

Reconstruction and Social Development

Brij Mohan

Reconstruction, after slavery and the Civil War, helped lay down the foundation of what we call Constitutional Democracy in America. As the world wars ended, countries woke up after a long oppressive night of bad dreams. These “undeveloped states” of the post-postcolonial heritage have evolved into the so-called Third World, aka, the “underdeveloped” or “developing” nations. There is a developmental dialectic in the becoming of these “welfare states” striving for democratic governance for progressive social change. A general rubric of reconstruction or “nation building” is usually referred to as Social Development (SD) with implicit specificity of regional goals. This article is a critique of the developmental processes which have impacted human lives and social structures in the global North and South with emphasis on the American history, racial ideology, and political structuralism, loosely entitled “Third Reconstruction.”

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In 1895. TWO DECADES AFTER HIS STATE MOVED FROM THE egalitarian innovations of Reconstruction to the oppressive “Redemption,” South Carolina congressman Thomas Miller appealed to the state’s constitutional convention:

We were eight years in power. We had built schoolhouses, established charitable institutions, built and maintained the penitentiary system, provided for the education of the deaf and dumb, rebuilt ferries. In short, we had reconstructed the state and placed it upon the road to prosperity.

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By the 1890s, Reconstruction had been painted as a fundamentally corrupt era of “Negro Rule.” It was said that South Carolina stood under the threat of being “Africanized” and dragged into barbarism and iniquity. (Coates, 2017, p. xiii; emphasis original)

The echoes of those “eight years” still resound in the Hayekian policies and programs that define Welfare System in America and the other “developing” countries. National histories are somewhat similar yet vastly different from each other. The United States of America and India are democracies, albeit flawed (Mohan, 1996). They both were colonies of the British colonial rule. Racism and casteism have scarred the evolution of equality, constitutional development, and protection of civil rights. Dissimilarities abound in the structure and functions of social institutions. The main burden of this article is twofold: The end of slavery and colonial subjugation does not necessarily lead to freedom; and reconstruction that follows the end of slavery shaped the future of societal reconstruction. *Social Development* (SD) (per se) and its processes define the quality of self-renewal—independent of foreign aid—that refurbishes a country. I attempt to offer a comparativist’s macro-historical view of social transformation. *Slavery preceded Reconstruction; likewise, the British Raj, in India, was followed by “the Great Partition” equivalent of the Civil War in America.* (*Emphasis mine*).

On January 31, 1865, the Congress passed the 13th Amendment, which was ratified on December 6, 1865, abolishing slavery in America. India regained independence in 1947. Historian Eric Foner in his new book, *The Second Founding* shows *How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (2019). A plethora of historians, world leaders, and scholars similarly historialize how India lost and regained her freedom from the foreign yoke in 1947 (Mohan, 1972; also see Azad, 2003; Brown, 1994; Guha, 2007; Keay, 2000; Nehru, 1946; Tharoor, 2016). National reconstruction followed after Independence: democratic socialism through Five Year Plans; public investment in science and technology; nationalization of banks; community development plans; abolition of “untouchability,” and *Zamindaris* and nonalignment as a foreign policy. It was nothing short of *Reconstruction* after a rapacious colonial rule and centuries of exploitation by invasions. The ravages of violence and the communal unrest that followed India’s partition (1947) was equivalent to American Civil War. The sad difference is America became stronger as a unified nation and India lost her innocence and her most fertile regional states. The pernicious “two nation” theory divided India on the basis of very undemocratic, anti-secular, and colonially designed “two nation” theory. Lack of vision amongst Hindu and Muslim leaders and divisive British policy expedited Independence by a few months at the expense of millions of slaughtered and displaced people. It has been called the most heinous crime by the British Empire against India. I have assayed elsewhere this reality of balkanization that masquerades as *Freedom* and *Independence*.

Reconstruction may or may not lead to revolution. While Civil War in the United States unified the country, India was “partitioned.” The main burden of this

article is derived from this *a priori* assumption: SD as a process is a work in progress, not a definitive outcome of *Reconstruction*. Eric Foner comments:

Reconstruction can also be understood as a historical process without a fixed end point—the process by which the United States tried to come to terms with the momentous results of the Civil War, especially the destruction of the institution of slavery. ... Reconstruction is also a prime example of what we sometimes call the politics of history.... (2019: xxi)

Reconstruction posits “reformation” along with structural construction. In the context of twenty-first century, it may be considered as Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost*.¹ In other words, SD seeks to humanize the statist renewal without colonially inspired bureaucratic reforms.

The gains of *Reconstruction* can hardly be overstated. Citizenship rights, equality, and constitutional safeguards lay the basic foundation of a modern state. Foner’s logic of history, as cited below, has far reaching implications for SD.

The Civil War and Reconstruction period that followed form the pivotal era of American history. The war destroyed the institution of slavery, ensured the survival of the Union, and set in motion economic and political changes that laid the foundation for modern nation. (2019: xix)²

Briefly, I posit a three-dimensional analysis of general “reconstruction” that validates SD as an indigenous “nation-building” program along with its vicissitudes and promises.

1. Requiem for the *Second Founding*
2. The *Revolution that Failed*
3. Jewels of *Social Development*

Reconstruction, as Foner says, was the nineteenth century version of “nation building.” America proudly stands as a beacon of freedom in the community of nations. However, American domestic and foreign policies and priorities often contradict their own ideals. From Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan, we find the emergence of counter-reconstructive forces. The origins of this behavior lie deep in the DNA of founding fathers’ aspirations and hypocrisy. Slavery was a lucrative business that enriched the rich and powerful whites. Constitutionally, there is no slavery in the United States today. However, both capitalism and democracy—and

¹ See Obituary Mikhail Gorbachev, *The Economist*, September 3, 2022: 78.

² I requested Professor Eric Foner to review this article. He, rather politely, declined to oblige due to his retirement. (Personal correspondence, September 7–8, 2022: on file).

their variants—owe their indebtedness to the evils of slavery, especially its abolition.

A corrupt society thrives on institutional fissures and structural fractures. Banality of avarice and acquisitive greed incubated by cultural pressures and societal contradictions deepen individual and communal disharmony. *Resentment* usually morphs into chaos. Triumphant Trumpian waves of racialized reactionary politics have posed clear and immediate dangers to the American democracy. President Joe Biden's recent address signified this issue in search of "the soul of the nation." Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with his politics of power and a sectarian vision of India's future, has diminished hopes for a progressive, secular, and diverse society. Modi's pernicious propaganda machine is not limited to India.³ The horizons of SD in the West and across many developing nations look less than promising.

Lately, I joined a passionate and well-informed lecture by an enlightened speaker.⁴ His emphasis on historical, colonial oppression as a central theme to unravel anti-Asian violence in America calls for doing something constructive in the class and beyond academia. In principle, I agree. However, woes of higher education in a capitalist society mainly commoditize education, career, and the *Metaverse* that seeks to revolutionize our way of life. This is a disturbing view of society which has little or no room for SD we normally talk and write about. Politics of education is a global reality.

India, analytically, presents a similar spectacle. Independence from the British Raj was the threshold for liberation. However, it entailed a heavy price: millions of deaths and displacements, rise of communalism, loss of inseparable states in the west, and divisions of Punjab and Bengal to name the main casualties of "partition." India and her new neighbor Pakistan have had three major wars, not to mention a nearly permanent armed hostility around the Line of Control (LoC). In "Give me Liberty," Foner expertly writes about American history in a series of books. Subhash Chandra Bose, one of India's most charismatic and heroic freedom fighters, called the nation in a hair-rising patriotic slogan: *Give me blood, I will give you freedom*. His mysterious disappearance and death continues to inspire anti-colonial groups even today. Bose was a secular fighter; today, his patriotism is used by reactionary forces, which does not help democracy and its avowed institutions.

³ See an article in The Nation, Hindu Nationalism...Goes Beyond Texas <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/hindu-nationalism-america/> (September 12, 2022).

⁴ A lecture on "History of anti-Asian violence in America," by Professor Pranav Jani at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, September 8, 2022. These two links offer the speaker's analysis:

- "Atlanta was a Watershed": <https://www.tempestmag.org/2021/08/atlanta-was-a-watershed/>
- "Colonialism, Slavery, and the Origins of Capitalism": <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/colonialism-slavery-and-the-origins-of-capitalism-aafc3d114a20>

There seems to be no end of a perpetual armed conflict between the “two nations,” the biproducts of the eponymous theory. Tharoor (2016) writes:

In 1930, the American historian and philosopher Will Durant wrote that Britain’s conscious and deliberate bleeding of India ... [was the] greatest crime in all history. He was not the only one to denounce the rapacity and cruelty of British rule, and his assessment was not exaggerated. (2016)⁵

The contours of “developing nations” in contents and contexts reveal an uneven dependence on democratic institutions. America, likewise, is threatened by the ascendance of insurrection unleashed by its 45th President. If the Trumpian governance comes back, the U.S. will become a banana state ruled by a narcissist-neofascist. The difference between “developing” and “advanced” nations is fallacious. Generally, SD, and its processes and methods, can only be measured, to some extent, by the quality of the ruler-ruled relationships; overall social climate; and people’s standards of health, education, and well-being regardless of the presumed North and South divide. Since all democracies are fragile, modes and forms of SD can’t be formulated for good. I contend that both “social” and “development” ought to be reconceptualized in a historico-macro perspective. Scholars, policy makers, and practitioners should always remember *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The power shift between North and South and East and West is dubious at best. In a world ravaged by inequality, injustice, and war, it’s conceptually invalid to distinguish between “developing” and “advanced” nations.

American politicians now treat their rivals as enemies, intimidate free press and threaten to reject the results of elections. ... Are we living through the decline and fall of one of the world’s oldest and most successful democracies? History doesn’t repeat itself. But it rhymes. (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 2, 10)

“Shifting power in an unequal world” between the “front lines” and “fault lines”, pose major difficulties to formulate a universally suitable manifesto of SD (*Sic. Hujo & Carter, 2022*). As I see, three globally crucial conditions will impact the future of SD as we know. First, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continued war have reinigorated the Western military alliances. It’s the return of the new Cold War without an Iron Curtain. Implications of this reality have far-reaching consequences. It’s not merely the threat of a thermo-nuclear catastrophe; it resuscitates global atavism that might trigger off unstoppable avalanche of counter-developmental forces.

Second, the variants of biological warfare bode ill for nations in conflict, territorially as well as ideologically. Lastly, the community of nations should give up the euphoria and delusions of a peaceful world. Doubtless, human societies will

⁵<https://www.amazon.com/Era-Darkness-British-Empire-India/dp/938306465X> (September 8, 2022).

outlive a probable *World War III* with a renewed manifesto of a metamorphosized cosmos. Will that ensure the rebirth of peaceful *homo sapiens*? Perhaps, I have outlived some of my delusions assayed elsewhere (2022). Jewels of SD are enshrined in cooperative co-existence, meaningful conflict-management, universal standards of living, and inclusive investment in the *last founding*.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

M.L.K.

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