

# The Legacy of Rostow: Modernization Theory, Global Challenges, and Alternative Development Frameworks

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## Abstract

This article critically evaluates Walt Rostow's modernization theory, a Cold War-era model that presents development as a linear, universal process. It argues that the theory is fundamentally flawed due to its Eurocentric assumptions, reductionist framework, and disregard for historical and structural inequalities, particularly those stemming from colonialism. Drawing on postcolonial critiques from thinkers such as Mohanty and Spivak, the article contends that such models impose epistemic violence, erasing the voices and agency of the Global South while reinforcing neocolonial hierarchies under the guise of progress. It also critiques the theory's neglect of non-linear development trajectories, political contexts, and environmental sustainability. In response, alternative frameworks

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such as dependency theory, Sen's capabilities approach, and ecological modernization are explored for their more inclusive and context-sensitive visions. However, while Amartya Sen's capabilities approach offers a profound shift from Rostow by focusing on expanding human freedoms, his positioning within the mainstream economics tradition and the incomplete nature of his theory reveals certain ambiguities. Ultimately, the article calls for a postcolonial reimagining of development that embraces pluralism, sustainability, and local realities, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals to foster an equitable future.

**Keywords:** Rostow, Global South, Development, Neo-imperialism, Economics

## Introduction

Walt Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960)<sup>1</sup> stands as one of the most influential and contentious development theories of the twentieth century. Forged in the crucible of the Cold War, its linear model progression from traditional society to the age of high mass consumption provided a powerful ideological blueprint for promoting Western capitalist modernity as a universal antidote to communism. While its historical significance is undeniable, Rostow's stages of growth have been the subject of decades of sustained critique for their profound theoretical limitations and damaging real-world implications (Itagaki, 1963). Rostow's model is not merely a flawed economic theory. It is a potent instrument of epistemic violence that universalizes the Western experience. The model obscures the structural inequalities perpetuated by colonialism and global capitalism. It also continues to implicitly constrain contemporary development discourse. Because of this, the model must be replaced by frameworks centered on pluralism, sustainability, and postcolonial equity (Itagaki, 1963).

The present analysis will first deconstruct the model's inherent Eurocentrism and its failure to account for the devastating legacies of colonial exploitation, resource dependency, and debt that precluded a linear "take-off" for many

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1 *Walt Rostow's The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960) outlines a linear, five-stage model of economic development through which all societies purportedly progress: *Traditional Society*: Characterized by subsistence agriculture, pre-Newtonian science, and limited social mobility. *Preconditions for Take-off*: New ideas and investments (often spurred by an external force) begin to challenge the traditional economy, leading to the development of infrastructure and a centralized state. *Take-off*: A decisive period of intensive growth (2-3 decades) where industrialization increases, new industries expand rapidly, and investment rises to over 10% of national income. *Drive to Maturity*: A prolonged period of sustained economic growth and technological diversification, as the economy extends modern technology to all sectors. *Age of High Mass-Consumption*: The final stage, where the leading economic sectors shift toward durable consumer goods and services, and widespread affluence is achieved. This model was presented as a universal, non-communist path to modernity, emphasizing capital accumulation and industrialization as the primary engines of growth (Rostow, 1960).

nations in the Global South. It will then examine the theory's neglect of non-linear pathways, internal socio-political barriers, and its environmentally destructive endpoint of high mass consumption (Thaha & Galib, 2022; Natural Resource Governance Institute, 2015; Hunter, 2012; Arora, 2010). Drawing on postcolonial thinkers like Mohanty and Spivak, the analysis will demonstrate how Rostow's framework imposes a singular developmental narrative, erasing alternative ontologies, and legitimizing neocolonial intervention. Finally, the paper will explore how alternative paradigms from Sen's capabilities approach, Ecological Modernization Theory, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals represent a vital, albeit incomplete, shift toward a more holistic and ethically grounded understanding of global progress. Ultimately, a critical examination of Rostow's enduring shadow is not an academic exercise but a necessary step in decolonizing development theory and practice (Ukwandu, 2017; Tobias & Boudreau, 2011; Fischer, 1987; Hariram, Mekha, Suganthan, & Sudhakar, 2023; York, Rosa, & Dietz, 2003). The primary objective of this article is to present a comprehensive critique of Walt Rostow's modernization theory, demonstrating its fundamental flaws as a universal model for development. We argue that the theory is not merely an outdated economic model but a form of epistemic violence that erases alternative pathways and reinforces global inequalities. This paper will systematically deconstruct the theory's Eurocentric assumptions, its neglect of historical and structural barriers like colonialism and debt dependency, and its environmentally unsustainable vision. Drawing on postcolonial thought and alternative frameworks, the article ultimately aims to make the case for a postcolonial reimagining of development centered on pluralism, sustainability, and equity.

This analysis will proceed by first examining the theory's neglect of non-linear development pathways and internal socio-political barriers, alongside its environmentally unsustainable endpoint of high mass consumption (e.g., Thaha & Galib, 2022). It will then demonstrate how Rostow's framework imposes a singular developmental narrative, drawing on postcolonial arguments to show how this erase alternative ways of being and legitimizes neocolonial intervention. Acknowledging the more radical critique of the post-development approach, which questions the very concept of "development" as a Western imposition, this paper nevertheless explores alternative paradigms that seek to reform the goals of progress from within the development discourse. These include Sen's capabilities approach and the UN Sustainable Development Goals,

which represent a shift toward more holistic, if imperfect, understandings of well-being and sustainability. The paper contends that while these alternatives operate within a broad modernist tradition, their explicit focus on equity, human agency, and ecological limits offers a vital corrective to Rostow's economically deterministic and Eurocentric model. Ultimately, this critical examination of Rostow's enduring shadow is not a purely academic exercise but a necessary step in the broader project of decolonizing development theory and practice, a pursuit supported by critiques of its environmental unsustainability (York et al., 2003), its neo-colonial implications (Ukwandu, 2017; Fischer, 1987), and its failure to account for diverse, localized pathways to well-being (Hariram et al., 2023; Tobias & Boudreaux, 2011).

## Critiques of Rostow's Model: Addressing the Shortcomings

### *The colonial legacy and dependency: historical context matters*

Harry Truman's 1949 presidential address created a new US-led liberal international order by projecting American capitalism as the universal model for global development and framing poverty in the developing world as a problem to be solved through this system. The two main focuses of the speech signified how the US will play a special role in assisting poor countries development and revealed how the US will be a "savior" for the underrepresented background. This reflected a strong Eurocentric bias and presenting Western values and institutions as universal, it created the hierarchical relationship between the US and developing nations, with US as the dominant actor, further it oversimplified the complexities of historical development and structural factors that contribute to poverty and finally it promoted a specific ideological agenda, linking development to the expansion of capitalism and US influence (Parashar & Schulz, 2021).

The connection between Rostow's developmental framework and U.S. foreign policy, especially during the Vietnam War, underscore a critical issue: development theories are not politically neutral. Rostow's model, in many ways, served as a justification for American interventionism, cloaking military and geopolitical objectives under the guise of promoting economic progress. His role as a national security advisor and one of the key strategists behind U.S.

involvement in Vietnam reveals how development theory was weaponized to pursue ideological ends. In this light, Rostow's "stages of growth" model appears less as an objective economic theory and more as a Cold War instrument to counter communist influence, particularly in the Global South.

The tragedy in Vietnam, marked by widespread destruction and human suffering, reveals the dangers of imposing linear development frameworks without regard for local contexts, sovereignty, or the long-term consequences of forced modernization. Instead of fostering growth, these efforts often entrenched cycles of violence, instability, and economic disruption. As such, Rostow's theory, when divorced from the lived realities of those it sought to "develop" becomes not only inadequate but deeply harmful (Gawthorpe, 2021).

### *The Myth of Universality: One Size Does Not Fit All*

Rostow's model, while influential, suffers from a fundamental flaw in its assumption of universality, implicitly prescribing a single, linear path of capitalist industrialization for all nations. This prescriptive approach disregards unique starting points, diverse resource endowments, varied cultural values, and distinct institutional capacities. For instance, the model homogenizes the "traditional society" stage, overlooking the vast differences in pre-existing social structures and historical legacies that profoundly shape a nation's development trajectory (Marinaro, 2017). It is precisely this rigidity that the alternative frameworks presented in this paper seek to overcome. Unlike Rostow's universal sequence, Sen's capabilities approach breaks with this model by rejecting a fixed end-goal, instead prioritizing the expansion of individual freedoms and opportunities, which can be realized through a plurality of economic and social arrangements. Similarly, the principles underpinning the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly reject a one-size-fits-all trajectory by integrating diverse environmental, social, and economic targets that nations can adapt to their specific contexts and challenges. This fundamental shift from a monolithic pathway to context-sensitive, pluralistic conceptions of progress represents the core epistemological break that this analysis champions (Frediani, Sen's Capability Approach as a framework to the practice of development, 2010).

Furthermore, Rostow's model culminates in "high mass consumption" as the pinnacle of development, equating prosperity solely with material abundance

and consumerism. This narrow definition is powerfully challenged by nations like Bhutan, which have deliberately prioritized Gross National Happiness (GNH)<sup>2</sup> and sustainable living over GDP growth as markers of success. Bhutan's embrace of GNH, encompassing spiritual, cultural, and environmental well-being alongside economic indicators, demonstrates that nations can define their own success metrics, which may fundamentally diverge from the Western ideal of endless material accumulation. This underscores a critical philosophical divergence: development is not solely about economic growth but can also encompass broader human flourishing and societal well-being, as defined by the people themselves, thereby directly challenging Rostow's final stage (Brooks J., 2013).

The successful development trajectories of East Asian economies such as South Korea and Taiwan expose the limitations of transplanting Western models onto fundamentally different political, historical, and social landscapes. Unlike the more market-driven, minimal-state intervention approach often implicit in Rostow's later stages, these "Tiger Economies"<sup>3</sup> achieved rapid industrialization through highly interventionist, state-led development strategies. Their governments actively nurtured specific industries, provided subsidies, directed investment, and protected nascent domestic industries, showcasing a "developmental state" model that stands in stark contrast to a laissez-faire approach. Beyond economic policies, these nations also prioritized significant

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2 *Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a holistic and sustainable development philosophy and metric pioneered in the Kingdom of Bhutan. It serves as a direct alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by prioritizing collective well-being and spiritual fulfillment over mere economic growth. The GNH framework is structured around four pillars: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance. Its nine domains provide a comprehensive measure of well-being, including psychological well-being, health, education, living standards, and community vitality, thereby explicitly challenging the Western-centric, consumption-driven endpoint of Rostow's model.*

3 *"Tiger Economies" (or "Asian Tigers") typically refers to the highly free-market and developed economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. These nations achieved rapid, sustained economic growth and industrialization between the early 1960s and 1990s, largely through export-oriented industrialization, high savings and investment rates, and significant government intervention to guide the market a model often described as the "developmental state." Their success, achieved via a state-led approach that diverges from laissez-faire Western models, is frequently cited as a powerful counterexample to the universal, linear path of development proposed by Rostow.*

investments in education and human capital development, recognizing a skilled workforce as crucial for technological advancement, and fostered social cohesion to ensure political stability and the successful implementation of long-term development plans. These examples conclusively demonstrate that development is a multifaceted, context-dependent process, defying any simplistic, one-size-fits-all approach and highlighting the critical role of factors beyond a purely economic linear progression (Kim & Heo, 2017).

*The Role of Structural Inequalities: Debt, Neo-Imperialism, and the Global Architecture of Underdevelopment*

Rostow's "Stages of Economic Growth" presents development as an internal, linear progression, a formulation that fundamentally fails to account for the pervasive structural inequalities of the global capitalist system. This model, which assumes a level playing field where any nation can achieve "take-off" through sufficient capital accumulation and political will, is directly contradicted by the historical and ongoing realities of dependency, debt, and neo-imperial control that actively manufacture and sustain underdevelopment in the Global South.

The post-war era initially seemed to validate aspects of Rostow's framework through the rise of the Keynesian developmentalist state. Nations across Latin America, Asia, and Africa pursued state-led, interventionist policies, including import-substitution industrialization (ISI), mirroring Rostow's emphasis on state-guided "preconditions" and "take-off" (Chang, 2002). For a time, these policies generated significant growth, creating an illusion of a universal progression (Bresser-Pereira, 2022). However, this model's vulnerability to external shocks was brutally exposed by the oil crises of 1973 and 1979, which triggered global inflation and catastrophic balance-of-payments deficits for oil-importing nations (Yergin, 1991). This crisis revealed a fatal flaw in Rostow's theory: its inability to anticipate how the volatile, interconnected global economy could derail a nation's internal progression, an oversight that dependency theory powerfully explains.

Dependency theorists like Frank (1966) and Wallerstein (2004) argue that underdevelopment is not a primordial "stage" but a direct consequence of the Global South's ("periphery") structural position within a global system designed



to benefit the Global North (“core”). This manifests as unequal exchange, where the periphery exports low-value primary commodities and imports high-value manufactured goods from the core (Palestini, 2023). This dynamic systematically drains capital and perpetuates technological dependence, creating a structural trap that actively hinders the economic diversification Rostow’s “take-off” requires. Where Rostow saw a “traditional society” awaiting transformation, dependency theory reveals an exploited periphery integrated into, and subordinated by, the global capitalist system.

The oil crises plunged developing nations into a debt dependency that became a powerful mechanism of this subordination. Turning to the IMF and World Bank for relief, countries were forced to adopt Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which mandated austerity, privatization, and trade liberalization (Babb, 2005). These policies systematically dismantled the developmentalist state, cutting public investment in health and education, stifling domestic industries through premature exposure to global competition, and exacerbating social inequalities (Justice, Debt, 2023). This enforced austerity directly contradicts Rostow’s vision of self-sustaining progress, instead locking nations into a vicious cycle where debt service diverts resources from productive investment, making “take-off” an economic impossibility (McNair, 2024).

This perpetuation of control through economic means is a hallmark of neo-imperialism (Nkrumah, 1965). The global economic architecture, governed by institutions like the WTO, often enshrines rules that favor developed nations. For instance, agricultural subsidies in the North depress global prices, undermining farmers in the South, while protectionist measures block market access for Southern manufactured goods—directly contradicting the “infant industry” argument used by now-developed nations during their own ascent. Furthermore, stringent intellectual property rights (IPRs) create significant technology transfer barriers, legally blocking developing nations from accessing critical technologies and perpetuating their dependence on the Global North (Hassan et al., 2010). This creates a “catch-22” Rostow never contemplated: nations are told to industrialize, yet the rules of the system prevent them from acquiring the means to do so.

The “resource curse” provides another stark contradiction to Rostow’s assumption that natural resources are a straightforward boon for capital

accumulation (Sandvik, 2015). Rather than fueling “take-off,” resources like oil and minerals often correlate with lower growth, inequality, and instability. Reliance on a single commodity creates vulnerability to price volatility, while phenomena like “Dutch Disease” appreciate the national currency, eroding the competitiveness of other export sectors like agriculture and manufacturing (Label, 2025). Most critically, resource wealth fosters weak institutions and rampant rent-seeking, as elites battle for control of rents rather than building a diversified, productive economy (Ross, 2015). Rostow’s model assumes that capital will be productively invested, but the resource curse demonstrates how it can be violently contested and squandered.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) exemplifies this tragic paradox. Its immense mineral wealth has not led to Rostovian prosperity but has fueled decades of conflict and governance failure (Tunamsifu, 2022). The colonial legacy of extractive institutions has perpetuated a cycle where resource control fuels violence, enriching armed groups and corrupt elites while actively preventing the stability and institutional development Rostow’s model presumes as a precondition for growth (Reinsberg et al., 2020).

Similarly, the recurring economic crises in Argentina illustrate the compounded impact of these structural inequalities. Once one of the world’s wealthiest nations due to its agricultural exports—a seeming fulfillment of Rostow’s “preconditions for take-off” Argentina has been plagued by a cycle of debt dependency and speculative capital flight (Spruk, 2019). Its history of IMF interventions, with their attendant austerity conditionalities, has repeatedly undermined long-term, nationally-tailored development strategies. The susceptibility to volatile “hot money” flows led to currency crashes and deep recessions, notably in 2001-2002, demonstrating that development is not an internal progression but is profoundly shaped by the inherent volatilities and power dynamics of the global system.

In conclusion, Rostow’s stages of growth offer a deceptively simple and internally-focused map to prosperity. However, the real-world terrain of global capitalism—marked by the core-periphery dynamics of dependency, the stranglehold of debt, the skewed rules of neo-imperial trade, and the paradoxical perils of resource wealth systematically prevents many nations from ever embarking on that journey. The theory’s critical flaw is not just its linearity, but

its blindness to the global architecture of inequality that makes such a linear path impossible for those assigned the role of the perpetual periphery.

### *The Myth of Universality: Internal Social and Political Barriers to Development*

Beyond external structural constraints, Rostow's model also significantly undervalues the crucial impact of internal social and political barriers that can derail or profoundly alter a nation's development trajectory, even when external conditions might appear conducive to growth. His linear progression often presumes a stable political environment and functional institutions, yet real-world economies frequently encounter deep-seated internal challenges that inhibit progress.

One critical internal barrier is weak governance and corruption. The absence of effective, transparent, and accountable governance, coupled with rampant corruption, can systematically divert resources away from productive investments. Funds intended for public services like infrastructure, education, or healthcare are siphoned off by elites, undermining the very foundations necessary for "take-off." Such environments also deter both domestic and foreign investment, as businesses face unpredictable regulatory landscapes and excessive informal costs, stifling economic activity. Furthermore, a lack of robust rule of law means that property rights are insecure, contracts are unenforceable, and justice is compromised, making long-term economic planning and entrepreneurial risk-taking extremely difficult (McMillan, Page, Booth, & Velde, 2017).

Deep social divisions and ongoing internal conflicts also fundamentally undermine the stable environment essential for Rostow's stages. Whether based on ethnicity, religion, class, or regional identity, profound social fragmentation can lead to political instability, civil unrest, and even prolonged civil wars. These conflicts devastate infrastructure, displace populations, disrupt economic activity, and divert national resources from development towards security expenditures. Such environments are antithetical to the sustained investment and societal consensus Rostow's model implicitly requires for linear economic progress (Crawford & Lipschut, 1998).

Moreover, the absence or suppression of a vibrant entrepreneurial class and an innovative culture can be a significant internal impediment. Rostow's "take-off" relies heavily on new industries, technological adoption, and productive investment driven by dynamic entrepreneurs. However, in contexts where the state heavily controls the economy, where political connections are more valuable than merit, or where cultural norms do not foster risk-taking and innovation, this vital engine of growth may be absent or severely constrained (Julien, 2007).

The history of Iran vividly illustrates how these internal socio-political factors, intertwined with its external context, have profoundly impacted its development trajectory, often deviating sharply from Rostow's linear path. Despite possessing vast oil reserves—a resource that in Rostow's framework might be seen as a strong foundation for "take-off" through capital accumulation—Iran's development has been characterized by significant internal disruptions. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, driven by deep social, political, and cultural grievances against the Western-backed Shah's modernization efforts (which were perceived by many as culturally alienating and economically inequitable), fundamentally altered the country's development path. This massive internal upheaval, a rejection of a specific model of modernization, led to significant economic disruption, capital flight, and a reorientation of economic and social priorities. (Sugihartono, 2024)

In the post-revolutionary era, corruption and rent-seeking have remained persistent challenges. Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perception Index, for example, ranked Iran 149th out of 180 countries, indicating widespread perceptions of corruption that hinder economic efficiency and divert resources. Furthermore, the governance structure of the Islamic Republic, with its complex interplay of elected and unelected bodies, has at times led to policy inconsistencies and challenges to the rule of law, creating an unpredictable environment for investment and economic growth. While external sanctions have undeniably played a massive role, Iran's internal political struggles, social cohesion challenges (e.g., between different ideological factions and ethnic minorities), and the structure of its state-dominated economy have also constrained the emergence of a dynamic, innovation-driven private sector. This complex interplay of internal and external factors demonstrates that

development is not merely an economic process but is deeply embedded in, and often reshaped by, a nation's unique socio-political landscape, directly challenging the simplistic universality of Rostow's model. (Hosseini, 2025).

## **Alternative Development Theories: Beyond Economic Determinism and Western Prescriptions**

While Rostow's modernization theory offered a foundational, albeit flawed, understanding of development, a robust body of alternative theories has emerged, advocating for more nuanced, equitable, and context-specific approaches. These frameworks directly challenge Rostow's Eurocentric bias, oversimplification, and neglect of structural inequalities, emphasizing human well-being, sustainability, and diverse pathways to progress.

### *Human Development Theory and Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach*

The perspective that the Human Development Index (HDI) can be seen as complementary to Rostow's theory is insightful, as both frameworks operate within a broad modernist tradition that views development as a form of societal progress. However, while they share this common ground, Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach, which underpins the HDI, represents a fundamental corrective that challenges the core assumptions and priorities of Rostow's model, shifting the ultimate end of development from economic output to human freedom (Sen, 1999).

Directly challenging Rostow's sole focus on economic growth and GDP, Human Development Theory reframes development as a process of expanding people's substantive freedoms and opportunities. Sen posits that real development lies in enhancing individuals' "capabilities"—their effective freedom to achieve valuable "beings and doings" (e.g., being healthy, being well-nourished, being educated, participating in political life). It's not just about what people have (income, material goods) but what they are able to do and be. Sen emphasizes that development must be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy, allowing them to lead lives they have reason to value. This shifts the focus from inputs (like capital investment) or outputs (like GDP) to the actual opportunities and choices available to individuals (Kuhumba, 2022).

This philosophical divergence becomes starkly clear through the concept of “conversion factors.” Sen demonstrates that the relationship between income (a primary focus for Rostow) and well-being is not direct. Personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, disability), social norms (e.g., discrimination, public services), and environmental conditions (e.g., climate, pollution) that influence how effectively individuals can convert resources (like income or food) into valuable functioning. For instance, a disabled person may require more resources than an able-bodied person to achieve the same level of mobility. Similarly, a woman in a highly patriarchal society may find it harder to convert educational opportunities into meaningful employment compared to a man. This highlights that simply increasing income does not guarantee improved well-being if these conversion factors are ignored, a nuance entirely absent from Rostow’s economically deterministic framework (Kuhumba, 2022).

Therefore, while the HDI and Rostow’s stages both seek to measure progress, they are guided by different teleologies. Rostow’s model culminates in high mass consumption, treating economic output as the ultimate goal. In contrast, the Capabilities Approach, operationalized by the HDI, positions economic growth as a potentially powerful means to the ultimate end of expanding human capabilities. It does not oppose modernization but insists that its success must be evaluated not by the volume of goods consumed but by the richness of human lives enabled. This critical refinement moves the development discourse beyond economic reductionism, forcing a confrontation with the qualitative dimensions of progress that Rostow’s linear stages overlook.

Beyond simply receiving goods or services, Sen’s approach places strong emphasis on agency people’s ability to act on their own behalf, make choices, and participate in decisions that affect their lives. True development, in this view, empowers individuals to shape their own destiny, rather than being passive recipients of top-down development interventions. This directly challenges Rostow’s more prescriptive model, which implicitly assumes a linear path to be followed. Rostow views development as a linear economic progression culminating in mass consumption, implying that material wealth automatically translates to well-being. Sen’s approach highlights that even if GDP rises, if people lack access to quality healthcare, education, political voice, or clean water, they are not truly “developed.” It criticizes the idea that economic

growth inherently leads to human flourishing, demanding explicit attention to equity, social justice, and individual agency. This framework directly informed the creation of the Human Development Index (HDI), a composite statistic measuring life expectancy, education, and gross national income per capita. It offers a stark contrast to Rostow's purely economic indicators and presents a far more holistic measure of a nation's progress. The HDI, by design, seeks to capture dimensions of human well-being that GDP alone misses, allowing for a more nuanced comparison between countries and highlighting that high economic output does not automatically equate to high human development if fundamental capabilities are constrained (Frediani & Walker, 2018).

### *Postcolonial Criticism: Deconstructing Power, Representation, and Knowledge in Development*

Postcolonial criticism provides a fundamental challenge to Rostow's modernization theory by exposing the colonial power dynamics and Eurocentric knowledge systems that underpin it. This school of thought interrogates how mainstream development paradigms, including Rostow's, perpetuate intellectual and economic colonialism by silencing alternative voices and legitimizing Western intervention. The work of key thinkers Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said offers a multifaceted critique essential for deconstructing Rostow's model.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's seminal work critiques how Western discourses, including development theory, construct a monolithic image of the "Third World Woman" (Mohanty, 1984). She argues that this is an act of essentialism, portraying women in the Global South as a homogeneously oppressed group, thereby erasing their diverse histories, agencies, and forms of resistance. This critique extends far beyond gender. Mohanty's framework directly challenges Rostow's homogenization of "traditional society." Just as she exposes the creation of a singular "Third World Woman," Rostow's model creates a singular "underdeveloped nation" a blank slate defined by its deficits and destined to be remade in the Western image (Rather, 2023). This universalizing narrative ignores diverse social structures and cultural values, prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution that disempowers local populations and legitimizes top-down intervention.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak delves deeper into the power dynamics of representation through her famous question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak, 1988). The “subaltern” refers to those peasants, tribal communities, the urban poor whose voices are systematically silenced by dominant discourses. Spivak introduces the concept of epistemic violence, the harm inflicted when powerful knowledge systems, like mainstream development economics, dismiss or erase alternative ways of knowing. Her work profoundly undermines Rostow’s model, which is a prime example of a Western expert speaking for the “underdeveloped” without engaging in their epistemologies or aspirations (Maggio, 2007). Spivak’s critique compels a radical rethinking of development practice, demanding that interventions be based on ethical engagement with local voices and a recognition that the “subaltern” often cannot be heard within the existing structures of power that development institutions represent.

While Mohanty and Spivak focus on discourse and representation, other postcolonial thinkers provide crucial insights into the psychological and cultural dimensions of colonial power. Frantz Fanon, in his work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), analyzed the deep psychological wounds of colonialism and argued that genuine liberation requires a violent break from the colonial system, not a peaceful, staged assimilation into it. This stands in stark contrast to Rostow’s vision of a smooth, guided transition to a Western-style modernity, ignoring the violent disruptions and cultural resistance that such a process often entails.

Furthermore, Edward Said’s concept of *Orientalism* (1978) offers a direct lens through which to view Rostow’s framework. Said demonstrated how the West constructs a fictional, inferior “Orient” to justify its domination and define its own superiority. Rostow’s characterization of “traditional societies” as stagnant and pre-scientific functions in a similar manner, creating a hierarchical division between the “modern” West and the “backward” rest, thereby legitimizing the West’s self-appointed role as the developer and modernizer (Abdelli, 2023).

In postcolonial criticism, through its analysis of universalism (Mohanty), epistemic violence (Spivak), the psychology of liberation (Fanon), and cultural representation (Said), reveals that Rostow’s Stages of Economic Growth is not a neutral economic model. It is a political project that imposes a Western historical experience as universal, silences alternative visions of progress, and reinforces the very global power imbalances it claims to overcome.



### *Sankara's Philosophy and Self-Reliance*

While not a formalized “development theory” in the Western academic sense, the philosophy and practical approach of leaders like Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso (1983-1987) offer a powerful, internally driven alternative that challenges core tenets of modernization theory. Sankara championed a radical vision of self-reliance, advocating for African nations to break free from external dependency, reject foreign aid (which he viewed as a tool of neo-imperialism), and mobilize their own resources and human capital for endogenous development. He believed that true liberation and development for African nations could only come from within, through their own efforts, rejecting the notion that salvation would come from outside benefactors. His policies focused on agrarian reform (redistribution of land to peasants), increasing local food production to achieve food sovereignty, mass literacy campaigns, public health initiatives (like nationwide vaccination drives), and environmental conservation (tree planting). Crucially, he also actively promoted gender equality, seeking to dismantle traditional patriarchal structures (Shipman, 2017).

Sankara's approach fundamentally rejects Rostow's implicit call for external capital and technological transfer as the primary drivers of “take-off.” Instead, he prioritized internal capacity building, human dignity, and sovereignty. His policies were antithetical to the idea of a universal path imposed from outside; they were rooted in local needs and an anti-imperialist stance. By rejecting IMF loans and foreign aid, Sankara directly challenged the mechanisms of debt dependency and neo-imperialism, arguing that they perpetuated a cycle of control rather than genuine development. While short-lived due to a coup, Sankara's legacy represents a powerful example of an alternative, nationally defined development path that prioritized human well-being, social justice, and environmental stewardship over integration into a potentially exploitative global capitalist system, demonstrating that true progress can be rooted in internal transformation and a rejection of dominant external prescriptions (Krishna, 2009).

## *Sustainable Development Theory: Integrating Ecology, Equity, and Economy*

While Rostow's modernization theory offered a foundational, albeit flawed, understanding of development, a robust body of alternative theories has emerged, advocating for more nuanced, equitable, and context-specific approaches. These frameworks directly challenge Rostow's Eurocentric bias, oversimplification, and neglect of structural inequalities, emphasizing human well-being, sustainability, and diverse pathways to progress.

Emerging as a direct and urgent response to the escalating environmental degradation and persistent social inequalities that accompanied the industrial growth celebrated by models like Rostow's, Sustainable Development gained mainstream prominence with the 1987 Brundtland Report, "Our Common Future" (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987). This landmark report famously defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition introduced the crucial concept of intergenerational equity, underscoring a moral and practical obligation to preserve resources and environmental quality for those who come after us. This was a significant evolution from earlier environmental movements (like the "Limits to Growth" debate of the 1970s) that often focused on resource depletion, by explicitly integrating the concept of "development" rather than just conservation. It calls for an integrated approach that simultaneously balances three interconnected and equally vital "pillars" or dimensions, often visualized as interdependent systems (Pohoață, Diaconășu, & Crupenschi, 2021).

Safeguarding natural resources, biodiversity, ecosystems, and climate stability. This involves minimizing pollution, promoting renewable energy, adopting circular economic principles (minimizing waste and maximizing resource utility), and managing natural capital sustainably. Ensuring fairness, justice, and inclusion within and between societies. This addresses issues like poverty eradication, access to education and healthcare, gender equality, human rights, and social justice, promoting intragenerational equity a fair distribution of resources and opportunities among people alive today, recognizing that poverty can drive environmental degradation (Kirchherr, Yang, Spuntrup, Heerink, & Hartley, 2023).

Fostering economic systems that are productive, resilient, and inclusive, but not at the expense of environmental or social well-being. It emphasizes long-term economic resilience, resource efficiency, and the creation of decent work, moving beyond a narrow focus on purely quantitative GDP growth to consider the qualitative aspects of economic activity that genuinely contribute to well-being (Yanamandra, 2020).

This theory fundamentally argues that genuine progress requires simultaneously achieving goals across all three pillars (Environmental protection, Economic Viability and Social Equity), recognizing their deep interdependence. Compromising one for the sake of another (e.g., rapid economic growth at the cost of environmental destruction or heightened social exclusion) is deemed unsustainable and ultimately self-defeating in the long run. It implies a profound qualitative shift in societal values and economic practices, moving from a linear “take-make-dispose” model to one of efficiency, reuse, and the creation of regenerative, circular systems, rather than simply maximizing output (Mensah & Casadevall, 2019).

Rostow’s model is inherently linear, teleological, and largely blind to environmental limits and the long-term ecological footprint of industrial expansion and high mass consumption. His vision of progress is one of continuous material accumulation and an unchecked transition to high consumption, assumptions that sustainable development critically questions. Rostow’s stages implicitly assume infinite natural resources, infinite assimilative capacity for pollution, and that waste can simply disappear, notions starkly contradicted by the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion that sustainable development seeks to address. The concept of the planet’s carrying capacity, which is fundamental to sustainable development, is entirely absent from Rostow’s framework. Furthermore, where Rostow saw development as largely an internal process fueled by capital, sustainable development underscores the need for complex global governance and international cooperation to address transnational environmental problems (like climate change) and achieve shared equity goals (Thaha & Galib, 2022).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all UN member states in 2015, are a contemporary, globally agreed-upon manifestation of this theory. They provide a comprehensive framework of 17

interconnected goals, encompassing targets from ending poverty and hunger to climate action, gender equality, responsible consumption and production, and global partnerships. While the SDGs represent an unprecedented attempt to operationalize sustainable development, the theory itself faces ongoing challenges and critiques, particularly regarding the inherent tension between “development” (often still interpreted as economic growth) and “sustainability.” Critics argue that a truly sustainable future may necessitate more radical systemic changes, including, for some, a move beyond growth, as explored by degrowth proponents. Nevertheless, Sustainable Development Theory firmly establishes that progress cannot be measured by economic metrics alone and must encompass ecological integrity and social justice as inseparable components of genuine human well-being (Swain, 2018).

## Conclusion

Rostow’s model of economic growth, with its linear trajectory from traditional societies to high mass consumption, has served as one of the foundational theories in post-war development economics. By conceptualizing development as a universal, stage-based process, Rostow attempted to provide a roadmap for nations transitioning from underdevelopment to modern industrial economies. While the model’s historical significance and pedagogical simplicity are undeniable, this analysis has demonstrated that its applicability across diverse global contexts is both limited and increasingly contested.

Through a critical evaluation of its five stages: traditional society, preconditions for take-off, take-off, drive to maturity, and age of high mass consumption, it becomes evident that Rostow’s framework is grounded in Eurocentric assumptions. It privileges Western historical experiences as a normative benchmark for development, thereby overlooking alternative growth paths, structural inequalities, and the legacies of colonialism and global dependency. The model’s deterministic nature fails to account for the non-linear, multidimensional, and often cyclical patterns of growth observed in many countries of the Global South. Moreover, it largely ignores socio-political factors, environmental constraints, and issues of distributive justice that are essential to contemporary development discourse.

Despite its limitations, Rostow's model retains heuristic value, particularly in highlighting the role of investment, industrialization, and infrastructure in facilitating economic transitions. However, for modern policymaking and development strategy, there is a pressing need to move beyond rigid stage-based theories toward frameworks that are historically grounded, contextually sensitive, and inclusive of alternative indicators of progress such as sustainability, human capabilities, and digital transformation.

In an era marked by climate crisis, digital inequality, and multipolar economic dynamics, development cannot be seen as a singular journey to high mass consumption. Instead, future-oriented models must reflect pluralistic trajectories, respect national specificities, and prioritise equitable and sustainable growth. Thus, while Rostow's stages of growth offer a valuable starting point for understanding mid-20th century development thinking, they must be complemented and, in some cases, replaced by more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches to meet the complex challenges of the 21st century.

### **Ethics Statement**

This study is based entirely on secondary sources and theoretical analysis. It did not involve human participants, personal data, or fieldwork, and therefore did not require ethical approval.

### **Use of Generative AI**

Generative AI tools were used for language refinement and clarity during the drafting process. All content was critically reviewed, edited, and finalized by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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