

Humanities Education for Freedom and Socioeconomic Development in Postcolonial Societies

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IN VARYING DEGREES, MANY OF THE CONTEMPORARY socioeconomic and political problems of postcolonial societies in the twenty-first century are still traceable directly to their colonial past and their current disadvantageous locations within the postcolonial global capitalist system. This system has over the centuries, with very little modifications, promoted and sustained the exploitative forms of economic relationships between the erstwhile colonial societies and the industrialised (or post-industrialised) societies within the global capitalist system. Postcolonial studies in humanities education and the social sciences have shed useful light on the contradictions inherent in the existing international division of labour and their implications for the practice of freedom, cultural and socioeconomic development in postcolonial societies. We need more critical and relevant humanities education and the social sciences, not less, to also more fully understand the gapping technological divide between the rich and poor countries of the world that has worked to widen and nourish the existing international division of labour in the twenty-first century.

As the effects of globalisation and information communication technologies rapidly reshape our international horizons and perceptions, there is now a tendency among some people to see the impoverished erstwhile colonial societies as merely the underdeveloped (or, better yet, developing) segments or regions of the international economy. The reasoning is that, if we are all now members of one globalised community, the problems of impoverished erstwhile

colonial societies cannot be much different from any of the backward areas, or regions, of the industrialised (or post-industrialised) societies. An idea has emerged on the basis of this reasoning, which is flawed, that ‘foreign investors’ are as good a means for achieving the much needed and desired technological breakthrough as ‘indigenous investors’, especially when the latter are perceptibly inadequate. There are two related flawed ideas that are directly traceable to the idea above. Although this view is increasingly losing its potency, there are those who still see ‘foreign investors’ as innocent and willing agents for the transfer of technology. Secondly, these erstwhile colonial countries have also been told that, because of the existence of more competitive technologies, they need not go through the same difficult and tortuous paths which the industrialised societies have been through to achieve their own technological breakthroughs. They are, simply put, being told not to reinvent the wheel, but to utilise the accumulated experiences and technologies of industrialised societies via the ‘foreign investor’ for their own socioeconomic development.

This type of thinking and the type of education that promotes this type of thinking are counterproductive to the practice of freedom and socioeconomic development in postcolonial societies. In some of the worst instances this view about development has led to a passive state whereby the peoples and governments of developing countries had assumed that as long as ‘foreign investors’ remained engaged technology would develop through a transfer process.

Many text books describe this process as “industrialisation by invitation”. Yet, after more than fifty years since decolonisation in the latter part of the twentieth century, underdevelopment has persisted and gotten worse in many of these developing countries. Externally driven developments are barren of internal energies that only the indigenous people can supply.

The technological divide between the erstwhile colonial societies and their former metropolitan colonisers, as earlier observed, has reached a new height never seen or known before.

Developing countries, among other things, now seem wedded to the idea that STEM education can provide the urgently needed solutions to underdevelopment. In pursuit of that idea, since the beginning of the twenty-first century (or even earlier in some instances), many developing countries have

started building more universities and colleges of science and technology. This is with a view to increasing the local supply of graduates in the subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). STEM education, A.B. Lantz indicates, is an attempt at eliminating “the traditional barriers erected between the four disciplines by integrating them into one cohesive teaching and learning paradigm”. Implicit in the debate in favour of STEM education is the assumption that the preexisting education models and curricula have failed to create the “takeoff” conditions necessary for bridging the technological gap for industrialisation in postcolonial societies.

Assuming that this is the way to go, there are still certain questions begging for answers. Given the contemporary political economy of global capitalism, to what extent can STEM education alone facilitate a transfer of technology in the erstwhile colonial societies? Without an understanding of the socio-historical situations of these erstwhile colonial societies what forms of technology will STEM education seek to introduce (or transfer)? To what extent can the new curricula of STEM education (if there is one in place) facilitate true education for the practice of freedom and development without humanities education and the social sciences? All of these overlapping questions, particularly the last one, have been posed for reflection in part because the idea of STEM education, as a socially constructed body of knowledge, cannot be fully appraised and understood without being squarely placed and interrogated within the political and sociological framework of knowledge production in the twenty-first century.

It is difficult to contemplate socioeconomic development in erstwhile colonial societies without the right technologies, including the right educational systems to sustain the emergent technological base. These technologies and educational systems to be put in place have to reflect domestic realities that are more favourable to the utilisation of existing local factor proportions. In a developing economy that is overly characterised by surplus unskilled labour, for example, how do entrepreneurs and the state manage the relationship between labour and technology as factors of production to achieve social stability and sustainable socioeconomic development? For the right indigenous technology to emerge it has to be rooted in the domestic soil and allowed to grow its own branches by deriving its own nutrition from the fertility of the domestic soil in

which it is being grown. The advantages of promoting indigenous technology over foreign technology, among other things, are as follows: to encourage the emergence of technology based on the right domestic factor proportions; to stimulate and encourage the social mobilisation and psychological involvement of the local community; and cheapen the overall financial and ideological cost of development associated with some of the well-known nefarious political activities of 'foreign investors'. These points are ideologically very critical to the pursuit of sustainable development, however defined, for postcolonial societies.

The answers to these overlapping and complex questions cannot be answered fully and satisfactorily by the technologist, the mathematician, the engineer, and the scientist alone, without contributions from humanities education and the social sciences. This is because these disciplines are more equipped to provide the ideological, socio-historical, political and cultural contexts for explaining knowledge production and socioeconomic development. All ideas and concepts, including those collectively reflected in STEM education, have emanated from thoughts and actions that were significantly determined by the concrete social situations in which the proposers of these ideas and concepts lived and operated. For this reason, any society, especially developing postcolonial societies, cannot afford to relegate humanities education and the social sciences to the background in their educational system. These disciplines have to inform, among other things, the national discourse for true education that is capable of promoting the practice of freedom and socioeconomic development.