustice are disapproved, fought and challenged by larger groups than the single individual; otherwise, it will become normalized and widely accepted because this is the common perception.

5.3. Final Remarks

Since its appearance in the Development discourse, empowerment lost the political thickness and the transformational nature that characterised it. "Empowerment" underwent a drastic operation of reductionism and its focus on participation, social change and political struggle faded. It turned into a palliative measure to make projects more efficient and legitimate, and never really involved any shift in power, as it was intended to. NGOs, international organizations and development experts coined and practiced a new conception of empowerment which was individualized, de-politicized and economized, while the psychological, political and social dimension of power went utterly ignored. So, while originally empowerment had been conceptualized as a strategy in opposition to the status quo, to top-down development model, and to fixed relations of power and knowledge, today is mostly viewed as a mechanism to increase the efficiency of project implementation and productivity. It does not promote social transformation, nor it challenges the status quo at all, but it maintains and reproduces it. Throughout the chapter, the main structural obstacles that refrain it from succeeding have been found.

- Donors never really adopted a participatory approach which would require them to enter into *partnership* with the community instead of aiding it.
- Development actors get stuck to development assumption about how a good society looks like, this is their place within the discourse and the application of their knowledge is constitutive of their identity. Therefore, their action is always aimed at applying technical knowledge instead of listening to needs, necessities and demands.
- NGOs are erroneously juxtaposed with civil society, while they never really embodied grassroots social movements, they were just its byproduct.

Moreover, it has been highlighted that what constraints any potential of social change in the development industry is that it is highly depoliticizing. It established itself as indisputable and as a natural expression of the order of reality. Even after the adoption of the discourses of participation and empowerment, the development discourse kept on conceptualizing global injustice and inequality in terms of lack of capital, knowledge and technology, rather than in terms of relations of power, exploitation and hierarchies. Through this mechanism the questions of poverty, misery, unequal distribution, violence, and scarcity, are turned into tecno-

economic (instead of socio-political) problems. In this way it completely obscures global inequalities and social conflicts on the national and international level.

However, the emancipatory level of the concept of empowerment should not be underestimated. The relation between empowerment and politics is biunivocal and mutually reinforcing. A politically vibrant field of action is essential to make empowerment unfolds its real potential, and in parallel empowerment can be the key paxis to trigger the repoliticization of situation of injustice and inequality. The *praxis* of re-politicizing discourses which lost their political sharpness is indeed one of empowerment. The definitive overcoming of fixed conditions of marginality, misery, and oppression must begin with refusal of the transfiguration of the social – and thus inherently political – question into a technical – and consequently apolitical – problem. This is a process of empowerment and mobilization that requires people to challenge the essentialist representation of the status quo and to recognize it as the byproduct of hegemonic relations. Such process or re-narration shall begin by contrasting the relations of power and knowledge exerted by either the development discourse and the more recent globalizations discourse. The main difference is that while the former concentrates its effect over the North-South relations, the latter have severe consequences – in terms of social justice and equality – that transcend national borders and, thus, require transnational alliances. The process of empowerment and repoliticization must thus recognize the political nature of national debts and development and the overall power relations that invest global inequalities.

Concerning the former, the aid apparatus and its mainstream depiction of Western countries as warm-hearted creditors and of debt crisis in the South as the natural outcome of mismanagement and corruption must be confronted. This hegemonic narrative conceals the political nexus between global inequality and the dominant financial regime, overlooking on the unfair repayment conditionalities and the political nuances of measure that are not merely technical. Public debt became a powerful tool for Western capital to forcefully transplant the political-economic policies on Southern states and to ensure the primacy of the market over the social. Challenging the development debt regime and the way it amplifies uneven global relations requires to emphasize the *politicality* of debt. Nowadays, it is represented as a technical exchange of money between debtor and creditor, along the lines of the neoliberal separation of the economic from the social and the political. The first step towards the politicization of development is recognizing that such a distinction cannot be made and that the dominant economic representation of debt and development must be deconstructed to achieve social change.

When it comes to global inequalities and social injustice, we must face the representational norms which present the subaltern identities as underdeveloped and deficient from the Western standard. Such beliefs are developed, reinforced and revised continuously through development expertise's observations, aid policies, international media, development workers knowledge and volunteers ideals. They exert direct influence on people's behavior and in their actual capacity of change. Once depoliticized, inequalities are normalized and taken for granted, therefore, marginalized groups instead of looking at their condition as the outcome of certain relation of power, interpret it as inevitable and sees no alterative possibilities or discourses. By articulating social injustice in terms of technical problems, state inefficiency or underdeveloped economic structure, the development apparatus inhibits social change. Inequalities are sustained and reproduced when marginalized groups of society internalize stigmatized and subaltern identities. But, through association, mobilization and exposure to egalitarian and politicized discourses, people come to review their identities, strive for dignity and struggle for social change.

The biggest paradox is that quite often these unspoken relations of power that promote unjust global dynamics of aid and debt, are the same that fosters initiatives to contrast poverty, misery and marginality through development policies. INGOs, or even "grassroots" organization", which adopts and implements aid policies and donor-driven development are legitimizing those power relations they supposedly are seeking to change. They operate an unintentional but coordinated change in beliefs and behaviors which sustain inequalities' path dependency.

To conclude, instead of focusing on projects where empowerment is reduced to policy implementation or economic training, the focus must go back to the collective dimension of participation against conditions of inequalities. A human-rights-based approach which focuses on rights of people should be adopted rather than on which emphasizes their need and challenges. Reducing conditions of marginality and misery to technical issue or to unfortunate outcomes of a poor economic performance is the first step to reproduce social inequalities and injustice. These processes are naturalized and made possible by the highly depoliticization operated by the development discourse; therefore, empowerment if bravely adopted in its original meaning by grassroots NGO and movements might be the keystone to pursue social change.

CASE-STUDY: EMPOWERING PRACTICE IN A TANZANIAN NGO

The following case-study is rooted on the volunteering experience I carried out throughout three months in a Tanzanian NGO called Art in Tanzania. Art in Tanzania (AIT) was established in 2001 and operates in Dar es Salaam counting on more than 200 international volunteers and interns (both local and foreigners) all year around. Beyond its CEO and founder, the NGO has around 20 permanent staff members, among which 2 team leaders, 3 local interns, kitchen personnel (5 people) and maintenance personnel (4 people).

Concerning international volunteers, their number during my staying has been floating, going from 4 up to 12 people. The only three of them that remained for the whole duration of the study are object of this research given their availability during the full length of the research. AIT defines itself as a self-sustainable no-profit NGO whose mission is that of promoting the development of the most vulnerable communities in Africa through self-sustainable operations. All its programs are community-based and geared towards empowering local communities and individuals.

1. The Context

The development context and the presence of NGOs in Tanzania are related to the country's overall socio-economic, historical/cultural, and political conditions. Tanzania remains a relatively new nation, having come into existence into its contemporary form just recently. It achieved its independence from the United Kingdom in the 1961 and it accomplished its unification, becoming the United Republic of Tanzania, in 1964, after Zanzibar gained its independence. After the colonial period Tanzania adopted socialist and self-reliant policies that fall under the name of *Ujamaa.* Their main goal was that of wresting the control of the economy away from western colonisers and re-orienting it towards meeting the need of the people through the provisions of goods and services (Mbilinyi 2016). These set of policies rested on the so called *Ujamaa* Villages, which were meant to be self-sustainable and communitarian economies.

The *Ujamaa* period is object of contrasting opinions. On the one hand, some authors (Maddox and Mbilinyi 1994; Raikes 1986) suggest that it was a successful strategy for rural transformation that supported the steady expansion of African civil society. The socialist period coincided with strong welfare policies, whose result was the provision of basic economic, heath, education and water services for the majority of Tanzanian people. The spread access to such a vast array of services during the *Ujamaa* era is counterpointed to what happened from the 1980s with the structural adjustments programmes (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The economic crisis that assailed the global economy between the 1970s and the 1980s, combined with high debt and donor dependency, provided the opportunity to push ahead with the liberalisation of the economy and to roll back welfare programmes together with socialism. The SAPs era - coinciding with large-scale processes of privatisation, free-marketisation, commodification, denationalisation, and internationalisation - is, thus, considered as a major failure in terms of social and welfare policies. All the major previous achievements were rolled back: education, health and water were liberalised, and privatised, thus free universal education and health care got lost. Such a process is interpreted as the main source of growing inequalities in access of social services (Mbilinyi 2016). On the other hand, the *Ujamaa* era has its own contradictions and others define it as a complete failure. M. Lofghie describes its policies of collective villagisation as the major cause of a crisis in agricultural production and claims that the welfare and social provisions achieved in that period are highly overrated (Lofghie 1978).

What is less equivocal is the process of NGOsation that followed the SAPs and the liberalisation of Tanzanian economy. As I said, before the Structural Adjustment Policies, Tanzania was a socialist state dominated by the Revolutionary Party that - despite the more or less successful policies it encouraged - largely restricted political and social participation, thus, hindering the development and the organisation of civil society (Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizárraga 2017). *Ujamaa* ideology allowed the State to be sole provider of services, thus there was no room left for bottom-up process of self-organisation and for the development of society itself. Therefore, the 1980s represented a shift point; liberalisation engendered the conditions that sparked NGO movement by leading to a radical reduction of the role of the state and to the increment in the provision of social services by the private sector. This came together with the opening up of the political arena, the introduction of the multi-party system (1992) and development of civil society. Associations and non-governmental organisations, funded mainly through associations with international partners and donors, emerged and filled the gap left by the downgrading of the State in services' provision. NGOs became the main vehicle of foreign aid and the centrepiece of development agenda in Tanzania. The main international donors on which Tanzania relied - US, Britain, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, and the World Bank - reduced drastically their support to state-based programs, and NGOs became the major beneficiaries (Kiondo, 1994). The SAPs era brought new rules of the game, as far as development and aid processes was concerned. To use the worlds of A.S. Kiondo, "while the State was meant to shoulder the largest burden, aid directed at providing welfare services and which was targeted at poor would be increasingly funnelled through local non-state channels, which were assumed to be expanding from below to fill some of the "gap" which the state was leaving" (Kiondo, 1994). NGOs proliferated and their number moved from 70 in 1978 to 813 in 1994. Therefore, NGOs became the backbone of development programs, becoming primary means of services' provisions and pivotal channels of injection of aid. The fundamental flaw in the processes described above is that NGOs started being mistakenly juxtaposed with civil society, and international donors and policymakers thought that funding the former equalled empowering and developing the latter. Such logic, that to a large extent is still in motion, rests on the belief that the institution and the process coincide, whereas NGOs never really embodied grassroots social movements, they were just its byproduct. Notwithstanding the fragility of this logic, NGOs end up becoming the privileged channel of development by the means of empowering society.

Therefore, the *developmental* path followed in Tanzania mirrors the evolution of the development discourse sketched in the previous chapters. Initially development policies where

mainly informed by modernization theory and designed as top-down imposition of economic maneuverers. In Tanzania the first *stage* was characterized by a socialist tendency; however, this did not really change the fact that *development* was still regarded as a linear and monologic path along the lines of the western societal evolution. Quite the opposite, "development" has been wielded by nationalist and political elites to seize power and establish hierarchies. In the 1980s, the crisis of the development apparatus was felt in Tanzania as well. Neoliberal ideology seized the room, and through the Structural Adjustment Programs new policies were adopted which promoted the erosion of welfare state structures of social support, free-marketization, commodification, businesses' decentralization and further internationalisation, and the restructuring of welfare provisioning to increase the attachment to the workforce. NGOs became the primary means of development/aid policies as well as basic services. They started being regarded as the reflection of civil society and, thus, the key to participation and empowerment, giving rise to multiple paradoxes and contradictions.

In the previous chapter we highlighted the rising importance of NGOs within the development apparatus, especially when it comes to policies of empowerment and participation. The development crisis started in the 1980s and engendered the imposition of the neoliberal paradigm hinged on identification of NGOs as enablers of empowerment and participation. The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and the processes of liberalisation generated the conditions that sparked the NGO movement. Both as a consequence of the growing civil society and the decreasing role of the State, NGOs were becoming primary means of services' provisions and pivotal channels of injection of aid. Since then, development buttressed heavily on the NGO system which became the centrepiece of the development agenda and the symbol of community participation. This was one of the main reasons that led me to pick an NGO as privileged site to analyse empowerment practices, their criticalities and their contradiction with the development discourse. Moreover, in light of the peculiar historical-contextual conjuncture that wants Tanzanian NGOs to be the primary enablers of society's empowerment, this case-study allows to explore the effectiveness of empowering practices, as framed in the previous chapters, and the way these practices are shaped and influenced by the development discourse.

4. Methodology and Methods

The paper uses a qualitative approach, influenced mainly by feminist methodology and its principles of subjectivity of knowledge, reflexivity, positionality, intersectionality and non-binarism (Deitch 2020).

Starting from the recognition of the utter subjectivity of the work and accepting the unavoidable influence exerted by my presence as a researcher, the paper conceptualises and problematize my position as a volunteer in the Tanzanian NGO Art in Tanzania. The specificity and materiality of the knowledge detained by me as an intern and by the other (foreign) workers in the NGO is one of the main objects of study. Development expertise – or pre-given conceptualization of the development world - is embedded in the identities of people working in the development industry. Development actors are there to express how a good society looks like, and their action is always aimed at applying technical knowledge instead of listening to needs, necessities and demands. Hence, the question to be answered is how this knowledge-based approach of development actors (me included) influence and conditions the effectivity of empowering practices. This is why reflexivity is advanced on positivity, and my social location as a researcher as well as my relationship with the people and the topics studied are particularly emphasised (Deitch 2020).

The discursive interferences are not the sole focus of this study. Grounding of the analysis of power carried out in the previous chapters, I was also interested in analysing the relation between knowledge and power and scrutinize how certain narratives support traditional power hierarchies. In accordance with the principle of positionality, the power relations in which I was involved - that were inherently embedded in my identity of a white person in Tanzania and of a foreigner unable to speak the local language - were not overlooked but placed at the centre of the research.

When it comes to the case-study, applying these principles meant analysing empowerment by assessing how foreign volunteers/interns interact with and influence empowering processes. Art In Tanzania is a perfect instance of those many non-governmental organisations whose primary goal is that of empowering communities but whose primary actors/enablers of such process are, paradoxically, foreigners unknowledgeable and detached from the community, its culture and its necessities. Therefore, assessing empowerment, its effectiveness and its limits required also to linger on the way in which the position of the primary actors of empowerment processes is perceived. This meant reflecting upon whiteness and blackness in Tanzania, the way "*muzungu*" are perceived, and how this conditioned any activity. Besides that, the analysis

focused on the subjective positions of the interviewees and of the community members, trying to assess what informs them and how they are affected by the current processes of globalisation, neoliberalism and development, with the final aim of understanding how this restraints and conditions empowerment processes.

The field work was based on the NGO Art in Tanzania and the communities it serves and focused on two core projects - the Women Development Programme and the Financial Programme (which was still part of the former). The data were obtained through document analysis, participated observation and unstructured interviews to the operational and management staff.

- Document analysis had as its main focus the official papers of the NGOs, where its mission statement, vision and programmes are fully explained. The aim was that of framing the NGO, verifying its adherence to the object of study, and to understand the "intentions" of the NGOs.

- Participated observations have been the primary means to frame the situation and context. They have also been useful material to be discussed during the interviews, both with locals and foreigners. Their centrality in the research is founded on the importance of assessing the gap between pre-given perceptions of interns and volunteers and systems of representation of local workers.

- Concerning the interviews, the study gave priority to the qualitative depth of the interviews, that has been carried out in different stages for each participant throughout the whole period of staying. The interviews were unstructured and dialogical, but they followed an interview guide that prioritised these topics: a) organisational, financial and corporate structure of the NGO (AIT), b) operating as NGO in Dar Es Salaam, c) relationship with the community; d) role and relationship with (foreign) volunteers and interns, d) meaning of empowerment and development and their practical implementation; e) identity and identity shocks; f) values and ideas about society and human progress. Throughout the interviews maximum attention has been reserved to personal feelings, experiences, triggers of motivation, and restraints to self-empowerment.

5. The Case-study

The study revolves around the whole stay in the NGO, the relationships with the local and foreign workers, the dynamics with the local community and two of its core empowering projects (Women Development and Financial Literacy). Both projects are claimed to aim at the empowering of the community and to serve as primary purpose its enhancement. The projects followed the sequent agenda: first the community was interviewed in order to define its main challenges, needs, and necessity; then the operational staff together with the volunteers designed a strategy of action that was implemented accordingly to the data collected. Concerning the Women Development Project, the programme focused on skill and educational training, while the Financial Projects concerned carrying out interviews to local governors and organising three conferences about financial education.

The analysis and finding of the case-study are structured as follows. There will be three short sections (intentions, implementation and impotence) in which the good intentions of the NGO and its strategies will be presented (intentions), then they will be valued in relation to the current needs of the community (implementation), to finally assess the efficacy and utility of the NGO's empowering operations (impotence).

6. What the Research Found

The research identified the main factors that undermine the feasibility of liberating empowerment and the interstitial spaces in which liberating empowerment does take place. Concerning the first finding, liberating empowerment appears to be hindered by: a) institutional fallacies; b) the delocalised ownership and management of the NGO, c) the distorted perception that foreign volunteers and interns hold about the community; d) the self-perception of the community (and of local interns); e) the high depoliticization of the projects and thus the impossibility of articulating politically the complexity of the needs of the community. The NGO as an institution has been found completely futile in terms of promotion of liberating empowerment. Its action is restricted to the fostering of a neoliberal form of empowerment; however, local workers of the NGO succeed in empowering themselves or the community exploiting the umbrella of the NGO. Therefore, even if human agency appears to be the sole real source of empowerment, institutions (the NGO in this case) may serve as triggers.

7. Intentions

Art in Tanzania (AIT) was established in 2001 and it has been operating in Dar es Salaam for 11 years. It counts on more than 200 international volunteers and interns all year around. Beyond its CEO and founder, the NGO has around 20 permanent staff members, among which 2 team leaders (locals), 3 local interns, kitchen personnel (5 people) and maintenance personnel (4 people). Participants (interns, workers and volunteers) live all together in the compound, placed in Madale Village, to support the surrounding communities.

The NGO focuses on different socio-environmental issues: Children's Agenda program, Climate Change program, Women Development, and Corporate Social Responsibility program, among others. As we can read in the *memorandum* of AIT: "the projects are community-based program geared towards empowering local communities and individuals". Art in Tanzania regards itself as primarily focused on the empowerment of communities, on their participation, and on the locals' ownership of the projects. Their mission statement is indeed the following: "To promote the development of the most vulnerable communities in Africa developing partnerships with INGOs, Universities and Corporate sector". While their vision is claimed to be: "self-sustainable operations as the only way to help vulnerable societies".

In the keynote documents of AIT the strategies to implement such empowerment are explained for each project. Concerning the Children's Agenda, the primary focus is on children's right for education, medication, sanitation and other necessities. Moreover, the program has ten key investment points: to Invest to Save the Lives of Children and Women, Invest in Good Nutrition, Invest in Better Hygiene and Sanitation in Schools and Health Facilities, Invest in Early Childhood Development, Invest in Quality Education for all Children, Invest to Make Schools Safe, Invest to Protect Infants and Adolescent Girls from HIV, Invest to Reduce Teenage Pregnancy, Invest to Protect Children from Violence, Abuse, and Exploitation and Invest in Children with Disabilities. Regarding the Climate Change program, they are implementing friendly solutions for the communities, and they focus on eco-construction or eco-friendly solutions. In addition, they support local builders and prompts the utilization and diffusion of traditional African construction techniques. The Women Development programs aim at empowering women of the communities through providing them with business skills, helping them to gather in solidarity groups and ease their access to financial credit. Finally, the Corporate Social Responsibility program focuses on partnerships with Tanzanian corporate and government institutions to act against climate change. Given the

scarce attention that climate change issues have in Tanzania, AIT focuses on informing the public about its effects and consequences and on working with corporations to increment their CSR duties. They also work with a consortium of NGOs and private sector actors to evaluate and produce solution to the combination of climate change and human rights issues in rural Africa. Vulnerable groups are the most affected and the programs wants to develop models for possible solutions.

To sum up, we can recognize the good purposes of the NGO Art in Tanzania which, at least in its formal priorities, is openly interested in empowering the communities through awareness, participation and ownership.

8. Implementation

Taking a closer look, few criticalities emerge. The original question is how all these good intents are going to be implemented and if such an implementation is coincident with the interests and needs of the served community. Unfortunately, during my three-months-experience I had to reach the conclusion that the implementation stage is often extremely poor and lacks any kind of adherence with the beneficiaries' needs.

My analysis focused specifically on the Women Development Project. This due to three main reasons. First of all, it was the one with the strongest attention to the beneficiaries' empowerment (at least officially). Second, I had the chance to get involved since the very beginning of the project, and, finally, once there I realized that the NGO was poorly organized, unstructured, and negligent, thus, the largest part of the projects it claimed to do were finished or never even started properly. The Women Development Project (WDP) followed the sequent agenda: first the community was interviewed in order to define its main challenges; then the operational staff together with the volunteers designed a strategy of action that was implemented accordingly to the data collected. After having heard the women of the community, it was decided that the priority was that of strengthening their group and increasing the solidarity among them in order to set the foundation for a credit group (SACCOs). It was also thought to provide them with basic financial and business education to help them improving their business, and to organize few courses to teach them traditional dying techniques that could support their businesses. The project was undertaken and carried out, however, there was a constant feeling of impotence that came with us during the whole implementation. Women were not really interested in taking any financial class, thus, they were there as passive recipients rather than active participants. They were already aware of how to

analyse market, how to improve their business and in which ways they could acquire and retain customers. In addition, they were more acknowledged than the volunteers that should have given them lessons; indeed they knew the specificities of the Tanzanian market, the institutional framework and the characteristic of its operators. What they were lacking was not the ability, willingness or knowledge to carry out their businesses, as our presence there wanted to claim. Community members were not struggling because they missed the financial knowledge or the capability to save money but because market prices are flawed, institutions are poorly performing, their condition of women is subject to multiple oppressions, and they enjoy no government assistance at all. Clearly, while the NGO was adopting a technical approach, based on the idea that community's challenges are economic in nature, women were urging the *politicality* of their struggles. Women were always very direct about their main challenge: they were constantly fighting for the capital and against the impossibility of having enough capital to overcome the mere survival. However, such an impossibility is not related to their incapability of doing business – as our presence there wanted to suggest. Many of the women interviewed were utterly aware of the legal constraints imposed by the government to SMEs (small and medium enterprises), the scarce recognition of their rights, and the weak position into which globalized international chains of labour consigned them. However, the WDP overlocked on the political necessity of articulating such struggles and focused on the "economic empowerment" of the women. Since the very first stage of the programme (interviews to the women), the depoliticizing tendency of foreign workers to frame situation in techno-economic categories was visible in the questions they posed. The focus was not on their rights or on the injustice they faced and its underlying causes but on their flaws as businesswomen. This approach automatically led to multiple paradoxes. One of the most glaring was the NGO's insistence on helping the women overcoming their lack of capital through loans and credit, instead of mobilization and action. As a former local employee of the NGO stated, "this tendency openly ignores that in the current state of affairs loans will end up being a double burden for these women". Firstly, given the oppressed conditions of women in Tanzania and the country's patriarchal foundations, very often women-directed financial aid (via loans) is taken by force by their husband to finance their alcoholism. Second, these loans become soon unbearable debts. The socio-economic conditions and the absolute absence of any government assistance or social service obliged the women to use loans to pay for basic need instead of investing in their businesses. Therefore, they found themselves with no capital and growing debts on their shoulders. Such a mismatch between needs and solutions, shew a

fundamental mistrust in the capability and in the knowledge of the community members that ends up in disempowering them by objectifying them as mere objects of aid.

An equally thorny issue was the presence of foreigner volunteers/interns and the discursive identity they carried with them. Their development expertise and their narratives about North/South relations had tremendous impact on the way in chich both volunteers/interns and community members perceived themselves and were perceived. First of all, foreign workers must deal with a pre-given identity built on decades of development projects and narratives. As said by one of the team leader of the NGO, most of the women were there more for the presence of foreign (white) volunteers rather than for the projects themselves. In Dar es Salaam, white people had indeed acquired the meaning of "money is coming" and their identity is nowadays so closely related to the image of the "white saviour", that it is almost impossible to actually collaborate with the community members peer to peer. Unfortunately, most of the time such identity is welcomed and confirmed by the workers themselves. Moreover, the modalities in which projects were structured enhanced the perception that there was a distinction between qualified western volunteers and negligent southern beneficiaries. The very moment in which foreigners *helped* they were placing the beneficiaries in a political spaces which was economical and market-centered. The type of help that foreigners were providing (techno-economic instead of socio-political) and the way in which it was delivered fostered the idea that those women were struggling due to their incompetence and scarce entrepreneurial knowledge. This practice has been internalized up to the point that that it came to be part of the subjective narrative and vision of themselves. The final result is that the NGO never really adopted a participatory approach which would require it to enter into *partnership* with the community instead of aiding it. The peculiar positionality of foreign workers was never really contrasted and the whole WDP – from the design to the implementation – fostered a top-down "banking education". What was most interesting is that these identities were internalized up to the point that even the local workers of the NGO, even if more acknowledged and qualified for the operations, tended to step aside during the activities to leave the floor to the "white saviours". Out of the interviews it emerged that foreign interns arrived imbued with a rhetoric that portraits them as the "helper" and the community as the incapable people in constant need. This directly affects the effectiveness of the projects, which are never grounded on trust for the community and dialogical/co-intentional reflexive action, but on top-down objectifying approaches. Empowerment was thus understood as an attribute the community could be endowed with exogenously, instead than a process whose source is stitched with the beneficiary. What is even more enthralling is that out of the words of the locals, the community

members themselves self-perceive them as constantly needing exogenous help. As one of the interviewees said, this is one of the largest obstacle for the effective empowerment of the community, and it is grounded on the developmental narratives the community is constantly exposed to and on the way aid and help have been provided throughout the last six decades. In the specific case of AIT's projects this practically means that since foreign people assume (and are attributed) the positional meaning of "the helpers", the community will hardly overcome the predisposition of solely being aided.

The critical points of the project will be further explained in the following paragraph, we may conclude here by saying that the project was finalized, however, the final impression was that it has been implemented more for the credibility of the NGO that for empowering the community. The volunteers that participated, the author included, had a strong feeling of impotence and of having deliberately ignored the political character of the struggles that those women were facing.

9. Impotence (Findings)

The feeling of impotence has crossed my way several times during my staying at the NGO and in the interviews to the operators of AIT in Tanzania. I met several people working in the development industry and for different NGOs, mainly in Dar es Salaam, and unfortunately with many of them I shared such sensation. By impotence I mean the clarity with which one can recognize the gap between the NGOs' operations and the demands of the communities. Notwithstanding the good purposes of the NGO, the project object of this study can't be considered anything but a partial failure. The women never really got engaged in the project and not only their condition did not really change, but they also got no extra awareness about its root reasons. The main criticalities of the project are gathered into three main groups and summarized in the figure below (Table 1).

- *The development expertise which is embedded in the identities of the foreign workers/volunteers*. Notwithstanding the high expectations connected to NGOs, considered as grassroots organization which mirrors civil society, the case-study demonstrated that such a link is not always straightforward as it may seem. Communities' members remain mere beneficiaries of external development projects, and their participation is limited to implementation phase. Empowerment was intended only as the interest for vulnerable

communities, but it was never implemented functionally. Despite the undoubtable commitment to the ideals of participation and empowerment, there are some structural contradictions which prevents it from succeeding. Among all, the most impressive was "development" expertise embedded in the identities of people working in the NGO. Volunteer and interns were there to *help* and *teach*, this was their place within the discourse and was constitutive of their identity. They hardly listened to needs, necessities and demands of the communities, but they were always ready to provide techno-economic solutions, usually unsuited to the contextual conjuncture in which they operated. The discursive reality that surrounds them is material in its consequence though. Actual cooperation and participation were hindered by fixed identities that wanted the community to be passive beneficiaries and the volunteers to be helpers endowed with the right knowledge. Such a frame permitted to provide the most basic form of aid but for sure it is unsuited to empower anyone. Unfortunately, these identities, and the dichotomies that come with them, seemed to be crystalized in the structure of the NGO and in its practices.

- *The economic focus of the empowering operations*. The case-study revealed that empowerment is often reduced to the economic dimension that pertains to it just relatively. The economization of the concept of empowerment started in the first phases of the project, when the challenges and needs of the community have been framed in techno-economical terms instead of political. Such an approach not only resulted in the failure of the project, but it also risks to emphasize feelings of frustration and guilt in the community. By deliberately overlooking on the political roots causes and on the power relations that underlies certain condition of marginality, NGO workers are allegedly making beneficiaries believe that their condition will really change if they only learn better how to draft a business model or to properly write down their expenses. But, unfortunately it will not, unless the structural conditions that marginalize certain groups and rewards others is not confronted.

- *The high depoliticization of the NGO*. Related to the former point is the general tendency of the NGO to depoliticize any issue. The political root reasons underlying the marginality of the women's group (both as women and as entrepreneurs) were never raised. Moreover, marginalization and inequality were sustained and reproduced by the economic approach of the NGO's projects and by the identities of its workers. The NGO did not promoted

association, mobilization and exposure to egalitarian and politicized discourses, through which people could have come to review their identities, strive for dignity and struggle for social change. Empowerment was reduced to policy implementation or economic training, and it was never focused on the collective dimension of participation against conditions of inequalities. A human-rights-based approach which focuses on rights of people should be adopted rather than one which emphasizes their need and challenges. Reducing conditions of marginality and misery to technical issue or to unfortunate outcomes of a poor economic performance is the first step to reproduce social inequalities and injustice. These processes are naturalized and made possible by the highly depoliticization operated by the development discourse and welcomed by development actors (e.g., AIT).

Constraints to Empowerment	Key Features	Effects
Discursive Identities of Foreign Workers	• Internalization of Eurocentric dichotomies • Objectification of the beneficiaries • Scarce participation • Self-conceptualization as "acknowledged helpers"	• Impossibility to cooperate peer-to-peer • Promotion of subaltern identities • Discursive disempowerment
Economic focus of empowerment	• Framing of challenges in economic terms • Design of techno-economic strategies and projects	• Root causes of marginality remain untouched • Sense of guilt and frustration in the beneficiaries
Depolitcization	• Economization of any issue • Weak exposure to egalitarian and politicized discourses	• No promotion of association and mobilization • Reproduction of inequality and marginality

Table 1

To conclude, the findings confirms that empowerment practices are deeply conditioned by the neoliberal and development discourses, which impoverish and sabotage their potential of success by depoliticizing them. NGOs, by restraining their operation on the mere economic aspects of empowerment, overlooks on the form of oppression and disempowerment that derives from the economic system itself. Moreover, this depolitization process sometimes burden the community with additional work and with blaming narratives. An additional critical

point is the presence of foreign workers imbued with developmental narratives that are likely to reproduce and sustain Eurocentric dichotomies that instead of enabling empowerment reinforce inequalities. Their position and even the utility of their presence – should thus be questioned. If the final aim of NGOs is that of empowering communities and engendering social change, greater attention should be given to process of political articulation, community participation and community ownership. Whereas techno-economic approaches and development workers should be temporarily left aside.

CONCLUSION

The pursue of the improvement of human condition and the quest for social change are undoubtedly worthy objectives. The development apparatus constructed a very specific way of representing social change whose worthiness is instead more doubtable, or at least its political implications must be openly displayed and examined. Discursive formations are always material in their consequences, and the way in which we describe reality shapes our field of action. Our perception of social reality will make appear some political action as legitimate and other as illegitimate; and, above all, any construction of reality supports certain relations of power and the status quo they mirror. Therefore, it is more than legitimate to wonder which relations of power are sustained by the development discourse and the representation of reality it supports. The development apparatus lays its foundation on diverse epistemological assumptions of the colonial discourse, namely: the dichotomic distinction between a progressive Self and a deficient Other; the evolutionary conceptualization of society; and the justification of violence (or sacrifice) to achieve the correction of deviances. However, the Foucauldian analysis of the development discourse permitted to identify that there has been a clear discursive shift in respect with the colonial one. The rules of formation of the discourse – thus the way in which objects emerge, enunciates are spoken, concept formed, and strategies designed – exhibit numerous discontinuities from the colonial discourse: different formation of objects (countries instead of people); different enunciative modalities (development experts instead of racist anthropologists); different formations of concepts (transitive instead of intransitive processes); different strategies (socio-economic instead than economic

exploitation). This was probably due to the racial horrors of the WWII that, together with the anticolonial and independentist movement – reshaped the relations between North and South. The development discourse though, still supports a system of representation that is evolutionist, mono-perspective, depoliticized and strictly Eurocentric. The genealogical study of the discourse, from its origin in the 1950s until the cotemporary era, demonstrated that development underlying assumptions – its Eurocentricity, authoritarianism and depoliticization – are constantly reproduced and maintained. Those hindered assumption filters our access to reality and support specific relations of power, while rendering others unthinkable. The Eurocentric implications of the development discourse refers to the fact that Western societies are taken as ideal-typical models of "development", while Southern countries are defined in terms of their deviation from this norm. Development is external and grounded on the model of the western process of industrialization, while other societies are instead framed as always lacking and inferior following certain parameters. The pivotal failure of this approach is that it neglects the impossibility of reproducing certain historical processes in completely different historical, economic, political and social contexts. Moreover, this approach deliberately decides to ignore the abusive practices and the shortcoming in terms of social justice that characterizes also the Western "Self". The Eurocentric developmental paradigm constructs a myth of the Western civilizational superiority that rests on the sole fact that the parameter of judgement is economic growth instead of distribution, social justice or equality. The Eurocentricity of the development discourse refrain anyone from objecting that highly atomistic societies of consumers based on concurrency, competition and exploitation constitute the best of all possible realities. The concept of development has also authoritarian implications because it prescribed interventions – based on expert knowledge – in people's lives without asking their approval or legitimation. The "truth" of development, and of the misery coming from the lack thereof, justifies any means to reach the fixed objectives. "Development" becomes the passe-partout to say that what is done to people by those more powerful than them is their destiny, their fault, and their only chance of survival. Finally, the concept of development has huge depoliticizing implications. This is probably its most dangerous feature, given that it sustains its durability and indisputability. Development is depoliticizing because it obscures global inequalities and social conflicts on the national and international level. The development discourse conceptualizes global injustice and inequality in terms of lack of capital, knowledge and technology, and provides also technical solutions: financial assistance, projects, etc. In this way it completely matts a perception of global injustice and inequality in terms of relations of power, exploitation and hierarchies. The development paradigm

deliberately neglects the difference between oppressors and oppressed. In addition – by framing situation of oppression, unequal distribution, and abuse of power as technical problems – assumes that social problems may be resolved with solutions unconcerned with politics, power, conflict of interests: technocratic solutions that being rational cannot be objected. Through this mechanism the questions of poverty, misery, unequal distribution, violence, and scarcity, are depoliticized and left almost unanswered. This "technocratic bias" of the discourse is reproduced at any level of the development ladder, from the highest international organization down to the local NGOs. Indeed, almost no institution or NGO ever proposed an analysis which suggests that the root causes of poverty are political instead of technical, that government are highly responsible, and that real change must come through radical social transformation in the South. Therefore, the very industry that claims to take the sides of the less privileged parts of the population is in reality constantly trying to avoid political conflicts at the national and international level. In a few words, it is just supporting the systemic condition that constituted this unjust spectrum of privileges in the first place.

It comes naturally to think that due to its Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing implication, the concept of development should be abandoned or at least overcome. The consequences of the development discourse go far beyond the linguistic realm by producing and reproducing specific relations of power. Many authors attempted to redefine the concept and offer novel alternatives that, however, usually falls in the same tenets of the development paradigm. Fortunately, the development discourse did not remain constantly unquestioned. Especially since the crisis of development in the 80s, new concepts have become influential and have challenged the discourse from within constituting fundamental contradictions with its general principles. Among them, the one with the highest radical potential is definitely empowerment, which is specifically suited to stand against global injustice and inequality. This concept is transformational given that in its three declinations (ownership, participation, and self-representation), it challenges the Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing assumptions. Moreover, the concept of empowerment is able to adhere to the rising discourse of globalization and the different relations of power that it is establishing. Relations of power and oppression, even within the North-South framework, need to be understood and challenged transnationally and intersectionally, and empowerment, if practically operationalized and integrated within social movements is the best means to social change.

Regrettably, once it was integrated in the development discourse empowerment became opaquer and its adoption in multiple fields of international development, that made it the cornerstone of its policies and rhetoric, has been object of divergent opinions. Despite its

integration within the vast majority of development policies and its ascension as new credo of international aid, the concept lost its original features. The political thickness and the transformational nature that characterised it went lost, and usually it was reduced to its economic declination. If participation is restricted to apical representative and in the obliged manner of project implementation; if ownership is only referred to countries' ownership; and if self-representation is channelled through the medium of foreign workers and volunteers; they will hardly lead to empowerment – at least if it is intended as the self-determination of marginalized people and the transformation of power relations. Despite the undoubtable commitment to the ideals of participation and empowerment, throughout our analysis it emerged that there are some structural contradictions with the development apparatus which prevent it from succeeding. Firstly, donors never abandoned a humanitarian approach to development, and they have never renounced to the need of monitoring the employment of their resources. Therefore, they never really adopted a participatory approach which would require them to enter into *partnership* with the community instead of aiding it. Secondly, development expertise is embedded in the identities of people working in the development industry. Development actors are there to express how a good society looks like, this is their place within the discourse and the application of their knowledge is constitutive of their identity. Therefore, their action is always aimed at applying technical knowledge instead of listening to needs, necessities and demands. Taking seriously the claims of empowerment would instead mean renouncing the superior position of development expertise and reducing development actors to the role of assistant and enablers. Thirdly, communities are mistakenly regarded as a homogenous corpus, whereas they are the stratified articulation of multiple interests which are mostly divided. Therefore "community empowerment" cannot ignore that interests are mostly antagonistic, thus faded version of empowerment risk just to reinforce existing dominant interests. Finally, NGOs have been erroneously juxtaposed with civil society. Whereas funding NGOs does not equal empowering and developing the marginal communities. Such logic, that to a large extent is still in motion, rests on the belief that the institution and the process coincide, while NGOs never really embodied grassroots social movements, they were just its by-product.

Consequently, the concept of empowerment was unable to challenge the development apparatus in its most basic criticalities. The underlying construction of identities (a developed Self and underdeveloped Other) was maintained and reinforced by the presence of foreign workers and by the humanitarian/aid-approach of international donors. The primacy of development expertise over communities' self-determination, which mirrored the Eurocentric

assumptions of the development discourse, remained also unquestioned. Finally, the developmental objective of *developing underdeveloped* nations through economic growth and industrialization and its authoritarian implementation permeates the development discourse until now.

Through a case-study, we had the chance to confirm the fermenting contradiction between empowerment and development, but above all we identified the negative consequence of a cosmetic employment of the concept of empowerment. The findings confirmed that empowerment practices are deeply conditioned by the neoliberal and development discourses, which impoverish and sabotage their potential of success by depoliticizing them. NGOs, by restraining their operation on the mere economic aspects of empowerment, overlooks on the form of oppression and disempowerment that derives from the economic system itself. Moreover, this de-politization process sometimes burden the community with additional work and with blaming narratives. An additional critical point is the presence of foreign workers imbued with developmental narratives that are likely to reproduce and sustain Eurocentric dichotomies that instead of enabling empowerment reinforce inequalities.

Empowering practices have thus been found to resemble, at least in their current form, the repulsion of the development discourse to repeat itself. Such tenacity and immutability of the foundational relations of power and knowledge in the development discourse is probably direct consequence of the fact that it is highly depoliticizing, and precisely this is what emptied "empowerment" of its transformational potential. The processes of empowerment and politics are indeed deeply interconnected. Re-politicizing development, its actors and its objectives must be the first step to be walked if the crookedness of the system wants to be superseded; and such a process of re-politicizing discourses which lost their political sharpness can happen through the *praxis* of empowerment. Reducing conditions of marginality and misery to technical issue or to unfortunate outcomes of a poor economic performance is the first step to reproduce social inequalities and injustice. These processes are naturalized and made possible by the highly depoliticization operated by the development discourse; therefore, empowerment if bravely adopted in its original meaning by grassroots NGO and movements might be the keystone to pursue social change. Empowerment must come back to be a moment of political articulation of different social demands, a strategy of alliances among diverse social actors to pursue political objectives, and finally an instrument to establish novel chain of equivalence among social demands to contrast the contemporary hegemonic relations of power.

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SUMMARY

No one, especially social scientists, has direct access to objective reality, and to what we might call the "social truth". All of us are conditioned by our set of values, underlying assumptions, their specific positionality, knowledge interests, etc. It could be said that any gaze to the world is somehow filtered by subjective perspective. By saying this I am not denying the possibility of knowing and explaining reality, but I am suggesting that any quest of objectivity should be aware of its limits and of the subjective filter that express that objectivity. A theory is precisely a deliberately adopted filter which makes sense for us to use to better understand and explain our reality. Above all, it is thus fundamental to clarify and justify the filter adopted in this work: its theoretical and epistemological foundation. The theoretical foundation of the work derives from poststructuralism, while the central concepts are discourse, power, and hegemony (following Michel Foucault's definitions and Laclau and Mouffe's theory), and the methods is archaeology and genealogy.

First, a poststructuralist analysis is not concerned with reality, nor with its interpretation, but the relations of power and knowledge that make one interpretation or another possible. It focuses on the production of meanings in discourse, and the way in which these meaning operate representative function and have material consequences. A poststructuralist method will hunt the specific contents attributed to concepts, the words treated as synonymous or counterposed as antonymous, and the general relation between signifiers and signifieds. Following a poststructuralist perspective on reality and society, representation is inevitable: systems of meaning and representation are our sole access to reality. Therefore, discourse - defined as a specific system of meaning that defines certain relation between signifiers and signified – is one of the central categories of this work. The analysis of discourse is the archeological and genealogical study in Foucauldian terms. It scrutinizes the rules of formation that constitute the unity of discourses by constituting their objects, concepts, and statements. It also examines the condition of existence and possibility of the discourse, the truths it supports and the objects it excludes. It analyzes discourses to chase the repressive and productive dimensions of representative power. How are relations of power sustained and supported by certain discourses? What is the strategic purpose that can be identified in their effects?

The development apparatus will be scrutinized through this lens, to identify the rules of formation of this discourse, and see how it shapes its objects, policy statements and subjects. It will be analyzed both synchronically and diachronically to let emerge the relations of power

entangled within it. Special attention will be given to the appearance within the discourse of the concept of "empowerment" and to the relations of power that allowed its deformation. In addition, the role of African NGOs within this web of power relation will be analyzed: how are they conditioned? Which position do they occupy? Finally, through a case-study of a Tanzanian NGO (Art in Tanzania), empowerment practices will be problematized in light of the analysis, and, through the theoretical background of Laclau and Mouffe, its political position will be criticized and refounded.

Relations between North and South, the West and the rest, center and periphery constitutes a clear example of what we define a system of representation. These representations are imbued with relations of power and sustained by specific discourses which produce knowledge, truth, and identities. During the 20th century the colonial discourse was pushed aside and substituted by the development rhetoric. Many differences can be traced; however, the development discourse holds a relevant epistemological debt with the colonial one that merits to be assessed.

The foundational structure of colonial discourse is the division of the world into civilized and uncivilized peoples or nations and the whole dichotomizing system that it engenders. The colonial discoursed is hinged on paradigmatic oppositions as traditional/modern; agriculture/industry; colonizing/colonized; fit-to-govern/unfit-to-govern; superior/inferior; rational/emotional; reason/instinct; sovereign/dependent; oral/written; and the basic claim is that uncivilized nations are unable to take care of themselves and to self-govern so, civilized ones must help them for their own sake. This system of representation is not solely the epistemological support of an imperial policy, the knowledge it produces serves to construct truth, ways of living, and modes of thinking that bind together in artificial identities. Therefore, the power it exerts is simultaneously representative and productive (subjectivizing). These processes paved the way for the formation of the European/Western identity as progressive, liberal and civilized: as the ideal norm of human existence from which any "otherness" is depicted as a deficient deviance. The colonizing structure worked as a technology of meaning for the West, that – by distinguishing itself from a barbarian and backward Other, constituted its own Self. The characteristics attributed to the Self and to the Other are linked by chains of equivalence (superior equals civilized which equals rationality, etc.) and represented by the "western white men" which acts as a "master signifier". It is the benchmark according to which all other possible identities/subjectivities are found deficient and in relation to which differences are organized along lines of race and gender. People of the worlds came to be characterized in terms of their "civilization" or lack thereof. The element of development is already present in the colonial discourse. By a way of example, John Stuart Mill already in the

19th century explained the inferiority of the colonized people in terms of historical instead of racial factors. Following his view, the European were merely more progressed in the history of human improvement. However, in his meaning *development* was still linked to processes of exploitation of resources and civilization of peoples. Only in the latter part of the first half of the 20th century, developing a colony started to imply also the material improvements of the colonized, and thus the social aspect. This change of approach happened in the interwar period marked by the League of Nation. This was an intermediate step on the way towards the shift from the colonial to developmental discourses. We can identify a transformation of the representation that started assuming increasingly paternalistic features. It is true that these countries were still referred to as unable and deficient; see for example Art. 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations: "countries inhabited by people not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous condition of the modern world" (The Covenant of the League of Nations, 1924). However, any allusion to a natural (racial or biological) inequality of the people is no longer mentioned. We can definitely state that a new order of discourse is in the making, that after WWII will became the ultimate structure to frame North-South relations. By virtue of anticolonial movements, independence movements, the Russian Revolution, American imperialism, European geopolitical interests, and the event of the WWII that discredited racist policies, the colonial discourse transmutated into the discourse of development. Such discourse exhibited fundamental changes in comparison with the colonial one, starting from the fact that colonized people were no longer represented as naturally unable to self-govern. The new order of discourse - that emerged on the epistemological basis of the colonial one but differentiating itself from it – is visible in the UN Charter and in the inaugural discourse of President Truman. Overall, the great novelty of the development discourse was the abandonment of the racial rhetoric. This made the project of development no longer refusable from the colonized peoples. Indeed, postcolonial elites and large part of the population willingly adopted the development discourse and the self-representation as underdeveloped. However, this discourse constructed the identities of the people of the *underdeveloped* countries as inferior or subaltern. Their representation remained stuck to the allusion of backwardness that – in the development discourse - is now linked to an inferior and deficient culture. On the other hand, the Western Self emerges as the *developed*, and its identity is the results of a chain of equivalence between the same attributes that used to conglomerate within the signifier *civilised:* freedom, rationality, democracy, progress and Samaritan attitude. Finally, Truman admitted that self-interest played a role, describing Southern *underdevelopment* as a handicap for the Northern and *developed* states. There was a strategic interest in first, discovering "the problem of poverty", and second

in linking it to noncapitalist values and lack of technologies/development. Contrary to the repressive power put in place in the colonial period, the objective of the development discourse is to produce subaltern subjects that willingly support an international order in line with the Western interests. The paradigm shifted from civilization/exploitation to global governance. To sum up, the development apparatus lay its foundation on diverse epistemological assumptions of the colonial discourse, namely: the dichotomic distinction between a progressive Self and a deficient Other; the evolutionary conceptualization of society; and the justification of violence (or sacrifice) to achieve the correction of deviances. However, there has been a clear discursive shift: different formation of objects (countries instead of people); different enunciative modalities (development experts instead of racist anthropologists); different formations of concepts (transitive instead of intransitive verb); different strategies (socio-economic instead than economic exploitation). This was probably due to the racial horrors of the WWII that, together with the anticolonial and independentist movement – reshaped the relations between North and South.

The 1950s can thus be taken – not without any disagreements – as the time when the development discourse emerged. At its germinal stage, it was mainly informed by the modernization theory and development was a linear path on which countries progressed. Maintaining a certain continuity with the colonial discourse, nations were divided between *developed* and *underdeveloped*, and the latter were judged by virtue of their deficiencies from the *developed* norm. During this decade, poverty was "discovered" and linked – through a chain of equivalence – to many different signifieds (backwardness, tradition, underdevelopment, etc.). This was the beginning of a common process of the development discourse: issues' depoliticization. Poverty was framed as a sad condition that lied upon Southern nation whose root reasons were to be found in their cultural inferiority and historical misfortunes. Power relations had no room in the interpretation of those phenomena, that were interpreted as mere consequences of the lack of development. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the developmental paradigm has established itself and reinforced its epistemological connections with the modernization theory. In this decade the first challenging voices to the mainstream discourse emerged, namely structuralism and dependency theory. Notwithstanding the critiques, the new discourses of development was also widely adopted by different actors including Southern nations. Indeed, one of the reasons behind the success of the development discourse is that it proved to be more attractive to the Global South in comparison to the racist colonial discourse and the identities it offered. In the 1980s the development theory underwent a harsh crisis that led to the emergence of novel policies. The perception of a theoretical

impasse in the development apparatus and its essentialist assumptions, paved the way for the affirmation of the neoliberal paradigm. The implicit rationale of the neoliberal politics is that the invisible hand of the market is the main driver to economic growth and development. Developing countries suffer the interventionism of the state which engender manifold market distortion, while the main drivers of development are free trade, loose financial borders, and privatization. With the neoliberal paradigm, the nexus between liberalization and development is interpreted as good governance. Overall, policies are left out in favor of governance. The previous failures of the developmental apparatus are analyzed, and new governance deigned on the assumption that the presence of the State is standing on the way of development. The policy mechanism are not the only things to change though. Starting from this point, the whole development discourse underwent a relevant transformation and a new discourse – that of globalization – entered the stage. The development discourse did not disappear of course, however, relations between North and South started being represented by a new entanglements of power relations that was no longer sustained by the sole development discourse: globalization stepped in.

Since the 1990s, globalization established itself as a buzzword in social sciences. To use Laclau's terminology, it became the novel *master signifier*, emptied of any precise content to welcome a variety of signifieds across different contexts. Its main usages revolve around two main conceptions: a) a general increase of global interconnectedness in any sphere of human action; b) a transmutation of the world economic system that is becoming increasingly liberalized. Both variants are strictly connected and mutually reinforce one another. North-South relations have been reshaped once the globalization discourse became the dominant narrative of global economy. First, with the rise of the Globalization discourse the developmental dichotomy is substituted by a wider universalism. Global economic forces are depicted as natural events that are inevitable and leaves no society untouched, independently on their *development stage*. The only possible action is to accommodate these forces and adjust to the new global reality. This is what happened with the structural adjustment programs (SAP), which aimed at *adjusting* national policies to the unstoppable realities of liberal globalization. These processes dis not operate any differentiation between developed and developing countries, and they have been applied with the same tenacity in Europe and North America during the Raegan/Thatcher Era. The underlying assumption is that the economic sphere is a scientific truth that is best left to work on its own. Second, globalization discourse argues that any intervention in the market is inherently inefficient and counterproductive. Therefore, both in developed and developing countries the strategy is to free trade and liberalize markets.

Finally, in the globalization discourse, development aid is seen as unnecessary or even damaging and ineffective. In contrast, projects favoring the market or channeling people into the market (as producers or consumers) are praised and pushed.

The contemporary discourse of development, hybridized with that of Globalization, has manifold underlying assumptions that, though its technologies, are constantly reproduced. Those hindered assumption filters our access to reality and support specific relations of power, while rendering others unthinkable. The development apparatus has Eurocentric implications because Western societies are taken as ideal-typical models of "development", while Southern countries are defined in terms of their deviation from this norm. The pivotal failure of this approach is that it neglects the impossibility of reproducing certain historical processes in completely different historical, economic, political and social contexts. Moreover, this approach deliberately decides to ignore the abusive practices and the shortcoming in terms of social justice that characterizes also the Western "Self". The Eurocentric developmental paradigm constructs a myth of the Western civilizational superiority that rests on the sole fact that the parameter of judgement is economic growth instead of distribution, social justice or equality. The idea is not that to contest the positive sides of the Western societies but to highlight that some peoples (or cultures) could object that highly atomistic societies of consumers based on concurrency, competition and exploitation constitute the best of all possible realities. Indeed, to respond to the above critics, the attractiveness of the Western model still does not prove its superiority. The concept of development has also authoritarian implications because it prescribed interventions – based on expert knowledge – in people's lives without asking their approval or legitimation. The "truth" of development, and of the misery coming from the lack thereof, justifies any means to reach the fixed objectives. "Development" becomes the passe-partout to say that what is done to people by those more powerful than them is their destiny, their fault, and their only chance of survival. Finally, the concept of development has huge depoliticizing implications. This is probably its most dangerous feature, given that it sustains its durability and indisputability. Development is depoliticizing because it obscures global inequalities and social conflicts on the national and international level. The development discourse conceptualizes global injustice and inequality in terms of lack of capital, knowledge and technology, and provides also technical solutions: financial assistance, projects, etc. In this way it completely matts a perception of global injustice and inequality in terms of relations of power, exploitation and hierarchies. In addition - by framing situation of oppression, unequal distribution, and abuse of power as technical problems – assumes that social problems may be resolved with solutions unconcerned with

politics, power, conflict of interests: technocratic solutions that being rational cannot be objected. Through this mechanism the questions of poverty, misery, unequal distribution, violence, and scarcity, are depoliticized and left almost unanswered.

Fortunately, the development discourse and the more recent global discourse informed by neoliberalism did not remain constantly unquestioned. Especially since the crisis of development in the 1980s, new concepts have become influential and have challenged the discourse from within constituting fundamental contradictions with its general principles. Among them, the one with the highest radical potential is definitely empowerment, which is specifically suited to stand against global injustice and inequality. This concept is transformational given that in its three declinations (ownership, participation, and self-representation), it challenges the Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing assumptions. Moreover, the concept of empowerment is able to adhere to the rising discourse of globalization and the different relations of power that it is establishing. Relations of power and oppression, even within the North-South framework, need to be understood and challenged transnationally and intersectionally, and empowerment, if practically operationalized and integrated within social movements is the best means to social change. Although, it was adopted by the development discourse gradually – the concept of participation appeared in the 1980s while that of ownership in the 1990s, originally it rejected top-down development approaches and praised for re-establishing the primacy of the people. However, the statement has never been taken seriously and it was mostly regarded as a means to legitimize and make more efficient the implementation of projects. The discourse of empowerment is indeed full of ambiguities and contradictions. As decades elapsed, the term has become opaquer and its adoption in multiple fields of international development, that made it the cornerstone of its policies and rhetoric, has been object of divergent opinions. Despite its integration within the vast majority of development policies and its ascension as new credo of international aid, the concept of empowerment lost its original features. The political thickness and the transformational nature that characterised it went lost, and usually it was reduced to its economic declination. If participation is restricted to apical representative and in the obliged manner of project implementation; if ownership is only referred to countries' ownership; and if self-representation is channelled through the medium of foreign workers and volunteers; they will hardly lead to empowerment – at least if it is intended as the self-determination of marginalized people and the transformation of power relations.

Following a steady rise in popularity since the 1980s, empowerment has become a fundamental element of the rhetoric of almost any agency in the development industry.

Contrarily to the common belief, the concept of empowerment had already appeared – in the sole sense of "participation" – within the development discourse, long before the 1980s. The current emphasis on empowering communities by the means of participation is not new but may be seen as the radicalization of a trend that started in the 1960s. In fact, the current boost of empowering activities can be categorized as the third wave of participation since the emergence of the development discourse. The concept of empowerment has been informed for its larger extent by varied domains such as feminism, Freudian Psychology, theology, and social movements. Empowerment refers to the principles - such as the ability of individuals or groups to act and mobilise to ensure (a) their own well-being and (b) the utter control over decision-making that concerns them - that guided research and action among poor, oppressed and marginalised population in the United States. To fully understand the original meaning of the concept we shall refer to the work of Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). He was the main inspiration for the vast majority of the writings on empowerment, thus, it is the best source to develop an analytic framework to assess the adherence of modern forms of empowerment to the original concept. According to Freire (1968), the condition of the oppressed is rooted in a small number of people exerting domination over the masses, resulting in dominated consciousness. Therefore, the process of empowerment of such masses must start from the attainment of critical consciousness. He emphasises throughout its work the role of *conscientizaçao* (conscientization), intended as "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take actions against the oppressive elements of reality". The original meaning was thus inherently political and hinged on what Laclau would define "the moment of political articulation". *Conscientizaçao* is nothing else but the process of identification, where multiple social particularities - by distancing from the "oppressive" other - establish a chain of equivalence among themselves and get fixed in a certain political articulation. Freire stresses also on the active role of the oppressed in increasing its awareness and taking action. To Freire, overcoming a condition of oppression requires the full agency of the oppressed; it is a process that cannot ever rest on the oppressor good-willing and false generosity. One of the gravest obstacles to liberation is that the oppressive reality absorbs those that are within it, and almost always the oppressed tend to become oppressor instead of striving for liberation. Having internalised the image of the oppressors, they find in the oppressor their model of "manhood" and of humanity. Therefore, "freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility". Freire is suggesting that the process of emancipation must go together with the ejection of the hegemonic representation. Hegemonic representations, as stated by Laclau, are reinforced by specific relation of

knowledge and power, and tend to establish themselves because they self-represent as truths. The first step for self-empowerment is hence contestation of such a false representation and the right to speak one's own.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the term gradually gained foot in the international arena and development agenda, and drastically changed in respect with its original meaning. while originally empowerment had been conceptualized as a strategy in opposition to the status quo, to top-down development model, and to fixed relations of power and knowledge, today is mostly viewed as a mechanism to increase the efficiency of project implementation and productivity. It does not promote social transformation, nor it challenges the status quo at all, but it maintains it and reproduce it. The political emptiness of the term is reflected in the instrumental version of empowerment imposed by the WB, where it is envisaged as "building the assets of poor people to enable them to engage effectively in markets". Clearly, the development apparatus shifted its focus more on how the poor can contribute to development by creating propitious market conditions rather than changing power relations. Once applied within developmental policies and programs, the political thickness and the transformational nature that characterised it went lost. "Empowerment" has been undergoing a drastic surgery of reductionism. Participation was restricted to apical representative and in the obliged manner of project implementation; ownership only referred to countries' ownership; and self-representation was channelled through the medium of foreign workers imbued with the developmental ideas about how good societies should look like. The application of the concept never reached the levels of decision making and programs design, while within the policy framework it simply revolved around informing and consulting marginal communities, usually via few relevant NGOs that do not even have any real attachment to these communities. Empowerment turned into a palliative measure to make projects more efficient and legitimate, and never really involved any shift in power, as it was intended to. NGOs, international organizations and development experts coined and practiced a new conception of empowerment which was individualized, de-politicized and economized, while the psychological, political and social dimension of power went utterly ignored. So, while originally empowerment had been conceptualized as a strategy in opposition to the status quo, to top-down development model, and to fixed relations of power and knowledge, today is mostly viewed as a mechanism to increase the efficiency of project implementation and productivity. It does not promote social transformation, nor it challenges the status quo at all, but it maintains and reproduces it. Despite the undoubtable commitment to the ideals of

participation and empowerment, there were some structural contradictions which prevents it from succeeding:

- Donors never abandoned a humanitarian approach to development, and they do not renounce to the need of monitoring the employment of their resources. Therefore, they never really adopted a participatory approach which would require them to enter into *partnership* with the community instead of aiding it.

- Development expertise is embedded in the identities of people working in the development industry. Development actors are there to express how a good society looks like, this is their place within the discourse and the application of their knowledge is constitutive of their identity. Therefore, their action is always aimed at applying technical knowledge instead of listening to needs, necessities and demands. Taking seriously the claims of empowerment would mean renouncing the superior position of development expertise and reducing development actors to the role of assistant and enablers.

- Communities are mistakenly regarded as a homogenous corpus, whereas they are the stratified articulation of multiple interests which are mostly divided. Therefore "community empowerment" cannot ignore that interests are mostly antagonistic, thus faded version of empowerment risk just to reinforce existing dominant interests.

- NGOs have been erroneously juxtaposed with civil society. Whereas, funding NGOs does not equal empowering and developing the marginal communities. Such logic, that to a large extent is still in motion, rests on the belief that the institution and the process coincide, while NGOs never really embodied grassroots social movements, they were just its byproduct.

Consequently, the concept of empowerment was unable to challenge the development apparatus in its most basic criticalities. The underlying construction of identities (a developed Self and underdeveloped Other) was maintained and reinforced by the presence of foreign workers and by the humanitarian/aid-approach of international donors. The primacy of development expertise over communities' self-determination, which mirrored the Eurocentric assumptions of the development discourse remained also unquestioned. Finally, the developmental objective of *developing underdeveloped* nations through economic growth and industrialization and its authoritarian implementation permeates the development discourse until now.

Such tenacity and immutability of the foundational relations of power and knowledge in the development discourse is a direct consequence of the fact that it is highly depoliticizing. It

established itself as indisputable and self-represents itself as a natural expression of the order of reality. Even after the adoption of the discourses of participation and empowerment, the development discourse kept on conceptualizing global injustice and inequality in terms of lack of capital, knowledge and technology, rather than in terms of relations of power, exploitation and hierarchies. Through this mechanism the questions of poverty, misery, unequal distribution, violence, and scarcity, are turned into tecno-economic (instead of socio-political) problems.

However, the emancipatory level of the concept of empowerment should not be underestimated. The relation between empowerment and politics is biunivocal and mutually reinforcing. A politically vibrant field of action is essential to make empowerment unfolds its real potential, and in parallel empowerment can be the key paxis to trigger the repoliticization of situation of injustice and inequality. The *praxis* of re-politicizing discourses which lost their political sharpness is indeed one of empowerment. The definitive overcoming of fixed conditions of marginality, misery, and oppression must begin with refusal of the transfiguration of the social – and thus inherently political – question into a technical – and consequently apolitical – problem. This is a process of empowerment and mobilization that requires people to challenge the essentialist representation of the status quo and to recognize it as the byproduct of hegemonic relations. Such process or re-narration shall begin by contrasting the relations of power and knowledge exerted by either the development discourse and the more recent globalizations discourse. The main difference is that while the former concentrates its effect over the North-South relations, the latter have severe consequences – in terms of social justice and equality – that transcend national borders and, thus, require transnational alliances. The process of empowerment and repoliticization must thus recognize the political nature of national debts and development and the overall power relations that invest global inequalities.

Concerning the former, the aid apparatus and its mainstream depiction of Western countries as warm-hearted creditors and of debt crisis in the South as the natural outcome of mismanagement and corruption must be confronted. This hegemonic narrative conceals the political nexus between global inequality and the dominant financial regime, overlooking on the unfair repayment conditionalities and the political nuances of measure that are not merely technical. Public debt became a powerful tool for Western capital to forcefully transplant the political-economic policies on Southern states and to ensure the primacy of the market over the social. Challenging the development debt regime and the way it amplifies uneven global relations requires to emphasize the *politicality* of debt. Nowadays, it is represented as a technical exchange of money between debtor and creditor, along the lines of the neoliberal

separation of the economic from the social and the political. The first step towards the politicization of development is recognizing that such a distinction cannot be made and that the dominant economic representation of debt and development must be deconstructed to achieve social change.

When it comes to global inequalities and social injustice, we must face the representational norms which present the subaltern identities as underdeveloped and deficient from the Western standard. Such beliefs are developed, reinforced and revised continuously through development expertise's observations, aid policies, international media, development workers knowledge and volunteers ideals. They exert direct influence on people's behavior and in their actual capacity of change. Once depoliticized, inequalities are normalized and taken for granted, therefore, marginalized groups instead of looking at their condition as the outcome of certain relation of power, interpret it as inevitable and sees no alterative possibilities or discourses. By articulating social injustice in terms of technical problems, state inefficiency or underdeveloped economic structure, the development apparatus inhibits social change. Inequalities are sustained and reproduced when marginalized groups of society internalize stigmatized and subaltern identities. But, through association, mobilization and exposure to egalitarian and politicized discourses, people come to review their identities, strive for dignity and struggle for social change.

The biggest paradox is that quite often these unspoken relations of power that promote unjust global dynamics of aid and debt, are the same that fosters initiatives to contrast poverty, misery and marginality through development policies. INGOs, or even "grassroots" organization", which adopts and implements aid policies and donor-driven development are legitimizing those power relations they supposedly are seeking to change. They operate an unintentional but coordinated change in beliefs and behaviors which sustain inequalities' path dependency.

To conclude, instead of focusing on projects where empowerment is reduced to policy implementation or economic training, the focus must go back to the collective dimension of participation against conditions of inequalities. A human-rights-based approach which focuses on rights of people should be adopted rather than on which emphasizes their need and challenges. Reducing conditions of marginality and misery to technical issue or to unfortunate outcomes of a poor economic performance is the first step to reproduce social inequalities and injustice. These processes are naturalized and made possible by the highly depoliticization operated by the development discourse; therefore, empowerment if bravely adopted in its

original meaning by grassroots NGO and movements might be the keystone to pursue social change.

The qualitative research I carried out in the NGO Art in Tanzania (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania) enriched the critical analysis on the concept of empowerment and on the development discourse. It has been found that the critical points in the empowering operations of the NGO are:

- *The development expertise which is embedded in the identities of the foreign workers/volunteers*. Notwithstanding the high expectations connected to NGOs, considered as grassroots organization which mirrors civil society, the case-study demonstrated that such a link is not always straightforward as it may seem. Communities' members remain mere beneficiaries of external development projects, and their participation is limited to implementation phase. Empowerment was intended only as the interest for vulnerable communities, but it was never implemented functionally. Despite the undoubtable commitment to the ideals of participation and empowerment, there are some structural contradictions which prevents it from succeeding. Among all, the most impressive was "development" expertise embedded in the identities of people working in the NGO. Volunteer and interns were there to *help* and *teach*, this was their place within the discourse and was constitutive of their identity. They hardly listened to needs, necessities and demands of the communities, but they were always ready to provide techno-economic solutions, usually unsuited to the contextual conjuncture in which they operated. The discursive reality that surrounds them is material in its consequence though. Actual cooperation and participation were hindered by fixed identities that wanted the community to be passive beneficiaries and the volunteers to be helpers endowed with the right knowledge. Such a frame permitted to provide the most basic form of aid but for sure it is unsuited to empower anyone. Unfortunately, these identities, and the dichotomies that come with them, seemed to be crystalized in the structure of the NGO and in its practices.

- *The economic focus of the empowering operations*. The case-study revealed that empowerment is often reduced to the economic dimension that pertains to it just relatively. The economization of the concept of empowerment started in the first phases of the project, when the challenges and needs of the community have been framed in techno-economical terms instead of political. Such an approach not only resulted in the failure of the project, but it also risks to emphasize feelings of frustration and guilt in the community. By deliberately overlooking on the political roots causes and on the power relations that

underlies certain condition of marginality, NGO workers are allegedly making beneficiaries believe that their condition will really change if they only learn better how to draft a business model or to properly write down their expenses. But, unfortunately it will not, unless the structural conditions that marginalize certain groups and rewards others is not confronted.

- *The high depoliticization of the NGO*. Related to the former point is the general tendency of the NGO to depoliticize any issue. The political root reasons underlying the marginality of the women's group (both as women and as entrepreneurs) were never raised. Moreover, marginalization and inequality were sustained and reproduced by the economic approach of the NGO's projects and by the identities of its workers. The NGO did not promoted association, mobilization and exposure to egalitarian and politicized discourses, through which people could have come to review their identities, strive for dignity and struggle for social change. Empowerment was reduced to policy implementation or economic training, and it was never focused on the collective dimension of participation against conditions of inequalities. A human-rights-based approach which focuses on rights of people should be adopted rather than one which emphasizes their need and challenges. Reducing conditions of marginality and misery to technical issue or to unfortunate outcomes of a poor economic performance is the first step to reproduce social inequalities and injustice. These processes are naturalized and made possible by the highly depoliticization operated by the development discourse and welcomed by development actors (e.g., AIT).

To conclude, The case-study confirmed that empowerment practices are deeply conditioned by the neoliberal and development discourses, which impoverish and sabotage their potential of success by depoliticizing them. NGOs, by restraining their operation on the mere economic aspects of empowerment, overlooks on the form of oppression and disempowerment that derives from the economic system itself. Moreover, this depolitization process sometimes burden the community with additional work and with blaming narratives. An additional critical point is the presence of foreign workers imbued with developmental narratives that are likely to reproduce and sustain Eurocentric dichotomies that instead of enabling empowerment reinforce inequalities. Their position and even the utility of their presence – should thus be questioned. If the final aim of NGOs is that of empowering communities and engendering social change, greater attention should be given to process of political articulation, community participation and community ownership. Whereas techno-economic approaches and development workers should be temporarily left aside.