

Development Knowledge in Iran: The Semi-Colonial Foundations of Modernization-Oriented Development, with Emphasis on the First and Second Development Plans before the 1979 Revolution

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Article Info	Extended Abstract
Article type: Research Article	Objective: Development, as a multilayered and contested concept, does not merely signify economic growth or institutional transformation. At a deeper level, it functions as a “thought of transition,” shaping how societies perceive their past, present, and future. In Iran, although ideas such as “enkeshaf” (development) and “taraqqi” (progress) have a long history, the transformation of development into a coherent, institutionalized, and planned project emerged distinctly in the post–World War II context, within the framework of the new global political–economic order. This study focuses on this historical rupture and examines the epistemic system of development in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution, particularly in the context of the First and Second Development Plans, aiming to demonstrate that development operated not merely as a technical strategy but as a configuration of power–knowledge and a form of quasi-colonial knowledge. The primary aim is to analyze how development knowledge was formed, transferred, and institutionalized in Iran at the intersection of global powers’ agendas—particularly those of the United States—and domestic institutions and actors. The central question investigates how knowledge exchange between international development institutions, consulting firms, and American universities on one hand, and Iranian planning bodies and bureaucracy on the other, shaped national perceptions of development and influenced the trajectory and outcomes of development planning in Iran. The study argues that the development project in Iran was not a neutral “civilizing mission” but part of the global power order and the logic of international capitalist division of labor during the carbon economy era. The research is grounded in Roy MacLeod’s theory regarding the relationship between science, imperialism, and power. By distinguishing between “metropolitan science” and “colonial science,” this framework shows how scientific and technical knowledge—particularly in peripheral societies—is deployed through imitative techniques and practices to consolidate cultural hegemony, territorial control, and resource extraction. Accordingly, development knowledge in Iran is understood as quasi-colonial knowledge that, via consultancy networks, international institutions, and technical aid programs,
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produced a specific order of truth, subjectivity, and planning rationality.

Methodology: The study employs a Foucauldian archeological-genealogical approach. The archaeological dimension investigates the preexisting rules and unconscious structures that determined what could be articulated, conceptualized, and planned as development, and which propositions were recognized as valid knowledge. The genealogical dimension examines the links between development knowledge and power relations, showing how planning institutions, consultancy reports, and infrastructure policies emerged amid political-economic and geostrategic struggles. Data sources include archival documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, governmental laws and decrees, administrative correspondence, consultancy reports, bureaucratic memoirs, and secondary historical sources, analyzed through discourse analysis with attention to the semantic shifts of key concepts.

Findings: The study demonstrates that the Bretton Woods order and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank provided the institutional and discursive foundation for disseminating the modernization paradigm. The United States leveraged its economic and political superiority through long-term loans, technical assistance, and the “Point Four Program” to use development as a tool for containing communism and consolidating the Western bloc. Due to its geostrategic position and oil resources, Iran became a central site of this knowledge intervention, with agricultural development identified as the primary entry point to guide the country along the desired global order trajectory. Within this framework, the modernization paradigm, supported by theoretical perspectives such as Parsons and Rostow, emphasized transforming social habits, institutions, and even individual subjectivity. Development was no longer limited to infrastructure construction; it required cultural, educational, and socio-political reconstruction. The involvement of American university teams—particularly from Utah—in agriculture, health, and education played a crucial role, gradually introducing the American lifestyle as the normative benchmark of progress. Analysis of Iran’s planning consultancy system reveals three main patterns: short-term individual consultants with a technical but context-insensitive approach; university teams focusing on capacity-building and local participation; and large-scale private contractors prioritizing rapid project execution and economic gain. Despite some success of participatory academic models, the third model ultimately dominated under global capital logic, leading to massive dam and agro-industrial projects that caused population displacement, commercialization of agriculture, and increased technological dependence.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that development knowledge in pre-revolutionary Iran was neither neutral nor purely technical. It emerged within a global power-knowledge network that positioned



Iran as a raw material producer and consumer of finished goods. By overlooking Iran's climatic and historical constraints, this knowledge legitimized a consumerist, agriculture-centric model and, through planning institutions, reproduced a particular form of governance, subjectivity, and spatial order. From this perspective, the trajectory of development planning in Iran should be understood not solely in terms of administrative inefficiency but within the internal, quasi-colonial logic of the prevailing epistemic system.

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