

---

---

## Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 8, number 1. Winter 2012

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

---

---

### **Development and Hope:**

**Comments on Thomas McCarthy's *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development***

#### **LADALLE MCWHORTER**

Department of Philosophy  
University of Richmond  
28 Westhampton Way  
North Court, 2nd Floor  
Richmond, Virginia 23173  
[lmcwhort@richmond.edu](mailto:lmcwhort@richmond.edu)

Thomas McCarthy's *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* is an intriguing and important book; moreover, despite its heavy themes and its fine scholarship, it is extremely readable. *And* it is very timely. The questions it takes up are some of the most pressing of our age: globalization, international distributive justice, and sustainable economic development in particular. Its central problematic concerns the detrimental effects of developmental thinking as a core feature of modernity. The book seeks, says McCarthy, to make "a contribution to the critical history of the present" (2), but it does not stop with critical analysis; McCarthy strives to reconstruct the concept

of "development" in the interest of securing human rights and establishing global justice.

Developmental thinking is a fundamental aspect of modernity, McCarthy asserts, but it is not peculiar to modernity; the ancients (famously, Aristotle) had explicit theories of development. For the ancients, however, development was a matter of each being fulfilling its nature in the course of its existence. Time itself was not progressive; rather, it was cyclic. Development occurred only at the level of the individual entity, and each entity repeated the same basic developmental process according to its species. It was Christianity that introduced the notion of the ever-new moment in its story of the temporal progression from Creation, to Fall, to Redemption, to Last Judgment (134). However, Christianity's narrative was not progressive in the sense of improving the state of the world; the world was but a staging area for a progression that was purely spiritual. In modernity, by contrast, the notion of development is reconceived as material human progress, the gradual improvement of industry, technology, knowledge, and social and governmental institutions. This is the milieu in which Kant conceived of the inevitable social and political progression of history by natural means (conflicts generated and resolved by our natural unsocial sociability) coupled (and in tension) with the unpredictability of a history that is the domain of human freedom. McCarthy returns us to Kant's work as both the beginning of a modernity whose developmental thinking now imperils and impoverishes millions and as the source of a potential rethinking of development toward global justice for all.

Given space constraints, I must condense McCarthy's reasoning, but basically it is this: (1) Developmental thinking, like development itself, is a fact. For a variety of reasons, we cannot simply abandon it and think otherwise. As McCarthy puts it toward the end of the book, "developmental thinking

is irrepressible..." (242). That being the case, (2) we must confront developmental thinking as it has played out in our history and work through the damage it has done, the injustice, the violence, and in particular the racism that it has generated and furthered, and that it has used to further itself. If we do not do so, those elements will continue to structure our world, with all their damaging effects, into the future. (3) Embracing development, without its racism and imperialism, etc., and without the supposition of religious or metaphysical guarantees of success, requires hope for a better future, one in which global justice reigns and human misery is truly minimized. But such hope is hard to come by these days, especially after all the atrocities that have been committed in the name of human betterment and emancipation. Where will we get it? (4) We will not get it through some grand totalizing theory of history. As Kant said, history cannot be thought in its totality through speculative reason, precisely because it is a domain of freedom. Our hope lies, rather, in reflective judgment informed by empirical observation and guided by practical concern. But we may indeed hope, McCarthy insists, and in fact it is morally imperative that we do so.

I am very sympathetic with McCarthy's concerns. I believe his location of much of the modern world's ills in our persistent belief in progressive development on a global scale is apt, and I am impressed with his range of historical knowledge on the subject. Developmental thinking needs forceful philosophical critique, and I am grateful that someone with McCarthy's erudition and sensitivity has undertaken the project. It is, however, an enormous project, and McCarthy's treatment of it is unlikely to answer all the questions and allay all the concerns that we might have. In the remaining space allotted to me, I want to raise some of those concerns and questions in the hope that McCarthy and his readers will take them up in future work. (Nothing I say below should be taken to diminish the accomplishments of the book as it stands.)

First, is it the case that development and developmental thinking are facts? McCarthy is careful to qualify any appeal to factuality with a clear account of facts as products of interpretation. Hence, by "fact" I take him to mean simply that developmental thinking in one form or another is pervasive in the history of our society (insofar as we know that history) and is, for that and many other reasons, inescapable for us for the foreseeable future. There is no thinking otherwise at this juncture. And thus it is also inescapable that we perceive development and developmental thinking in the work and actions of our predecessors.

From a Foucauldian perspective, I agree with this view, although probably not for the reasons that McCarthy holds it (if, indeed, he does). Development is a fundamental feature of modernity, and we are products of it. As products of disciplinary institutions and practices, we are developmental through and through. Foucault never argued that we could cease to be developmental subjects, only that we could resist developmental *normalization* by striving to decouple discipline's cultivation of capacities from its intensification of docility. Disciplined development can intensify resistance to domination; it can decrease docility. On this point, I believe McCarthy and Foucault are fellow travelers. At some points in the text, however, McCarthy veers uncomfortably close to making ontological claims about development and to conflating a variety of fairly different processes under that one term (see chapter 7, esp. section V). I do not think the only alternative to progressive development is sheer, atemporal difference. Whether our example is the growth and decay of a living entity, the "advance" of science, or the complexification of a social system, we observe changes that, while not merely random across time, also need not be characterized at the outset as "progress." Temporality can be unidirectional and irreversible (thus, change is not mere differing) without being thereby progressive in any but the

barest sense of the term. It is important, historically and politically, to be careful to keep even small distinctions in the meaning of “development” in different contexts in mind. Otherwise analysis becomes normative much too prematurely. Development and developmental thinking may be facts, but they are most likely an array of facts in a variety of historically emerging deployments.

Second, I want to affirm McCarthy’s claim that racism is an inherent, not an incidental, characteristic of modernity and that, therefore, it must be worked through rather than simply disavowed. Despite the legal gains that minorities have made in the US over the last fifty or sixty years, despite the decolonization of much of the world, and despite the fact that most white people do not actively and explicitly embrace racist doctrines anymore, racism persists in entrenched practices and institutions and, as McCarthy makes abundantly clear, in the very way we think. A century ago, racism was upheld by biological theory and “fact.” That is no longer so; modern genetics does not support the division of humanity into distinct races (5). However, because race was never simply a biology concept, and, because the developmental aspects of biological racism can easily be shifted onto concepts like “cultural development” (as well as “cultural pathology”), many of the very same assumptions about many of the very same groups of people can be and are routinely made. African Americans are no longer considered to be incapable of stable family life and democratic self-government because they are Negroes; rather, their culture(s) are not sufficiently developed to support psychological maturation and independence (12). McCarthy calls this phenomenon “neoracism,” and he argues that it undergirds a “neoimperialism” characteristic of US foreign and military policy, as well as the practices of other Western powers and their conjoint institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. If we fail to acknowledge how deeply racism is

embedded in our conception of the world as developmental—and in particular as economically and technologically developmental—we will perpetuate terrible injustice. We must confront our own histories, face the injustices that our predecessors’ actions and our current institutions inflict, and—difficult though it will be—strip our developmental thinking of these dangerous and deeply injurious aspects.

But, as already noted, McCarthy declares that we must not give up on developmental thinking altogether. Instead we “should construct a critical theory of development, at a higher level of reflexivity, which takes into account and tries to avoid historical distortions and misuses of developmental thinking” (242). My concern is that, even with disaggregation of “various domains, processes, strands, and logics of development” and with acceptance of “a multiplicity of hybrid forms of modernization” (242), degree of development will still correlate with degree of worth. As long as development is valued, I suspect, this will be true. And whatever is not deemed well- or highly-developed will be disvalued, shunned, or targeted for elimination. Modernity itself is conceived as a developmental stage, is it not? As such it is supposedly better than whatever preceded it. This is why we moderns tend to believe that all the world must modernize, even if we accept that different regions may become and then be modern in different ways. While I agree with McCarthy that there is “pressing need for organized collective action on behalf of the poorest and most vulnerable societies” (226), I am not persuaded that we must think in terms of developing those societies (or helping them to develop) as we organize our response to their needs. Such societies have a multiplicity of needs, but it is not obvious that among those needs there is always a need for something accurately labeled “development.” We must be cautious in our presumptions; it will not do to widen or pluralize the concept of “development” or “modernity” to encompass all the economic or political needs that such societies evince.

Finally, is it true that in order to work toward global justice we must have hope that global justice can be achieved? I appreciate the note of pragmatism sounded here; certainly no one wants to commit themselves to a cause clearly lost from the outset. However, I do not believe that people generally approach moral questions in speculative terms—that is, regardless of the current rational-choice-theoretic craze in economic and ethical theory, I think what moves most people to moral action is the draw of another's need, not a calculation about the likelihood of ultimate success.

Every few months, I give money to an organization in South Dakota that provides food and clothing to people living on the Sioux reservations there. I have no illusion that my gifts make up for four hundred years of imperialism and genocide perpetrated against Native American peoples. Furthermore, I know that many of the people fed this month will be hungry next month, and those who get clothing this winter will next winter once again be cold. It would be wonderful if I could change the world, right the old wrongs and create a future that would be better than today. But even if I cannot do that, I will still help. It is not because I hope for a more just future; it is because I know that right now there are people who are hungry and people who are cold. Hope is not a prerequisite for giving.

Whenever possible, I want to do things to bring about a more just future. But even if I knew for sure that a more just future was impossible, I would not stop responding to the needs of those around me, including long-term needs for secure infrastructure, meaningful work, and political liberty. I would not stop fighting against bullies and bigots, big and small. I would not stop trying to alleviate suffering. I would not stop listening and caring. To do so would be to stop living.

Of course, a more just future *is* possible, even if the possibility of a persistent state of global justice is remote. It is not

morally imperative for people to hope for any such future, however; if anything is morally imperative, it is courage, along with a bone-deep, non-logical and non-metaphysical belief in human equality.